

## SELF-INSTRUCTION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Leslie Dickinson  
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The rationale and procedures for introducing more flexibility into the classroom and language learning programs by having learners take more responsibility for their learning constitute the subject and scope of this thorough and clearly presented discussion of autonomy. Examples of different programs with varying degrees of self-instruction are described, and ways of introducing the development of autonomy in the classroom and the language learning program are outlined. Throughout the book the author uses diagrams to give a helpful visual representation of the factors involved in the implementation of self-instruction.

Dickinson begins by clarifying what is meant by the term 'self-instruction', stating that various terms are associated with self-instruction in the literature on the topic, such as autonomy and self-access. He defines the different terms and states that self-instruction is "a neutral term referring generally to situations in which learners are working without the direct control of the teacher" (p.11). Throughout the book it is made clear that these situations include many variations. What is common to all the terms and the extent of their implementation is the idea of learner responsibility.

Why should self-instruction be considered? According to Dickinson, the purposes and/or advantages include practical reasons such as the inability of an individual to attend a course, but also the provision for handling individual differences among learners. In this respect he discusses factors such as aptitude, cognitive styles and learning strategies. Self-instruction can help compensate for these important and real differences by giving the learner an opportunity to decide what kind of activities to work on, how to carry them out, and to what extent. Broader educational goals in general are also rightly included, such as improving learning efficiency by developing planning strategies and encouraging self-assessment, promoting autonomy and facilitating continuing education. Affective factors such as motivation are also discussed, mentioning the possibility of enhancing motivational intensity through learner participation in making decisions. The author affirms that with self-

intrinsic forms of motivation (focus on learning) are emphasized instead of extrinsic forms (grades). Underlying the promotion of self-instruction is the belief that learning how to learn is a fundamental educational goal and that learning how to learn foreign languages should be an important goal in our classrooms.

After examining the "why" of self-instruction, Dickinson goes on to explore the "how". He begins with descriptions of existing programs, including the CRAPEL system in France and the Open Access and Video Library at the University of Cambridge, among others.

Another chapter describes features of materials that are designed for self-access, such as "a clear statement of objectives", "meaningful language input", "language learning advice", and "resource materials", among others. This useful chapter also shows, through an example, how an activity from commercial materials can be adapted for self-instruction.

A later chapter on self-access resource centers gives indications as to how to make such a center 'user friendly', describing details related to operation, including physical organization, classification systems, and learner preparation.

The author also includes a chapter on methods of guiding the learner in self-instruction, such as needs analysis inventories and 'learner contracts', which are agreements the learner completes before beginning the task, and include objectives, task to be completed, resources needed, and means of evaluation. These 'contracts' are designed to ensure purposeful learning. Specific examples of 'learner contracts' are provided.

Suggestions for a more general application of self-instruction appear in Chapter 7, which deals largely with the introduction of learner responsibility in the classroom. This very useful chapter is concerned with preparation for self-instruction for both teachers and learners. For both, Dickinson, following the CRAPEL system, distinguishes between psychological preparation, which deals with conditioned attitudes towards language learning vs. attitudes toward self-instruction, and methodological preparation, which is concerned with developing awareness of learning processes and techniques, as well as skills for putting them into practice. Appendices give

practical suggestions for workshops for both teachers and learners aimed at these two types of preparation.

The discussion on methodological preparation mentions that learners could benefit from some training in the learning strategies used by good language learners. For this purpose some of the research done in this area is summarized and in the appendices practical suggestions for implementing the development of learning strategies in the classroom are outlined.

Evaluation must be necessarily considered in the learning process and with self-instruction it is included in the form of self-assessment, since this is an important component of autonomy. Chapter 8 examines through case studies different ways of carrying out self-assessment as well as different purposes that it can serve, such as diagnosis, or self-monitoring after a 'learner contract' is completed. An appendix gives specific examples of possible forms that self-assessment can take, for example learner diaries and checklists.

Perhaps the ideas and procedures for their implementation contained in "Self-Instruction in Language Learning" could best be summed up in Dickinson's introductory words:

"Autonomy is achieved slowly, through struggling towards it, through careful training and careful preparation on the teacher's part as well as on the learner's, and the first stage in this process is the liberalisation of the classroom to allow the development of learner independence and learner responsibility." (p. 2)

He concludes by stating that this is a book on changing attitudes regarding language learning.

For anyone interested in developing learner responsibility in the language classroom or setting up a self-access center in their institution, "Self-Instruction in Language Learning" can be an indispensable guide. It is certainly a very complete and welcome discussion for those striving to attain a more learner centered classroom and to implement the broader educational goals of autonomy and focus on learning. In general, most language teachers will find in this book stimulating insights related to language learning.