The thick end of the wedge: encouraging autonomous learning by advanced-level ESL university students

Tony Lynch
University of Edinburgh

Abstract

Much of the literature on language learner autonomy has its roots in foreign language contexts, where learners have limited opportunities for interaction with the target language. It is generally assumed that learners and teachers working in an English as a Second Language (ESL) setting are in a relatively privileged position to take advantage of the greater opportunities for language practice beyond the language classroom. However, converting potential learning opportunities into opportunities taken is not necessarily straightforward, even for advanced-level learners in a linguistically rich ESL context. In this paper I discuss a project to create learner education materials for international students at the University of Edinburgh whose English is sufficiently high to exempt them from the University's language support programme. The materials are designed to help them to realise, in both senses, the language learning potential of their daily encounters with English in an academic environment. I describe the materials' origins, comment on a sample unit, report the responses of student users, and outline future development of the materials.

Key words: English for Academic Purposes, Learner Autonomy, Learner Training, Materials Design.

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1. Introduction: 'training' or 'education'?

The concept of learner training can be traced back to research in the early 1970s into the characteristics of 'the good language learner' (Naiman et al., 1975; Rubin, 1975). Since then we have seen the regular publication of studies based on a positivistic interpretation of that research, in the sense that they claim that people can be trained or guided to become more effective learners of a foreign or second language (L2), especially if that strategy training is informed and explicit (Wenden and Rubin, 1987; Willing, 1988; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Wenden, 1991, 1995; White, 1995; Cotterall, 1995; Goh, 1997).

Although the published research is generally upbeat about what strategy training can achieve, some commentators have been more sceptical. Rees-Miller (1993, 1994), for example, argued that we should be much more circumspect about the benefits claimed for strategy training and that there was a need for longitudinal studies of its effectiveness. Similarly, Tudor (1996) warned that "it would be misleading to assume that… strategies can be neatly pedagogised and 'taught' to learners in a straightforward manner" (Tudor, 1996: 39).

Apart from matters of substance and impact, there has also been disagreement over whether the term *training* is really appropriate. Some have objected to its mechanistic and low-level implications and have preferred to use learner *development* or learner *education* (Lynch, 1988a; Sheerin, 1989, 1997; Voller and Pickard, 1996; Sinclair, 1996). Rees-Miller, again, was especially critical: "Particularly for adult learners, terms such as *learner training* or *learning to learn* have the unfortunate implication that students are inadequate at learning" (1994: 684). (For fuller discussion of terminology, see Tudor, 1996 and Benson, 1997).

In addition to book-length publications offering strategic guidance and awareness-raising, such as Rubin and Thompson (1982), Brown (1989), and Ellis and Sinclair (1989), it is now increasingly common for 'learner training' elements to be included in global skills textbooks (for recent reviews, see Lake, 1997 and Sinclair, 1999). Naturally, the writers and publishers of commercial training materials attempt to reach as wide a readership as possible, and therefore to make their advice relevant to a variety of learning contexts. On the other hand, Stratford (1993) found evidence that language learners preferred materials with a local orientation to those written for a commercial readership. This parallels Clarke's discussion of the dissonance between SLA researchers' search for findings that are 'generalisable' and classroom teachers' search for the 'particularisable' (Clarke, 1994). It is perhaps for this reason that one finds relatively few accounts of locally rooted training materials projects in traditional journals – though the advent of electronic publishing is now changing that, with the development of networks such as AUTO-L and the AILA Scientific Commission on Learner Autonomy[1].

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1. See the annotated bibliography (Internet resources) in this issue.

In terms of the two broad design choices I have touched on in this section —training versus education, and universal versus local— the materials development project to be discussed in this paper was conceived as *educational* and *local.* Central to the project is the belief that we can help individuals to make the most of opportunities for learning 'out there', beyond the English language classroom —as illustrated by local projects by Cotterall (1995) in an ESL context and Ryan (1997) in an EFL context. As we shall see, the University of Edinburgh materials are designed to help international students on degree courses at Edinburgh to learn by and for themselves, without access to a teacher or class. (From this point on, I will use *student* to refer to the role of a registered participant in a university degree and *learner* to refer to the role of learning a language).

2. Background to the project

Applicants to the University of Edinburgh who are not native speakers of English are required to provide evidence of their linguistic proficiency, normally in the form of a minimum IELTS or TOEFL score achieved in their home country. Having been accepted, they also take the University's Test of English at Matriculation (TEAM), which identifies areas in which they may benefit from language support classes. These run during the academic year, in parallel with their academic studies, and are organised and taught by the Institute for Applied Language Studies (IALS) under the English Language Testing and Tuition programme (ELTT) funded by the University. In a typical year about 120 of the 200 postgraduate students who take TEAM are required or recommended to take English courses on the basis of their TEAM scores.

This paper focuses not on the students who attend the English support classes, but on those individuals whose TEAM score is too high (above 7.0 IELTS or 600 TOEFL) for them to get an automatic place on our English courses. They are offered a number of alternatives. Firstly, we can put them on a waiting list for the English course(s) they want to take. If there eventually turn out to be places free, we allocate them to individuals according to their score on the relevant TEAM section; those with the lowest 'high' scores (e.g. 61% for a course with a ceiling of 60%) are given priority. Secondly, in the case of writing courses we can offer them copies of the course materials, adapted for use by independent learners. A third option —particularly for those who want to focus on their oral fluency— is to suggest they arrange a 'language exchange' with a British person learning their language, either at IALS or in another University department (Voller and Pickard, 1996). This involves meeting the British learner once a week for an hour of conversation, half of which is in English and half in the student's language.

The notion of a 'high' score on the test is, of course, subjective. When IALS staff talk of high-scoring students, we are thinking in institutional terms: a high TEAM score is one above the level at which the student runs

a no more than average risk of failing the degree course (Lynch, in press). With limited teaching resources, we have to concentrate language support on students whose English level suggests greater risk. However, from the individual student's point of view, the situation is rather different: when they compare their English with that of their native-speaker peers, ESL students invariably feel at a distinct disadvantage.

Given that the University provides English support classes for most international students, many 'high scorers' are disappointed, to put it mildly, when we tell them that they are exempted —or excluded, depending on one's point of view— from our English programme. What they want, they insist, is a place on an English course. When I suggest to them that there is little to be gained from joining a group of less competent learners, a few of these advanced learners do accept the point, but the majority continue to ask for a course place, in preference to all other alternatives.

3. Language learning and language use

A gap between perceived wants and observed needs is nothing new, but the case of these advanced learners raises the wider issue of the relationship between language learning and language use, and the extent to which learners' and teachers' views of that relationship may be in conflict. A central assumption in the language teaching profession is that the teacher's task is to help language *learners* to become actual or potential language *users*, in other words, to transfer what they have practised in an instructional setting to real-life situations. This movement from 'artificial' learning to 'authentic' use is shown in Figure 1, in terms of the relationship between form and meaning in instructed classroom learning (Littlewood, 1997: 87).

Reading the diagram from left to right, we can see it as representing a sequence of instruction, beginning with a predominant focus on form, which is gradually phased out along the four positions of the continuum, so that the focus on form is eventually replaced by orientation to meaning. By the time the learners reach the right-hand edge of the diagram, they are using English for authentic purposes, in the sense of lifelike or realistic communication, albeit within the walls of the L2 classroom.

The upper half of Figure 1 shows a triangular 'wedge' of increasingly communicative language practice. When we consider the advanced learners 'exiled' from support classes at Edinburgh, we can regard them as already at (or beyond) the right-hand edge of the diagram, the thick end of the wedge: they are already involved in authentic, meaningful use of English in their daily lives, spending five or six hours a day immersed in academic English (lectures, practical classes, library research) and possibly as many again using English in their social lives, at least in the case of those sharing accommodation with students with whom they communicate in English.

From the teacher's perspective, it is ironic that the 'exiles' are so insistent that what they need in order to raise their proficiency further is to join an English
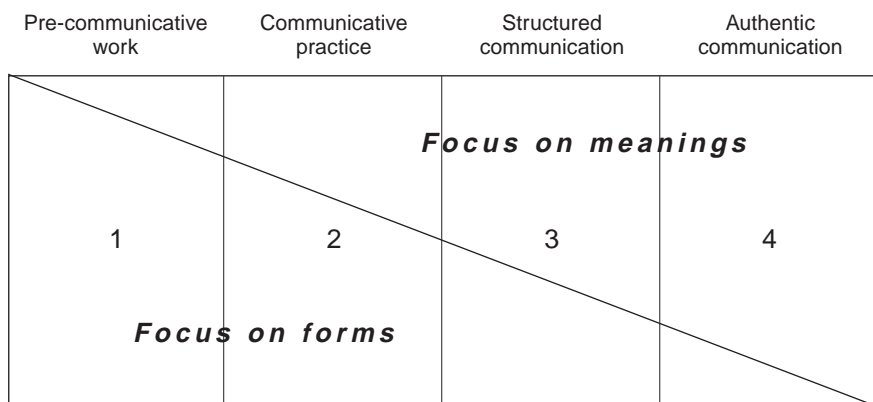
Pre-communicative work	Communicative practice	Structured communication	Authentic communication

F o c u s   o n   m e a n i n g s

1   2   3   4

F o c u s   o n   f o r m s

Figure 1. Language use and language learning.

class: as students are busy with real-life L2 communication, they are in what many teachers would consider an ideal position for language learning. So our main pedagogic task is to persuade them that they can harness their current communicative experiences in English as an academic medium - in other words, that they can *derive learning from use*. To do this requires a reversal of the conventional flow of instruction (from left to right in Figure 1), so that they move leftwards from actual use towards the 'noticing' of forms and patterns in English discourse. In order to facilitate that shift, we have now added a fourth alternative to those mentioned in Section 2: a set of learner materials designed to help them maximise their learning opportunities in Edinburgh, away from the sheltered familiarity of the English language classroom.

4. Materials for local learner education

Our materials aim to show learners ways of exploiting their own English input and output as data for analysis and reflection. There has been much discussion in the professional literature on the advantages of teachers adopting a reflective approach to what we do (Schon, 1983; Wallace, 1991; Richards and Lockhart, 1994). Recently, similar arguments have been made for learners (e.g. Tudor, 1996; Lynch, 1996; Matsumoto, 1996). One possible objection to recommending that teachers encourage the reflective route is that it may benefit analytical learners (Willing, 1988) but be less helpful to those with other learning styles. However, I would argue that university students are especially open to an approach to learning on the lines of what has been called 'experiential research' (Eck, Legenhausen and Wolff, 1995), since they are already used to applying data-analytical skills in the work they are doing for their academic postgraduate courses.

4.1. Origins

The materials for 'exiles' have been adapted from classroom handouts written for our summer pre-sessional English programme. In 1993 we introduced a learning strategies component into the programme, in the form of a published learner training course (Ellis and Sinclair, 1989). An evaluation of users' responses to the component (Stratford, 1993) suggested replacing the commercial material with dedicated local materials, which we did in 1994, drawing on three main sources of information: SLA and 'learner training' research; teaching methodology books; and our past EAP students. Our aim was to bring together contributions from relevant parties who do not normally 'talk' to each other: applied linguists (the research literature), teacher educators (methodological texts), and —not least— non-native users of English in the same situation as our students. In this sense our approach was similar to the 'forum' metaphor later adopted by Tudor:

> Learner training does not… simply involve a one-way flow of information, in which the teacher provides learners with knowledge and skills they might not possess… It also caters for the creation of a forum within which the teacher and learners exchange insights and perceptions of the learning process and thereby initiate the shared exploration of language learning which lies at the heart of a learner-centred approach. (Tudor, 1996: 37)

The empirical research literature that we found most relevant to our materials on the four skills included: for reading, Carrell, Devine and Eskey (1988) and Anderson (1993); for listening, Brown and Yule (1983a), Kasper (1984), Lynch (1988b) and Vanderplank (1988); for writing, Kroll (1990), Shaw (1991) and Mauranen (1993); and for speaking, Busch (1982) Pica (1994) and Luk (1994).

Among the ELT methodological texts cited in the learners' materials were: for reading, McCarthy (1991) and Cook (1989); for listening, Anderson and Lynch (1988) and Windeatt (1981); for writing, Hill, Soppesla and West (1982), and Brookes and Grundy (1990); and for speaking, Bygate (1987), Kenworthy (1987), and Knight (1992). In some units we also cited learner strategy and study skills texts, such as Rubin and Thompson (1982), and Northedge (1990).

For our third source of information and experience, we elicited the help of students who had attended our ELTT courses; we sent out a letter to some 100 postgraduates and asked them to tell us about the language learning techniques they had found useful during their period of academic study at Edinburgh. In particular, we asked them to describe techniques they had devised themselves.

These three sources eventually provided the structure for each unit: an introductory summary of the problem (e.g. listening) and key ideas from applied linguistic research; a description of practical resources that a learner

might exploit; and suggestions and techniques devised by past students. These became, respectively, *Principles*, *Resources* and *Options*, the section headings for each unit and also the first three letters of the title of the materials: *PROFILE – Principles, Resources and Options for the Independent Learner of English*. The classroom version of the materials was piloted in 1994 and has been revised in response to the evaluations by learners and teachers on pre-sessional courses since then. (For a detailed description of that process, see Lynch, forthcoming).

4.2. Adapting PROFILE for independent use

The generally enthusiastic user reactions from classroom users of *PROFILE* led to a decision to adapt it into a version that could be used by the independent learner, not only the high-scoring 'exiles', but also students who are unable to take IALS English courses for other reasons, and those who positively prefer to study on their own. The main design issue we faced in modifying the materials was one of accessibility. In the classroom, the teacher is available to act as mediator or interpreter of the text; for the lone learner we needed to make the ideas (and language) in *PROFILE* transparent enough to be used successfully without teacher intervention. With that in mind we made three main modifications to the original classroom version. Firstly, we added *Study Notes*, which were slightly adapted from notes written for the teachers using the classroom version. Secondly, we redesigned the tasks that relied on group discussion, changing them from interactive to reflective, for the user to respond to in note form and then compare with sample answers in the *Study Notes*. Thirdly, we had the materials bound in book form, with the *Study Notes* at the back.

4.3. Sample materials

To provide a flavour of *PROFILE*, I have included (as an Appendix to this paper) extracts from the Listening unit, which illustrates the tripartite structure of the material. The *Principles* section introduces a number of key ideas about L2 listening, such as the relationship with reading, and the way the effective listener exploits linguistic and cognitive knowledge sources. The extract focuses on the importance of contextual information and of flexibility in listening.

The *Resources* section discusses ways of using the main electronic media available to learners in Edinburgh to maximise their listening input: television (including closed caption subtitles), videocassettes and audiocassettes. In the extract you will see that we encourage learners to increase their familiarity with Scottish varieties of spoken English, explaining how local news programmes can be especially useful for that purpose. It is a common assumption among students at Edinburgh that "the Scottish accent" (sic) is unusually impenetrable – indeed, some students believe that Scots do not speak Eng-

lish properly. We also raise the issue of the very different levels of accessibility of different television genres.

The *Options* section in each unit distils the experiences of past students. In the case of the Listening unit, we report suggestions from ten students and invite the *PROFILE* user to analyse the specific characteristics of those suggestions (Task 9), considering what they share and what makes them different, and then get the learners to weigh the pros and cons, as in the example of dictation (Task 10). The final task underlines that language learners looking for ways of improving their English can and should 'convert' real-life texts into learning texts for their own purposes, and that there are various ways of using the same text as a vehicle for L2 learning.

The Listening sample illustrates three common threads running through *PROFILE*. Firstly, the language used is relatively technical and academic, e.g., *target setting, formula* and *random order.* This was intentional; we wanted the text to reflect the sort of lexical and grammatical features that the students would be encountering in their course texts. One of the criticisms from classroom learners of other 'learner training' materials we had used on our pre-sessional course was that they were too simple linguistically and not sufficiently academic (Stratford, 1993). Secondly, it should be clear from the sample that we are trying to foster a positive overall attitude to managing the learning problem in hand. Learners who arrive with negative preconceptions about their likely difficulties in understanding (Scottish) English need to appreciate how much they can help themselves to cope, for example, by making conscious use of background knowledge and context to work out a speaker's message. Thirdly, we aim to make a more general point, which underlies *PROFILE* as a whole: that the best place for collecting relevant and realistic learning materials is 'out there' in the real world.

4.4. User feedback

Informal feedback since 1995 from users of the independent version has been positive, even from those who would initially have preferred to attend a conventional IALS course. In 1998 we started to gather data more formally, in two ways: from a 'focus group' (users whose views and responses are sought as part of the (re)design process) and also from lone users. Our informants in the focus group were 12 students taking an IALS Speaking class, for which they were asked to read one unit of *PROFILE* a week as a home assignment, to complete an evaluation sheet and then to work through some tasks from the unit at the class.

Users' comments often reveal that they have been processing the materials at some depth, which suggests that they find the tasks thought-provoking. Here, for example, is what a Japanese student in the focus group wrote in response to a question about what he felt he had learnt from the unit on vocabulary learning:

> For a thousand years we Japanese have been learning ancient Chinese poems by heart - but by using the characters and their meaning, not their sound. In my case, when I was 13, I went to an English language school where an old teacher (80 years old) taught us English words using the *Oxford Concise Dictionary*. He explained their original meaning, often from Latin. That was a very old style of teaching.
>
> Nowadays, the situation is changing, but still many Japanese high school students memorise words in order to pass the university entrance exam, not to get better communication skills. There are no tests of listening, speaking or writing. For these reasons Japanese people tend to remember words from their written form and never from their sound. Using sounds to remember vocabulary is an important and new technique for me!

The second group we can consult (by e-mail) are the genuine lone users, whose TEAM scores have barred them from ELTT tuition. We have sought their views in an open-ended way, asking them to express their opinion of the relevance and accessibility of *PROFILE* in their own words, rather than by circling or ticking pre-selected categories. In adopting this format of elicitation, we have deliberately sought individual and qualitative responses, as opposed to 'answers' that can be tabulated for statistical purposes. Like Foster (1998), in a different context, we want to preserve the individuality of each learner's contribution, which is inevitably lost when data is aggregated in pursuit of statistical robustness. A second, practical reason for not taking the statistical route is that our number of respondents is still small: so far we have contacted 16 and have received half-a-dozen replies, which have been enlightening and interesting. A Thai, for example, told us that he had initially been put off reading *PROFILE* by its plain binding and cover. When he eventually took the time to read it, he told us, he was surprised: "I found this book was a really good one, easy reading with a lot of ideas close to my life here".

One of our main concerns has been whether lone users have difficulties with the book's language and metalanguage, especially in the *Study Notes*, since they were only slightly modified from the original Teacher's Notes. So far we have had fewer negative comments on this area than we expected. A Brazilian wrote, "The Study Notes in every unit are ok for me. Actually, the 'teacher-lecture-note style' helped me a lot to understand the contents of the book". (I might add, in passing, that the relatively lack of open criticism on the part of respondents may be due to any of a range of factors, such as an individual or cultural predisposition not to criticise, or to the fact that the medium we chose, e-mail, makes anonymity impossible).

We have some evidence that speaking is the skill about which *PROFILE* users are most worried, even after working through the material. Seven of the 12 learners in the focus group said that the Speaking unit needed to be improved - or rather, extended. They cited as evidence the fact that they still

had problems in making themselves understood in seminars. However, we also hear similar comments from students who have taken conventional taught classes in speaking; a Japanese featured in an earlier case study (Lynch, 1997) told me that in retrospect he realised it had been easier to talk in the EAP course than in his academic course seminars. But this is not surprising, since in a seminar the international students have to understand and compete for speaking turns with native speakers. So the fact that *PROFILE* has not provided a complete solution to their problems in speaking is not necessarily a damning criticism. Requests for more practice and more work in an area in *PROFILE* may be an expression of unease with the demands of 'real operating conditions' (Johnson, 1996), and not necessarily with the materials *per se*. This does not mean that we should not look for improvements to make to the material; we could do more, for example, to guide learners to analyse and exploit the data they gather, perhaps on the lines suggested - for teachers - by Tarone and Yule (1989).

5. Discussion

PROFILE is designed to highlight areas in which independent learners can help themselves improve and to suggest practical techniques that their peers at Edinburgh have found effective. It encourages them to look for ways of exploiting the material of their real lives and not just pedagogic materials; for example, in the Listening unit, the *Options* section underlines the importance of exploiting the autodidactic potential of interaction with live native speakers, and not simply resorting to the conventional technological 'fix' of one-way listening practice (via computer, television or radio) in a self-access centre.

However, although the thrust of the material is practical, in the sense that we want learners to try out, to adopt or adapt some of the techniques that others have found useful, *PROFILE* also embodies theoretical principles, which I will touch on briefly in this section.

The first principle is the importance of *learner involvement* as informants on the language learning (rather than the teaching) process. Edge and Samuda (1981) made a strong case for involving learners in classroom decisions; Clarke (1989) applied similar arguments in suggesting we should involve learners as materials writers; and Aston (1996) called for learners to be given responsibility for developing self-access learning methods. *PROFILE* takes that involvement a step further by soliciting the help of past students as sources of expertise *beyond* the classroom. This is not in itself new (Rubin and Thompson, 1982; Sheerin, 1989), but the special value of *PROFILE* is that it draws on the experience of peers in the specific local context. The *Options* section of each unit offers— and the choice of that verb is deliberate —ideas that may save newly arrived students time and effort in their learning of English, ideas from other learners with whom they are likely to identify:

> there is no real substitute for practical experience. But neither is there any justification for not learning from other people's mistakes or for trying to reinvent the wheel, so it makes good sense to reflect on previous experience and to try to systematize what has been acquired, so that it can be transmitted and shared in as clear and efficient way as possible. (Riley, 1997: 129)

The second principle is the value of *reflection* as a tool in language learning, particularly for adult learners. In *PROFILE* learner reflection is incorporated in two ways. First, the suggestions offered under *Options* are the result of retrospection by the individuals we consulted in our 1994 questionnaire about their own successful learning techniques. Second, specific tasks in each unit require the current users of the materials to reflect on their own experience of learning and using English - sometimes with reference to events prior to coming to Edinburgh, sometimes immediate reflection on a practical activity they have just completed in the course of a *PROFILE* unit. In building retrospection and introspection into the materials, we support Sinclair's view that "the most effective learner development takes place when training combines reflection and experimentation, i.e. thinking about the learning as well as actually doing it" (Sinclair, 1996: 161).

The third principle is the focus on engagement with *authentic material* – by which I mean the spoken and written discourses that the learners participate in at Edinburgh. It is our strong belief that students seeking help with understanding academic discourse such as seminars should be helped to record and exploit those events as data for language learning. In much of the literature on autonomy (for example, Gardner and Miller, 1994; Pemberton et al., 1996), it is clear that teachers/counsellors tend to deal with learners' perceived problems in understanding spoken English by referring them to pedagogic packages, usually in a self-access centre. While it may be convenient for both parties if the learner works with whatever is available in such a centre, we believe it is more effective if they are shown how to gather and analyse data from their student lives, on the lines described by Tarone and Yule (1989) and Clennell (1999). As in our case, they were able to exploit the fact that their students were working in ESL settings, the USA and Australia, by creating project-type activities in which the learners carried out and recorded campus interviews with academic staff and then analysed the recordings for both content and form.

These three underpinning assumptions in *PROFILE* —the value of learner informants, of reflection and of working on authentic data— require adjustments to the traditional roles of teacher and learner. Aston (1997: 204), writing about the need to rethink what self-access materials are for, called for an open-ended approach in which learners would become "methodological researchers, exploring resources and evaluating their potential for learning"; *PROFILE* is intended to guide the language learner to take on that

responsibility for investigation and enquiry, which has parallels with current notions in the wider applied linguistic field, such as the learner as ethnographer (Byram and Fleming, 1998).

It should be recalled that one of our aims was to make *PROFILE* a forum for communication between researchers, teachers, previous Edinburgh students and the current learners. One of the limitations of the independent version of the materials is that the predominant 'voice' in the *Study Notes*, remains that of the teacher. However, the comments we are gathering from users, such as the Japanese student's reflection on the emphasis on written form in vocabulary learning in Japan, should help us to extend the forum. There are obvious practical constraints on the pace at which one can update printed materials with the views of recent users, but we hope in the future to convert *PROFILE* into electronic form, which would allow contributions from current users (such as in interactive 'chat' sessions), so amplifying the student voice in the materials.

6. Summary

The independent version of *PROFILE* was motivated by three main education aims: (1) to encourage learners to adopt a proactive approach to language learning; (2) to give them access to the experience of researchers, teachers and fellow language learners; and (3) to persuade them that, as students in an ESL context, they can exploit the potential of 'Out There' as a rich site for observing and noticing language in use. In re-designing the material for self-study, we have tried to take advantage of the fact that the users are already active —even if less active than they would like to be— at the thick end of the wedge in Littlewood's model, engaged in authentic meaningful communication in English. The pedagogic priority is to change any initial perception that we have driven them into 'exile' and that they are somehow missing out on serious language learning, compared with their peers in IALS classes, who are lucky enough to have weaker English! Instead of trying to transform *learners* into *users*, as is the convention in learner education programmes, *PROFILE* flows from *use*, the students' encounters with authentic discourse, and offers them options for harnessing those experiences in order to *learn* English.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

PROFILE sample: Extracts from Unit 2 – Listening
(Anderson and Lynch, 1996)

Principles

Principle 2: Let context help you

As you are learning English in Britain, you have the advantage of being surrounded by spoken language which, potentially, could be exploited to improve your skill in listening and also to expand your stock of English. However, particularly in the early period of a stay in this country, students can get frustrated by being unable to understand spoken English. Often this is expressed in comments such as *'people here speak too fast'* or *'the Scots have a strong accent'*. Judgments like those are relative: we think someone talks fast if we cannot understand them; no accent (of any language) is in itself difficult, but unfamiliarity makes it seems so.

Especially in the early stages of your stay in Edinburgh, it is important to set yourself reasonable targets. You should not expect to understand 100 per cent of what is said to you. Remember that native listeners, too, can find it hard to understand everything that is said around them.

> *If you observe the behaviour of [a native listener] coming up and joining a group of other people who are already engaged in a conversation, you will notice that the new arrival usually waits for a minute or two before beginning to take part in the conversation... Even native listeners, then, may occasionally find it difficult to work out the precise topic, purposes and attitudes of conversations, even when they have a lot of information about the context of situation. <u>The native listener will give himself time to work out what is going on</u>, and will frequently have to work quite hard, making very active use of his previous experience.*
>
> Brown and Yule (1983a:69), emphasis added

So language is not a mathematical formula; speakers may be vague and unclear in what they say, particularly in social situations. Not only is it not easy to understand 100 per cent of what we hear, it is also not necessary to do so.

But one thing you should expect to be able to do in the initial period of your stay in Britain is to recognise helpful clues in what people say in conver-

sation that will enable you to identify the general topic of a conversation, and then to see if your guess at the topic is confirmed by what you hear subsequently. The important thing is to be prepared to change your mind if you find that what you then hear does not match your first guess at what the topic is.

Flexibility of this sort is an essential skill in listening. Research (e.g. Kasper, 1984) has shown that we are more tolerant of uncertainty in our own language. We make an initial guess at what a conversation is about, then listen for more information to confirm or disconfirm that guess, and change our interpretation if we need to. In L2 listening we are more likely to keep to our original guess at the topic of a conversation than L1 listeners, even when we realise that some later information seems to conflict with it.

> **Task 4**
>
> This task is designed to underline this need to be flexible. On the cassette is a conversation between two work colleagues, A and B. You will hear the conversation in five sections, each consisting of a question from A and the response from B.
>
> After each answer-and-response section, write under 'Topic' (in the box below) what you think they are talking about and under 'Reason' what it is that makes you think so.
>
> Most people find that at some point in the course of hearing this conversation they decide that their initial assumption about the topic was wrong, in the light of the information from a later section.

Stop point	Topic	Reason
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

The point of that task can be summarised as the third of our language learning principles:

Learn to live with uncertainty

Resources

Television

You may specifically want to watch Scottish programmes to get used to the wide variety of accents in Scotland. In this respect, news programmes can be very helpful; often the newsreader/presenter has a slighter accent than the news reporters, and they in turn have a less marked accent than the people they interview for their report. Seeing each item explained in context in this way will help you to understand the people being interviewed.

> **Task 7**
>
> There is a wide variety of TV programmes available. Look at the list below and decide which types of programme you think are (a) *most suitable* and (b) *least suitable* for you to practise listening.
>
> - Scottish news
> - political discussion
> - children's programmes
> - quiz shows
> - international news
> - film (movie)
> - weather forecast

Options

In this final section we consider techniques that University of Edinburgh students have told us they found useful in improving their listening. As you read them, think about your own situation in Edinburgh. Even if you feel at first that a particular option would not be appropriate for you, (e.g. if you have no TV) you may be able to think of ways of *adapting* the student's suggestion to suit you. Read the suggestions and then do Tasks 9-11.

Student 1
> *I noticed that I improved much more when I got a TV but I didn't take any conscious steps to practise listening.*

Student 2
> *In lectures they give us lots of notes, especially for the M.Sc. That made it easier and the subject was very familiar to me, so I could use my knowledge to work out what the lecturers were saying.*

Student 3
> *Listening to a tape and writing down exactly what you hear is very helpful. To listen very specifically and in detail means you have to pay attention to sounds which you have some problems with yourself. Seeing what the gaps are in your dictation tells you what your listening problems are.*

(followed by comments from a further seven students)

Task 9

Those ten options have been presented in random order. Can you suggest ways of grouping them into similar types of listening practice?

Task 10

Student 3 found dictation useful. Can you think of reasons for and against using dictation to practise listening to English?

Task 11

Think of different ways of listening to a short (5-10 minute) news broadcast. Discuss them with someone else, or compare them with the *Study Notes*.

[Readers who would like to see the complete Listening unit, including the accompanying *Study Notes*, are welcome to email A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk]