

NOW THEY HAVE LEFT — REFLECTIONS AT THE END OF A PERIOD

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*What do we do?
Why do we do it?
How do we do it?
With what results? What next?*

Introduction

First of all a few words about the title of this paper - and why I chose it. 'They' refer to my students who left this very summer (1997). 'They' are some of the learners described in details in my book 'From theory to classroom practice'. If you haven't read the book, then you might be among those who have received a hand-out at one of my workshops with a classroom showing the seating arrangements - Birgitte making a newspaper, Michael making small books, Emrah involved in making a play with Dennis - my 'Menace'. If that is not the case either, then you might be among those who have seen the word-cards, or games of dominoes, or picture lottos, or newspapers produced by the same students - the same class. And I doubt that there among you is anyone who has not seen the 'Diaries' produced by this group of students. Who has not seen the beautiful and very personal ones produced by Nanna and other girls or the straight forward ones, full of vocabulary, produced by Max or other boys; not to mention the more "empty" and less orderly ones produced by some of my menaces? Special for this group of students is also that their progress and their development was looked into professionally. They were participants in a research project, the LAAL project, which focused on language acquisition in an autonomous learning environment. On top of all this, the class and I ended up in their 5th year of English - their last year at school - producing a video "*It's up to yourself if you want to learn.*"¹ The aim of the video was to show the

students at work with projects, to show learner-learner interaction, and to show teacher-learner interaction. In short, to show the structure, the organisation, and the contents of some typical English lessons at intermediate level.

My work with this class has given me new insights as regards classroom procedures and learning processes. It has sharpened further my awareness as regards the role of the teacher and the role of the learners in an autonomous learning environment. The five years have provided me with very rich and important classroom data to make use of when running my in-service-teacher courses and workshops.

And now they have left! And I am left - with a frustration. Partly because a number of questions suddenly crop up: Did I remember to ask them all the questions I wanted to ask them? Questions that only they could answer? Did I follow the progress that I wanted to follow? Did we get the data we wanted from this group for the LAALE project? Partly because I realize that they are gone - the ones that have taken up so much space of my life for the last 5 years. So when I was asked for a title for this paper, it was natural to choose the one I did - "Now they have left - reflections at the end of a period" - for at least two reasons. First of all it forces me to evaluate the period, to look back, to reflect on what happened, and to look ahead, to consider next step. Secondly it gives me a chance to dwell with my learners a little longer.

In this paper I will focus on what I regard as important developments and changes in my classroom over the period in question. At the same time, I will point out how these developments and changes have been mirrored in my work with in-service teachers.

Developments in the classroom

The simplified model of a teaching/learning sequence

I still make use of the simplified model of a teaching/learning sequence (fig.1). The simple organisation - the basic structure in project work - planning, carrying out the plans and evaluation is easy for the learners to grasp and make use of. The model is equally easy for in-service-teachers to understand when I claim that the development of learner autonomy is essentially a move from left to right; for the teacher to let go and for the learners to take hold. However, I have become aware of the fact that this is not the whole truth. It is not as simple as that. An autonomous learning environment is neither teacher directed nor learner directed; or rather, it is both and. What we are aiming at is in my view a learning directed environment. It is my experience from working with

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teachers, though, that it is probably necessary to 'go through' the following steps: From a teacher directed teaching environment to a possible learner directed learning environment to a joint and negotiated teacher and learner directed learning environment.

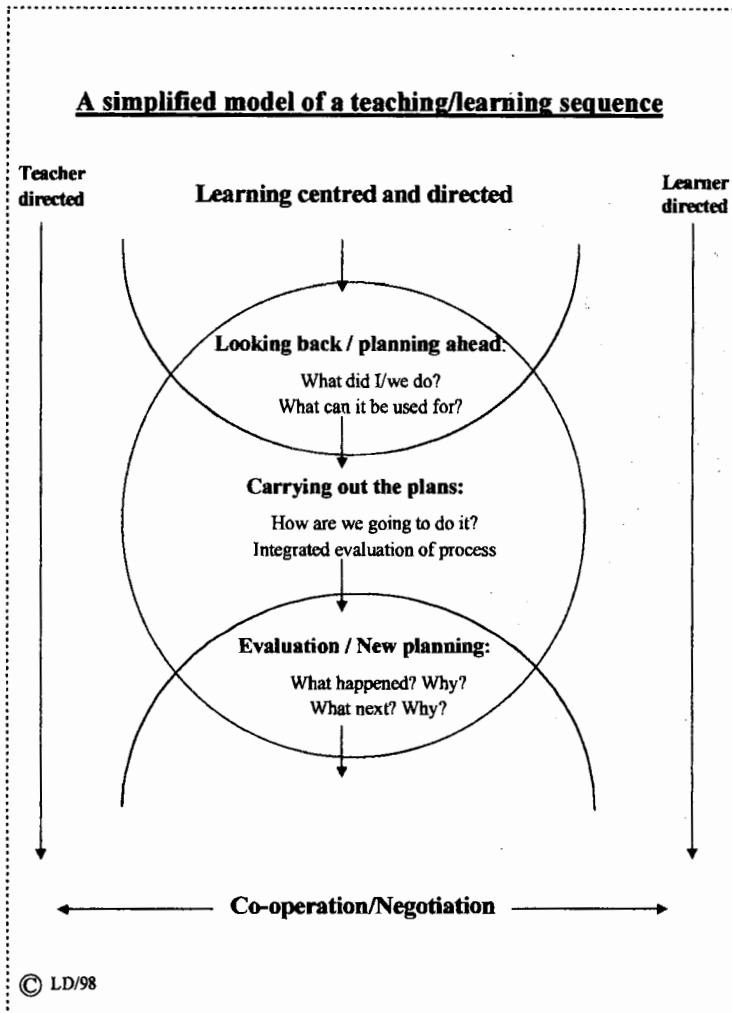


Fig. 1. The three circles

As a result of this awareness, the basic structure of my lessons has changed (fig.2). By dividing the plan for a period into the three categories 'Teacher directed activities', 'Student directed activities', and a 'Together' session, I have

indicated the division of roles - of responsibility - a division that has proved easy for the learners – as well as in-service teachers - to grasp. The plan in its present form has proved especially useful with my weaker learners, with new-comers to my classes, and when taking over new classes.

The 'new' structure has also made it easier to plan my work as a teacher - to make it clear when I am in charge and when I am a participant - and easier for the students to accept these different roles - and make use of them. It gives the classroom procedures certain stability - and provides its participants with a feeling of security. Might there be a danger of boredom? As regards the teacher no, as regards the learners seemingly also no. They do at least not mention it in any evaluations; on the contrary.

To place the learner directed activities under one hat so to speak has facilitated the learners' freedom to be in charge of their own work. One day a group might leave out '2 minutes' talk' in favour of a discussion about their group work. Students at intermediate level might want to prolong '2 minutes' talk' to half an hour spent on their own discussion points in connection with a chosen text. The suggested 'agenda', however, is without doubt a help for the previously mentioned groups - younger learners, weaker learners² and new classes; a fairly fixed structure within which the learners are asked to place their own contents.

The third item "Together" has also found its form and fixed contents. This session is vital. First of all because this is where things are shared. This is where the results of individual work, pair work or group work will be presented, discussed and evaluated. Not as much the products because they might only be of interest to a few, but more important the processes during the activity:

- How did we organise our work?
- What kind of problems did we run into and how did we try to tackle them?
- What kind of successes did we have?

'Together' also provides space for singing a song, playing a game, listening to a story, setting up a quiz; activities aiming at 'feeling good' together. A time for relaxation after a hard day's or week's work; a time where a lot of language is used – and learned! So far the contents of 'together' have more or less been decided by me, but there is no reason why the contents could not be decided by the learners.

At beginners' level 'Together' will normally take place at the end of each lesson. Later on it will be a matter of 10-15 minutes at the end of a week depending on how much time is needed for students wanting to present the results of their work.

Finally 'Together' is the place where it is possible to adjust the general course of learning or the learning environment by looking back and considering possible changes. This kind of evaluation does of course not substitute the

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internal, ongoing evaluation with individual learners or groups of learners during activities undertaken.

A plan for a teaching/learning period.

1. Teacher initiated and teacher directed activities promoting awareness raising as regards:

- the learning environment and the responsibilities expected from its participants
- useful language learning activities
- learners' and teacher's evaluation of teacher initiated activities.

2. Learner directed activities:

- Sharing homework.
- '2 minutes' talk'.
- 'Free', learner chosen activities in groups, pairs or individually within the given possibilities.
- Planning homework - and perhaps next step.
- Learners' evaluation of work carried out - individually, in pairs or in groups.

3. 'Together' - shared activities:

- Presentation including evaluation of results or products from group work, pair work or individual work .
- Joint events such as songs, lyrics, story-telling, quizzes, etc.
- Joint over-all evaluation of the period

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Fig.2. A plan for a teaching/learning period.

1.2 The use of diaries

The use of diaries is still – together with the use of posters - one of my key-tools in classroom work. It is the place where learners keep track of the on-going learning process as well as the place for personal reflections in this connection. It is a base for starting up dialogues between learners, between teacher and learners and between teacher, learners, and parents. The impact that the use of diaries can have on the development of learner autonomy and on the development of the learners' linguistic competence becomes more and more obvious. However, the use of a diary is probably also one of the more tricky and difficult areas, and its use needs constant attention from learners as well as teachers.

With the group of learners in question the lay-out as well as the contents of the diaries have to a certain degree changed from that of previous classes. With this group I introduced some 'musts' to be followed. I did this mainly in order to facilitate the communication between the learners and myself. I was tired of spending a lot of time finding my way around in their diaries, apart from the fact that in many cases I couldn't read their handwriting. So instead of spending time and space to mention these problems to the individual learner when looking into their diaries - notes that had no bigger effect - I introduced a list of 'musts' relevant to my needs at the time (fig.3) - 'musts' that the learners would check in pairs. When checking, they would enter aims for improvements into their contracts for the following month. It is worth mentioning that as soon the learners started 'checking' their diaries in pairs, it was only needed twice; then the effect was visible and time could be spent on more important matters i.e. on contents.

Demands for the layout and the contents of your diaries.

1. First impression:

- A cover with name and class
- Readable handwriting
- Nice impression/tidy
- Numbered pages
- Margins

2. Contents:

- Month page
- Day and date
- Share homework
- Two minutes' talk
- Activities during the lessons
- Homework for...
- Easy to follow what has happened during a lesson
- Comments on today's work.

Fig. 3

With these learners many diaries 'developed' into very personal and reflective ones. There are of course many reasons for this. I believe that not having to spend time on the form of the diary gave me an opportunity to develop a more personal contact with the individual learner via the diaries. I could now focus on the learning rather than the format and I started formulating my comments and suggestions to the learners in a letter-format, inspired by Nuria Vidal's work on evaluation.

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Another reason for improvements in the use of diaries might also be that I, myself, have become better at making use of my own diary, the teacher's diary, during the lessons, when working with individual learners or groups of learners. We know all too well that the learners are more inclined to do what they see than what we tell them to do.

For the same reason, I started making the use of my teacher's diary at my in-service courses visible to the participants. At the same time I 'forced' them to make use of diaries during the course – in as well as outside my classes. I made the use of the diary a normal procedure/part of the ongoing process. During a session I would for example ask them to note down in their diaries expected problems and/or successes in connection with a certain change in their classrooms. Or I would ask them to bring along their diaries to their classrooms and make notes during a lesson – notes to be used in the workshop.

The importance of self-esteem

Finally I will mention one more area of development. For the last couple of years I have focused more and more on the importance of the development of self-esteem as a prerequisite for the development of learner autonomy. I have focused on self-esteem on part of the teachers as well as of the learners; self-esteem as a pre-requisite for letting go as well as taking hold. A useful tool has been Barbara Reider's model of high self esteem taken from her book 'Building confident kids'. She claims that there are three basic areas involved when talking about (high) self-esteem: A feeling of uniqueness, of power, and of connectedness. She describes the three areas like this:

- Uniqueness: Has a feeling of being special in the world. Respects and trusts own perceptions. Uses imagination and creativity. Expresses own opinions.
- Power: Has a feeling of being in charge of his/her life. Feels competent, capable, and secure. Considers options and makes choices. Meets challenges, takes risks.
- Connectedness: Has a feeling of belonging to a group. Feels wanted, accepted, and liked. Communicates easily with others. Knows opinions are heard.

Not a bad checking list when setting up activities and organising work - in the classroom as well as in the workshops! Another useful 'tool' in that connection has been a drawing of Dennis the Menace saying 'The best thing you can do is to become very good at being yourself' - a drawing which should be placed in every classroom or staff room as a reminder for learners as well as teachers.

With what results?

When it comes to evaluating a process or a product, it is useful to look at the aims or objectives set up. My over-all aims when starting out with these learners - as well as with all my other learners - were that they should:

- Like learning English – be motivated.
- Be aware of and co-responsible for their own learning.
- Be capable of taking charge of their own learning.
- Develop communicative competence.

As with previous groups there was of course also in this group the odd learner - out of 20 – who did not end up being as motivated, as co-responsible, as independent as I could have hoped for. However, I feel that I generally speaking succeeded in getting close to my aims.

I base my 'evaluation' on the learners' more formal evaluations over the years in connection with questionnaires, their entries in their diaries, on the results from the LAAL project – as well as on the daily, ongoing work in the classroom.

Evaluation in 5th form - October 1992 – first year of English

At the end of their first three months of English I asked the learners which questions they would ask themselves if and when having to evaluate this first period. Individually and in plenary they came up with 20 questions that I entered into a questionnaire. Below you will find a few of the questions as well as a few typical answers. The answers were all very positive. This was the first time that I had the learners produce their own questionnaire.

1. Has it been fun learning English?

yes--■-----no

Why?

- because it is exciting and you can follow your own progression
- because it has
- I don't know
- you can decide what to do yourself
- because there are many funny words

4. Are you fond of English?

yes---■-----no

Why?

- I can understand people who speak English and read English
- because it is fun to know two languages
- it is a good language
- because it is fun

5. Do you think that it is a good way to learn English?

yes---■-----no

Why?

- because the teacher only speaks English
- because you can decide yourself what to do
- because I haven't tried other ways
- because we learn the small words first

Evaluation of work with projects - March 1997

A bigger project lasting 9 lessons took place and was evaluated at the end of the learners' fifth year of English. The period had been special in the sense that I had been away from the class most of the time during the project. The questionnaire was designed by me and focused to a last extend on how they had managed. The usual questions about the process as well as the outcome were included. In addition, I included the question below. Most learners answered 'yes' to the question. I have just copied some of the typical ones. The individual answers were collected and copied to the whole group as a base for a joint evaluation and discussion.

In general - Do you feel that you are capable of being responsible for your own learning?

yes---■-----no

Why?

- I think that my outcome of this project has proved that I am capable of being responsible of my own learning.

- I think that whether or not there's a teacher I'm responsible (if it's interesting my outcome is bigger.)
- I have to be capable of doing my own work and find ideas.
- Well, I don't really know why, but if I get a task and it's interesting then I do something about it.
- Yes, I think I am. But sometimes I have to tell myself that I have to do my homework. But I like English and write and read enough.
- Because I think it was easy this time. I like when I decide my own homework. But we do that every time. But I need a little help with new words.
- Yes, I think so, but sometimes I'm a bit too lazy.
- I feel like I've become better at it.
- I would like to work with others so that we could help the others.

Reflections written in the learners' diaries

Another type of evaluation is of course the daily comments in the learners' diaries entered at the end of a lesson. They are in most cases very simple (see below). However, to me they show some kind of 'development' of awareness of learning over the years. Notice how the last learner has taken over my 'letter-format'. The entries are directly copied.

Today it was a qrrrrrrriiii! day, it was avfuld! We tried to play our play on tape, but everytime I should say somting I said it wrong! my home work will be to read one more chapter.

(Boy aged 11, first year of English. He meant to say write instead of read.)

Comments on my work with Malene:

I think we are working very good together, and we have learned a lot of new words. The activities were a bit borrowing, but we had fun anyway, and talked alot English. Tomorrow we will make a story.

(Girl aged 13, third year of English)

Comments on today's work:

I think it went rather well. Lars and I wrote "News" on the computer and it will be finish on Monday. Lasse has finelly finished the weather, and Michael is still writing on that big article. I hope we will be ready to present it next week.

(Boy aged 14, fourth year of English)

Dear Leni

I think it has been a very exciting autumn. We have done and made a lot of funny things. But it has also been hard work. After we came home from England I was very tired of the English language. I didn't wrote in my diary for a long time and I didn't spoke a word of English. But now it is over. I like English again and that is a good thing.

About the project "Homelessness and poverty" we just made I think we did a good job. But it isn't really the way I like to work. I think our groupwork was to serious. We just wanted to win ... or how can I say it ... to be the best! I think it was a little hard to be in the group because I felt that I had

to live up to the rest of the group's work expectation. I felt that what I did wasn't good enough compared to the other's work. But apart from that I think I learned a lot of things. And we (the group) had a very good time and also fun.

(Girl aged 15, fifth year of English. End of Autumn term evaluation)

Communicative competence

Below you will find two examples of peer-to-peer talk taken from the LAALE data³ at the end of the learners' second year of English. The examples show the learners' communicative competence at this stage. The first dialogue takes place between two good learners; the second one between two weak learners. The third dialogue is taken from the German data collected at the same time; it shows the total lack of real communication.

Example 1.

- L: What should we talk about, Carsten?
C: I don't know, we could talk about our music group [?].
L: Yeah, that's a good idea --
C: I think it's fun. Now we have to play, ah, record our tape.
L: Yeah, the first time.
C: Yes, it's very exciting. I have made a cover to our tape at home.
L: That one you showed me?
C: Yes.
L: The only thing it's beautiful.
C: Beautiful?
L: Yes.
C: It's lovely. (Laughing)
L: I think it's good, too.

C: Yes.

Example 2.

- La: What are you going to do in your new school ... isn't it a special school?
M: No, it's just a ...
La: ordinary school?
M: No, it's an after school.
La: After school?
M: I don't know what it's called in English. It's ...(pause) I think it's a kind of private school maybe.
La: Are you going to live there?
M: Yeah, go ... only going home in the ...(pause)
La: weekends?
M: Yeah, every second of the weekends ... I don't know.

Example 3:

- J: I'm going to have a family with two ehm chil childrens, and I'm going to live in a big house.
I: When is your birthday?
J: My birthday is now.
I: Ah, my birthday is on the sixteen ah ja of ehm of May. When is your sister's birthday?
J: My sister's birthday is in is on the twenty-seventh of February.
I: What films do you like?

Apart from our data from the LAALE project, the learner-learner interaction in the video 'It's up to yourself' as well as the results from the official, oral test at the end of school prove the learners' high level of communicative competence.

How do they cope in tertiary education?

When my students continue in tertiary education, I will receive the marks they are given at the end of their first term there. In general, my students manage well. However, prior to this conference I wanted to find out how the learners themselves felt that they cope in their new surroundings. So I sent out a

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questionnaire asking them questions about:

- How they coped with the linguistic demands in general.
- How they felt that they coped compared to their peers.

It will take up too much space here to give a total report on their answers. The conclusion is, though, that all of them feel that they manage the linguistic demands well – from average to very well. As regards how well they manage compared to their peers, the picture is the same. They feel that they are just as good and in many cases even better than their peers. Some of the ones attending A-level college find 'grammar' problematic. But, as a couple of them point out, 'When we started here (at the A-level college) we didn't know the rules, but we said the things correctly. Now, after a month, we know many rules and we are still fairly correct whereas our friends in the class have known the rules all the time, but they still cannot make use of them.'

What next?

There is no doubt that the basic workshop model developed in connection with our 'Hundige-courses' and described in "An evolution of a teacher programme" by Mike Breen, Chris Candlin, Gerd Gabrielsen and myself works.

What has happened, though, is that the elements or the foci of the inputs given have changed at least for me. It might very well have to do with my personal development. I realized the change that had happened in my own workshops when I looked at some recent "contracts" made by the participants and compared them to the contracts made six or more years ago. At the AILA conference in Amsterdam in 1993, I pointed out the main starting points at that time for teachers wanting to develop learner autonomy in their classes. At that time 53% chose to change the learners as a starting point. I haven't made a similar detailed overview of the contracts made over the last 5 years, but "hits" for starting points are:

- Introduction of the use of diaries is high on the list.
- The introduction of new types of activities, and the awareness of the importance of the activities being learner centred and learner directed such as "2minutes' talk", "sharing homework", "group work decided upon and directed by the learners themselves".
- The structure of a lesson/period
- A change in teacher role.

When realising this change I also realised that the change probably was due to my focus on input at the workshop. I realised that due to my

growing awareness as regards what works and what doesn't in my own classroom I had changed the contents of workshop input accordingly. And I was very much aware of the power that we as teachers have - in our classrooms and in our workshops - a power which of course is also an enormous weakness in what we believe ourselves to be doing: developing autonomous learners - in our classes and at our workshops. If I am right in these assumptions, then it is more important than ever to ask ourselves the good old questions: What? Why? How? With what result? - when deciding for input at our courses.

It is of utmost importance in the future to continue collecting classroom data the way it has been done with this class - the LAAL data, descriptions of classroom work⁴, video-recordings, the learners' evaluations. Data of this type can and should be used in the classroom as well as in the workshops for awareness raising as regards the development of learner autonomy.

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Notes

¹ The production of the video was made possible due to initiatives taken by Birte Hjermin Jensen and Jette Lentz after the Nordic Workshop held in Copenhagen in 1996. Together with a little accompanying pamphlet it can

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be purchased at DPB (Danish Pedagogic Library), Emdrupvej 101, DK-2400 Copenhagen, or at bogsalg@dpb.dlh.dk for dkr 200,00.

² See 'Dennis the Menace – and autonomy' in Dam, 1999

³ For more examples and more details see Legenhausen, 1999

⁴ An example is Dam, 1995