

figured prominently). From 1991–93, then, SIG activities ‘ticked over’ with an average of one newsletter and one ‘workshop’ event being planned per year. The focus had shifted to self-access, away from the earlier emphasis on a broader range of interests within learner independence. In 1994, however, there was another hiatus – no newsletter was published, and there is no record of any events having been organized. When Jenny Timmer took over as coordinator in December 1994, there were, she said, two newsletters in the pipeline (*Independence* no. 16: p. 2). However, it was to be largely through her own dedication that the SIG now entered a period of particularly fruitful activity.

To be continued . . . [in the next two issues of *Independence*].

### Acknowledgments

My thanks go to Vic Richardson, Gail Ellis, Marion Geddes and Shelagh Rixon for their ready responses to my requests for information. I am also very grateful to Carol Everhard, to the IATEFL office staff and to Vic Richardson for enabling me to put together a complete set of the newsletters (apart from the mysteriously missing no. 31: does anyone have one of these?).

## Learner independence as an alternative to classroom-based courses

Marion Geddes

*This article is reprinted from the issue of Independence which celebrated the tenth anniversary of the (then) Learner Independence SIG – no. 18 (Winter 1996–97), edited by Jenny Timmer. As Jenny wrote in her Editorial (p. 2), ‘This edition [...] starts with Marion Geddes’ talk from our 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference held last November. I have selected it because she has looked back in quotation form over the previous editions of the Newsletter’. As editor of the current (40<sup>th</sup>) issue, I’ve selected this article to represent the last two decades for the same reason as Jenny, but also because it presents the kind of radical ‘vision’ that inspired the founders of the SIG, and at the same time conveys so much useful practical wisdom, showing that good ideas are timeless even if Walkmen move on!*

### Introduction

This article is the written version of a talk I gave on the occasion of the tenth anniversary seminar of the IATEFL Learner Independence SIG, held at Eurocentre, London [in November 1996]. As a SIG founder member I used the anniversary as an occasion for looking not only at the SIG’s growth over the last ten years, but also my own professional development over that period, and for taking stock of where I am at present. In this article I want to describe how my thoughts about learner independence have shaped the courses that I run at Project Scotland, the small residential language centre that I run in my home in the West Highlands of Scotland.

As a kind of tenth anniversary game, I am going to use one quotation from each of the back numbers of the SIG Newsletter *Independence* to support what I have to say. (Unfortunately newsletters 4 and 13 are missing from my collection and therefore I have had to leave these out.)

### Defining learner independence

In the early newsletters there were several attempts at defining learner independence. Newsletter 2 has one that I quite like: ‘Learner independence is ... allowing learners to take the freedom and the responsibility for choosing what and how they will learn’. However, I would like to add the words ‘where’ and ‘when’: ‘choosing what, how, where and when they will learn’. My reasons – and the action I have taken – is what this article is about.

### Dissatisfaction with classroom teaching

Ten years ago, like other founder members of the SIG (and, no doubt, many other teachers), I was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with classroom teaching – not just my own teaching but the whole concept of classroom teaching. Why? ‘The reason that a class is together is the common good – to learn English. Sometimes it is the only unifying factor’ (Newsletter 6). In the newsletters there are several articles that describe situations where

teachers have tried giving students a break from lock-step classrooms, through self-access schemes or through 'opt-out' classes. Usually these are reports of successes, describing student satisfaction and their enjoyment of the freedom it gives them. Looking back at these articles what I found surprising was that, although the writers recognise the students' pleasure in independent study, hardly any of them question the dominance of the classroom-based teaching they were doing at the time. Self-access is typically only a small proportion of the learning programme. Admittedly there are references to negotiating syllabuses in the classroom, but a class-negotiated syllabus is still a syllabus for the class-group and therefore cannot fully satisfy the individual.

So much of classroom teaching feels so inefficient. I feel great sympathy for the teacher who wrote of his own language learning experience: 'I'm held back by the speed of the teacher (or the slowest member of the class) when I feel there might be more useful language I could be learning' (Newsletter 14.). I myself would not wish to learn a language in a classroom, so how could I subject others to it? This is not to say that I wanted to abandon the classroom altogether – or rather *the group*. But I wanted a very different kind of classroom and group, and different types of interaction between the group members, for I accept that 'interaction and co-operation are bound up with autonomy in learning, and group work and co-operative work have their place in language learning situations' (Newsletter 12).

### **Project Scotland: Promoting learner independence**

Four years ago I decided to take the plunge and set up my own language centre, Project Scotland, where I would promote learner independence in groups but away from traditional classrooms. In newsletter 5, Rachel Belgrave and I reported, in mind-map format, on a talk we gave at the 1989 IATEFL joint-SIG Symposium at Avery Hill about some of the learning concerns of another organisation that we were members of, namely SEAL (the Society for Effective Affective Learning). Concerns about the environment of learning and the importance of positive learning experiences seemed to complement the more academic and methodological concerns of the LI SIG. It is not surprising perhaps that I chose to set up Project Scotland in a very 'SEALy', relaxed environment, in a large house on the edge of a small village in the West Highlands of Scotland, one of the most scenic parts of Britain.

A maximum of eight students live in our home, usually for two weeks at a time. The course runs seven days a week and students are 'immersed' in English during all waking hours. (We have yet to

try sleep-learning!) Each group is multi-level and aged anything between about nineteen and seventy-plus. There is no fixed timetable, no set number of study hours, no formal classes. With only eight students we can make decisions about group activities such as walks and excursions at short notice, perhaps after watching the weather forecast on TV, or over breakfast or lunch. The students are free to study when they want. Some may be 'early birds' and start the day by listening to something on a walkman in bed before getting up. The 'late-night birds' can burn the midnight oil. Some students work sitting at a table, others prefer lying on a sofa in the conservatory, or sitting on the swing in the woods. One will go into the garden to talk to the plants, while another will practise conversation with our cook in the kitchen. Part of my role is to keep a check on where each person is and show that I am available if required, to know when they are studying, and when they need to relax.

### **The environment as classroom**

In Newsletter 15 in a review of one of her books Leni Dam is referred to as saying that one of the five major changes required to facilitate learner independence is 'a view of the language classroom as a rich learning environment'. Her statement assumes that the traditional four walls of a classroom are the place where learning is to take place. At Project Scotland it is the environment that becomes a rich classroom, and the community who live in this environment are an important part of the 'classroom'. Young and old enjoy visiting the house and meeting the students, or inviting them to their own homes. Some of the children enjoy taking students on walks through the village, writing and performing plays for them, teaching and playing games. Escape is also possible! Recently, for example, one student built into her daily routine a peaceful half hour alone by the river at the bottom of the garden. Others go for walks in the beautiful surroundings. A few make a beeline for the local hotel-bar.

### **Aims and resources**

In any group of eight, the students are bound to be at different language levels and sometimes span a wide age range. They have different, albeit often overlapping aims. At the beginning of a course I discuss their aims with each one, usually sitting with the group so that they can all learn about each other. I also describe and discuss the resources that are available – the community and individuals in it, as well as the books, cassettes and videos in the Resource Centre. With each student I produce a kind of map of their aims and initial programme. As one writer in Newsletter 8 says: 'Useful self-access depends on the teacher giving the student a kind of

'map' of the route he/she should follow. A good map is a pleasure to follow; it also gives the learner to try other routes and become more independent in his/her learning in the future'.

### **Learner training**

In the *Independence* newsletters and elsewhere there has been quite a lot of discussion about learner training. On a short course I find that a programme of learner training activities is too time-consuming. Students are impatient to get their teeth into language learning rather than learning about learning. However, this is not to say that learner training is not important. On my courses I suggest a few (new) techniques to students. For example, I encourage them to carry paper and pen on them (round their necks, in their pockets, pinned to their clothes) so as to have it always at hand, for example at meals or on walks. I encourage the use of vocabulary cards (rectangles of paper) on which students note down a new word or phrase on one side, and write or draw a 'test question' (which could simply be a picture) on the other side, to help later review. The words from an interview transcript in Newsletter 11 could well have been said by someone in our village: 'I've seen you walking down the road with little pieces of paper from your pocket'.

### **Training for post-course independence**

When guiding students in their choice of materials and study techniques I am obviously concerned with their present needs and the immediate appropriacy of materials and tasks. However, it is also important to look beyond the course: 'Effective learning is a continuous process in which the course is but a part' (Newsletter 1). I have created no special 'self-access materials'. Instead I prefer to encourage the use of activities and materials that the students can find and use at home, alone without a teacher or facilitator. It is a salutary lesson to any teacher interested in independent learning to observe the delight that students can experience when they find a grammar book with an answer key, or listening materials that have answers and transcripts 'hidden' in the teacher's book. Other activities I encourage are reading simplified readers quickly and for pleasure (including readers linked to video films); vocabulary cards; talking to oneself aloud in English (see *Talking to Yourself in English* by Chris Sion, Desert Island Books, 1993 – reviewed in Newsletter 11); conversation groups; shadow reading (reading a textbook aloud from a transcript at the same time as a voice on a tape) with audio books or any text that has an accompanying cassette; actively using newly learned language; deliberately planning something to talk about at mealtimes or coffee breaks, for

example telling others what they have read or listened to; the use of monolingual dictionaries. All these are activities that can be continued at home by students on their own.

While some learner training is undoubtedly useful, I must confess to sometimes wondering if we are too hung up about it. I am often struck by the traditional techniques and strategies that teachers refer to in accounts of their efforts to learn a foreign language on their own without a teacher or the four walls of a classroom. In Newsletter 10 one teacher, writing about his learning of Portuguese, writes: 'The fact that I was going to meet a real Brazilian the next day would induce me to sit down in the evening and apply myself to some other learning activity – reading, reviewing vocabulary, studying grammar in the coursebook [...] I have found that the question of what I do (the choice, that is, between one activity and another, one methodological approach and another) is much less important than the question of whether I do anything at all'. It is clear that planning, self-discipline and motivation are important for the successful independent learner.

We will also sometimes talk about language and language learning. 'Learner independence is not just "autonomistic" for the sake of it, but also based on theories of how people learn languages best. That is, not just ideas that help people learn (though this is one interpretation of learner independence), but research and insight into how people learn' (Newsletter 7).

### **Assessment and evaluation**

'Learners need a sense of progress. I'd like to hear from anyone who has thought of ways to encourage the individual to assess his/her individual progress' (Newsletter 3). So would I. In the traditional classroom there is usually a textbook that helps students to feel they have made progress, by the simple fact of moving steadily from say Unit 1 to Unit 20 over two weeks. In an independent learning context other means have to be found.

At Project Scotland periodic review and, if necessary, revision of the 'map' produced at the beginning of the course is one way of marking progress and development. 'Retrospective self-evaluation' is another. The contributor to Newsletter 9 who coined this term explains it by saying 'it sounds like rather a grand name for what is really a very simple idea. All I am suggesting is that when you try to evaluate your own proficiency in a language you are learning, you think back and compare your performance now with a particular juncture in the past'.

At Project Scotland the Daily Record is a useful tool to help retrospective self-evaluation. This is a set of A4 pages, one for each day of the course, which students complete at the end of each

day, or first thing the following morning. They note down what they have studied that day, and all other learning experiences they have been part of, for example listening to our taking part in a conversation at lunch; spoken encounters in the village, etc. They also note down two things they did particularly well, for example their success in making a contribution to the conversation; new vocabulary that they were able to slip into a conversation or a piece of writing; a conviction that at last they understand the present perfect after doing lots of exercises on it. They also note down two difficulties they had, for example mistakes in vocabulary or grammar, or a cultural misunderstanding.

For retrospective self-evaluation it is important for students to have a yardstick to compare present with past performance. Thus the repetition of events and activities is important, for instance meeting and talking with the same people, reading readers at the same level, writing (as one student did recently) several compositions.

### **In conclusion**

The LI SIG has helped all of us focus our thoughts, ideas and practice. Speaking personally, it has helped me to have the courage to put ideas into action, and I have found my move away from a classroom-mode of teaching and learning very rewarding. I look forward to learning more over the next ten years and wish the LI SIG all the success it deserves.

The quotations from the *Independence* newsletters that I have used in this article can be found on the pages listed below:

Newsletter 1, Spring 1987, p. 1: 'The good language learner' by Brian North;

Newsletter 2, Autumn 1987, p. 1: 'Learner independence is . . . ' Anon.;

Newsletter 3, Spring 1988, p. 9: 'Preparing learners for negotiation: A reply' by Andy Baxter;

Newsletter 5, Spring 1989, p. 10: 'LI and SEAL: What are we missing?' by Rachel Belgrave and Marion Geddes;

Newsletter 7, Spring 1991, p. 2: 'Sour grapes: *Learning to Learn English* – wow or worry?' by Andy Baxter;

Newsletter 8, Spring 1992, p. 28: 'Teachers as self-access learners' by Rosey Feuell et al.;

Newsletter 9, Spring 1993, p. 19: 'Strategies that work' by Glyn Jones;

Newsletter 10, Winter 1994–95, p. 20: 'Teachers as learners' by Glyn Jones;

Newsletter 11, Spring 1995, p. 10: 'Interview with Nick Hall' by Jenny Timmer;

Newsletter 12, Summer 1995, pp. 4–5: 'Autonomy in Asia' by Naoko Aoki;

Newsletter 14, Winter 1995–96, p. 21: 'Trust the learner to get it right' by Susan Norman;

Newsletter 15, Spring 1996, p. 32: *From Theory to Classroom Practice* by Leni Dam, reviewed by Flávia Vieira.

[Ed. note: *Aside from giving us permission to reprint this article, Marion provided the following details of her career:*]

*In 1975, while working at the British Council English Language Teaching Institute in London, Marion Geddes produced the film 'Activity Days in Language Learning' with her colleagues Janet McAlpin, Gill Sturtridge and Jim Kerr. The film reflected the growing interest in learner independence (eg work by Dick Allwright and others) and proved very influential in encouraging the setting up of self-access learning centres in the UK and overseas. After freelancing for several years, Marion decided to combine a return to her Scottish roots with putting into practice many of her ideas about learner independence by setting up 'Project Scotland', which she ran until she retired in 1999.*

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If you're not a member of IATEFL, first you have to join this association (see [www.iatefl.org](http://www.iatefl.org)), selecting 'Learner Autonomy SIG' as (one of) your SIG(s) of choice when you do join.