The Benefit of Solitude: A further corollary of humanistic pedagogy

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Introduction

In a recent paper (Green 1997) I gave an overview of critiques of humanism in language pedagogy. In this article the psychology which informs humanistic approaches to language teaching is explored. It becomes apparent that not all the corollaries of a supportive environment and group dynamics have been noted by the proponents of humanism in language teaching. The capacity to be along is a further consequence, and I consider what this means for language learning and teaching methodologies. Two areas in which learners are encouraged to work by themselves, the Silent Way and self-access learning, are investigated in the light of this finding.

Psychology and humanism

There is a general consensus amongst psychologists that close, supportive relationships are essential for the healthy development of children. Human infants tend to develop attachments to specific figures at about the age of nine months. The parent usually provides a secure base to which the child can return, and the child is usually more adventurous when the attachment figure is present. When he/she leaves, the child usually protests, and if the absence is lengthy then the child will go through a regular sequence of responses. Angry protest is succeeded by a period of despair, during which the child is despondent and apathetic. After a further period the child becomes detached and seems not to care any more about the attachment figure. This sequence of protest, despair and detachment was first described by Bowlby (1980). His evidence is sufficiently strong for Bowlby to conclude that a child who is certain of the availability of attachment figures will develop confidence and a sense of security which will enable him/her to develop trusting and loving relationships as an adult.

The child's relationship with an adult not only provides emotional security but also a way of learning. The child's intellectual development depends upon the quality of dialogue between adult and child, the attachment figure's expectations of the child, and the interest shown in him/her. After a number of studies, Richman, Stevenson and Graham (1982) concluded that the crucial point in a child's growth, academic achievement and behavioural maturity, is the relationship with an adult. Their research tried to explore all the possible factors that prevented success in schools, and this factor emerged repeatedly.

A loving environment in which interest is shown in the child is essential for his/her mental health and emotional development. A child's confidence in being able to make relationships leads to self-esteem, which in turn is an important factor in learning. The most important attitude to learning which a child can develop early on is the acceptance of doubts and uncertainties, and this derives from shared security (Cullingford 1990: 122-3).

Adults who have never been surrounded by the security of stable and coherent relationships remain shy throughout their lives and have problems in forming interpersonal relations. The chain reaction from this is the same as for children, in that self-esteem is reduced and learning potential is compromised (ibid., p.123). The provision of such relationships to adults is seen

as a main concern of humanistic psychology:

> Humanistic psychology perceives itself as a potential source of revitalization for both
> over- and under-socialized man ...... The encounter group ...... was expressly designed to
> provide a sense of what it feels like to be in a face-to-face community without masks or
> facades and to be accepted by such a community.
>
> (Shaffer 1978: 7)

Encounter groups, a central tool of humanistic psychology, were designed to help participants explore their feelings and so achieve personal growth within an atmosphere of "openness, trust and emotional intensity" (ibid., p.126).

Humanistic education insists that meaningful learning can only result when students' needs for physical security and love have been satisfied, and then "creative expression, cognitive mastery and social competency" can be facilitated (Valett 1977: 13-17). In language teaching, Curran also promotes this kind of environment, with the relationships between the members of the group being of particular significance:

> Learning is [facilitated by] the warm, deep sense of belonging and sharing with another
> person - the one who knows - and with others engaged with him in the learning enterprise.
>
> (Curran 1972: 23)

In Curran's conception of community all the participants are of equal value and importance, and learning is motivated by the warmth and closeness of the relationship, not by arbitrary rules. Curran describes the relationship as

> similar to the relationship of mother and child in the very first stages of linguistic
> learning. These early stages seem to determine the degree, the half-life and the strength of
> the vectors that cause the adult to continue to struggle to perfect his knowledge of the
> foreign language.
>
> (ibid., p.36)

So Curran is in agreement with the psychologists quoted above who say that a close relationship in early life is a determinant of an individual's self-motivation, autonomy and the ability to work with doubts and uncertainties. Curran projects the need for security from the child-adult relationship to the adult language-learning classroom. The anxiety of adults to belong to the group "makes it imperative that counseling-learning take place in a warm, secure, understanding atmosphere" (ibid., p.110) so that learning will be maximized.

There are two essentially different phenomena operating within the relationships described. There is the drive for companionship, love, and whatever brings us closer to the rest of humanity; and there is also the drive towards being independent, autonomous and separate from others. Many psychoanalysts, social workers and members of the "caring" professions would emphasize one side of this duality, arguing that intimate personal relationships are the chief source of human happiness. As Berenson states:

> It is only in reciprocal personal relationships that subjective aspects of a person's life have a chance of spontaneously and fully manifesting themselves. Attitudes and reciprocal responses are of crucial importance ......
>
> (Berenson 1981: 105)

Indeed, both intimate relationships and those which are apparently more superficial play a vital role in giving us a sense of belonging to a community; mutual acknowledgement and the recognition of one's contribution to the community are important in giving a sense of self-worth and security. Some psychologists have gone so far as to argue that intimate attachments to others are the hub around which a person's life revolves from infancy to old age. Through these reciprocal relationships a person both gives and receives strength and enjoyment of life (Bowlby 1980: Vol.3, p.442).

The Benefits of Solitude

Anthony Storr (1989) agrees with the writers cited above, about the benefits of a supportive environment, but he also stresses the drive towards independence and autonomy which was mentioned in the previous section. Storr notes another benefit of the supportive environment which is often overlooked: the capacity to be alone. When the infant's immediate needs for food, warmth, physical contact and so on have been satisfied, the infant no longer has to look to the parent for anything. This position is what Donald Winnicott calls being "alone in the presence of the mother" and he argues that the capacity to be alone cannot develop in adulthood without a sufficiency of this state in infancy and childhood (Winnicott 1969: 33). Winnicott is suggesting that the capacity to be alone originally depends on what Bowlby would call secure attachment. As the secure child grows, he/she no longer needs the presence of the attachment figure but can be alone without anxiety for longer periods. Winnicott goes further when he suggests that the capacity to be alone is related to the individual's ability to get in touch with and make manifest his/her inner feelings (ibid., p.34). As Storr writes:

> The capacity to be alone [is] linked with self-discovery and self-realization; with becoming aware of one's deepest needs, feelings and impulses.
>
> (Storr 1989: 21)

Concerns which we have met in the examination of humanism surface again. Storr sees the solution to alienation in "learning, thinking, innovation and maintaining contact with one's inner world" (ibid., p.28), all of which are facilitated, not only by interpersonal interaction or group participation, but also by solitude. Some development of the capacity to be alone is necessary if the brain is to function at its best and if the individual is to fulfil his/her highest potential, because Storr argues that being alone enables one to get in touch with one's deepest feelings; to clarify and order ideas; to change attitudes; and that the growth of the creative imagination is aided (ibid., p.62).

Another area which may be of great importance to people, but which is ignored by those psychologists who stress the over-riding importance of interpersonal relations, is illustrated by individuals whose chief concern is with making sense and order out of life through their interests rather than relationships with others. Storr claims that the ideally balanced person

might find a meaning to life both in interpersonal relations and in his/her interests. Many creative activities are predominantly solitary, and are concerned with self-realization or finding some coherent pattern in life, aided by the benefits of solitude.

Humanists like Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow write of a search for "self-actualization", a process in which individuals attempt to realize unfulfilled potential. According to Maslow, some of the characteristics of self-actualizing people are autonomy and independence, which we shall see later are desirable characteristics of language learners. He also writes of a "quality of detachment" and "the need for privacy" (Maslow 1970: 160) which are not only qualities of the "self-actualizing" person, but I believe essential to the realization of unfulfilled potential and effective learning.

Solitude in humanistic approaches

In the discussion of modern humanism in Green (1997: 2-4), the role of interpersonal relationships was given much prominence. However, despite concern and respect for the individual, which is prevalent in humanistic psychology and the majority of humanistic approaches to language teaching, we have seen some situations in which no reserved space is provided for the learner to be private and gain from the benefits of solitude. Very often the emphasis is on group participation, and the fact that some isolation can aid assimilation and learning is overlooked. Where in writing about humanistic approaches do we find extensive attention to these benefits, and does the classroom practice derived from the writing really allow for privacy and solitude? Is the notion of learners being alone or private in class, where there are by definition other people, sensible, or even possible?

Caleb Gattegno is an educator who believes that silence is the best vehicle for learning. In a classroom full of people, learner silence would seem to be the closest approximation to solitude and privacy that can be achieved. Silence in Gattegno's Silent Way is seen as an aid to "alertness, concentration and mental organization" (Richards & Rodgers 1986: 102). Each person in Gattegno's ontology is a "self" plus whatever the "self" has created. The "self" is a tiny amount of free energy which is only able to deal with one pinpointed task at any one time (Stevick 1990: 111). Learning takes place when the "self" meets new challenges that come with "impacts", or stimuli from the unknown, i.e. outside the body. The impacts "force new awarenesses" which are assimilated, subject to revision in the light of new experiences (ibid., p.117). According to Gattegno, students retain more and learn better if they work from their own resources and are made aware of them by the teacher. The teacher gives minimal new information or sets small, clearly defined tasks that enable the students to build the next resource for themselves. He/she allows plenty of time for the students to do whatever internal work is necessary to build resources, and on the basis of the students' performance, the teacher reassesses their resources and repeats the process (ibid., pp.126-7). In silence, and so effectively in solitude, the learners concentrate on the task to be accomplished, and on their own resources for accomplishing it. The mental effort, thoughtfulness and "forced awareness" are more effective than mechanical repetition in aiding retention, and at the same time students become responsible for their own learning in that they can systematically use what information has been made available to them. Richards and Rodgers (1986: 111) describe the innovations of Gattegno's Silent Way as consisting of:

1. The manner in which class activities are organized
2. The indirect role of the teacher
3. The responsibility placed on the learner to figure out and test hypotheses about language
4. The nature of the material (fidels, rods etc.)

Gattegno himself saw the key features of the Silent Way as the independence, autonomy and responsibility which are engendered in the learners; "forcing awareness" onto the learners; and the subordination of teaching to learning (Stevick 1990: 105-6). The first three of the features noted by Richards and Rodgers can be seen to derive from Gattegno's philosophy that

> In humanity, there are only persons, and the only absolute is that one cannot live outside one's awareness of oneself.
>
> (Gattegno 1987: 110)

Because "we can only count on ourselves" (Gattegno 1976: 45), one must be able to act independently of others, both in the classroom and outside. Autonomy is the ability to take responsibility for one's own affairs, and hence for one's own learning. When autonomous choices in how to make use of inner resources produce appropriate results, then the learner may be described as responsible.

A roomful of independent, autonomous students sounds like the ideal language-learning class situation, but to what extent can Silent Way students really be described in this way? Are they truly responsible for their own learning? Because of the nature of the "self", which can only deal with one task at a time, the language presented in Silent Way classes is broken down into small constituents. The type of student or class to be taught makes little impact on this analysis and similar procedures will often be followed with all students. Nor do the students have any influence over what is to be taught or when; they cannot determine the structure of a class, nor the subject matter. It is true that in the Silent Way great responsibility is given to the individual learner, but the independence and autonomy which Gattegno claims are so crucial to effective learning are only available within a tightly restricted area: those parts of the language which the teacher has chosen to work on. Making students "aware", one of the main functions of the Silent Way teacher, seems to be limited to learners' awareness of the foreign language and the way in which they are learning. Again, this is no bad thing, but we only have to look at other humanistic approaches and methods to see how restricted this is as a goal. Other approaches develop awareness of learners' own personalities, their interlocutors and the way they react to their utterances. As Arthur McNeill writes:

> The Silent Way's restriction of the range of types of awareness underlines the emphasis it attaches to the mechanics of language and the relatively low priority it appears to give to such areas as the interaction of speakers and the choice of language appropriate to who the speaker is and the occasion on which it is being used.
>
> (McNeill 1982: 120)

In that the course content is pre-determined and no needs analysis is made, the Silent Way is

remarkably similar to more "traditional" approaches to language teaching. Stevick writes that "humanism emphasizes the centrality of the learner rather than the supremacy of the subject matter or the teacher" (Stevick 1982: 7). It has appeared to more than one observer that in the Silent Way "the supremacy of both teacher and subject matter [is] unmistakable" (McNeill 1982: 121). In Stevick's "caricature" of traditional methods there is only one task at a given time, which sounds like a description of the Silent Way, whereas in a "humanistic" classroom the learners are free to choose among tasks, or to interpret a given task in different ways (Stevick 1982: 8). Stevick names three dimensions of humanism, including attention to the needs of the learner, which are again generally ignored in the Silent Way. In fact, by Stevick's 1982 criteria, the Silent Way is hardly a humanistic approach at all. However, by his 1990 criteria (p. 23), the Silent Way is humanistic, paying most attention to the emphases on the intellect and the pursuit of uniqueness.

It would be perhaps too easy to dismiss the Silent Way as derived from an almost incomprehensible philosophy, and in itself nothing more than a traditional approach with a few additional gimmicks and gadgets. Stevick lists "some of the desirable things" which we might take from the Silent Way. Learners could

> develop good pronunciation on the basis of a single audible model from the teacher, they could learn from each other, as long as the teacher guaranteed they would not go astray; they could successfully explore beyond the exact data that had been given to them.
> (Stevick 1990: 54)

And by leaving the learners in silence for much of the time after the introduction of new "impacts", Gattegno harnesses some of the benefits of solitude and privacy which other humanistic approaches do not emphasize.

My argument is, after all, a question of emphasis. Modern humanism is based in existentialist philosophy, and many humanistic teachers have advocated the importance of a supportive atmosphere, and the acceptance and education of the whole person, as a partial answer to the alienation of late twentieth century life, and as essential for effective learning. Humanistic psychologists have argued that one solution to alienation comes through meaningful personal contact with others and acceptance into a group, hence the emergence of encounter groups and similar techniques. The psychology naturally passed into psychotherapy which again emphasized contact. In the language teaching world Curran is a good example of a therapist who turned to education, and the importance of group dynamics in CLL is a manifestation of the underlying theory. My argument with all this is not that group dynamics are unimportant, or even that they are over stressed, but rather that the capacity to be alone and the benefits of solitude have been either overlooked or underestimated. To read Curran one would think that the only two benefits of a supportive environment are the formation of interpersonal relations and the building of security and confidence. Storr and a handful of other psychologists, including Maslow, add a third benefit which is the ability to be alone. The consequences of this capacity are too significant to ignore, and as humanistic educators we should be interested in anything which facilitates our learners getting in touch with their deepest feelings, clarifying and ordering their ideas, changing and adapting their attitudes and developing their creative imagination. If we are concerned to enable our students to test

alternatives for themselves, to grow as human beings and to be independent and autonomous in the classroom, then we cannot afford to pass over the benefits of solitude. To be alone in the classroom is not necessarily unhealthy or undesirable, and as we shall see in the next section, general humanistic education which stresses learner autonomy often has students working alone on their own interests.

Learner autonomy

Followers of Gattegno use solitude as an important part of the learning process, allowing the learners to assimilate knowledge, and to make the necessary effort to create their own connections. However, the majority of teachers do not use the Silent Way, and many will not have heard of Gattegno's philosophy of education. Despite this, there is a general consensus among language teachers, in line with current theories of language and SLA, that the teacher should "hold off" and act more as a facilitator or helper, leaving learners to make their own connections and concentrate on their own learning. In the last twenty years or so, more responsibility has been given to learners, in the hope that autonomous and self-directing learners working on their own needs and interests will be more successful. The solitary pursuit of interests by autonomous learners is also relevant to my outline of the benefits of solitude in learning.

According to Henri Holec (1979) the notion of autonomy can be traced back to the end of the 1960s when social progress in industrially "advanced" countries became defined increasingly in terms of the quality of life. This socio-political tendency was based on the development of respect for the individual within society. Education (and particularly adult education) was involved in the movement; an involvement which consisted of a debate concentrating on

> the need to develop the individual's freedom by developing those abilities which will enable him to act more responsibly in running the affairs of the society in which he lives.
>
> (Holec 1979: 1)

The pursuit of this goal meant that a number of basic assumptions about education had to be altered, with perhaps the central change being the recognition that the student should take an active role in learning. From this point, the argument can be extended to the conclusion that learners should learn to manage their own education, i.e. to become autonomous.

The fully autonomous language learner has the capacity to take charge of his/her own learning in the following five areas, making judgments and taking decisions without undue influence from outside:

1. To determine the objectives of study
2. To define the contents
3. To select the materials and techniques to be used
4. To define and monitor the place, time and pace of learning
5. To evaluate what has been acquired

(Holec 1985: 180-2)

The learner's acceptance of responsibility for his/her own learning and the ability to make

decisions within these domains, combined with a learning structure in which the learner has the possibility of exercising these capacities, leads to "self-directed" learning. This type of learning often requires specially designed or adapted materials. Susan Sheerin (1989) provides many excellent examples of such "self-access" materials and suggests ways in which the teacher may produce his/her own. Self-access materials are frequently provided for learners in study centres with the appropriate technology (video and audio recorders, computer terminals), authentic reading materials (newspapers, magazines and books etc.), and works of reference (mono-and bilingual dictionaries, thesauruses etc.). A good overview of these self-access systems, with sections on materials, resources, and how to prepare and support the learner using a self-access centre, can be found in Dickinson (1987).

Learner autonomy is not innate, nor does it come automatically with experience. In section 2 above it was suggested that child-rearing practices determine the degree to which it will occur in an individual. Teachers see it as desirable to foster autonomy in their learners, and it is considered a necessary element in learning, but the use of materials designed for self-directed learning will not in itself result in autonomy. As David Boud (1989: 44) notes, "learners may still suffer debilitating dependencies on others even though they are given freedom to design and plan their own programmes". A brief survey of the literature shows that educators are very concerned for students to acquire autonomy and to learn how to learn (see for example Knowles 1975; Abercrombie 1981; and Holec 1985). And this is in the societies from which the concept of autonomy in learning first emerged. As Holec writes:

[The learner] has to learn to learn, to set off a process which will eventually enable him... to execute his own learning programme [which] may vary in length, difficulty and degree of success.

(Holec 1985: 182)

The attainment of autonomy by the learner is therefore problematic, even within those societies in which autonomy in education was first developed, and it may be that the fully autonomous learner can only be a hypothetical creature.

A number of obstacles stand in the learner's road to autonomy. David Boud argues that students are not always able to identify their needs without help and nor will they expect to do so, particularly if they have been educated in a system which places little value on this activity (Boud 1981: 26-7). Certainly learners' expectations are influential in the degree of autonomy which may be achieved; it is generally accepted that the brakes on the acquisition of autonomy are essentially psycho-sociological, resulting from the drastic change in the learner's role. The concept of autonomy may be incompatible with the personality of a learner, or with his/her way of life, or with social conditioning which denies the importance of individual responsibility. Autonomy in language learning may not be compatible with the learner's life outside, but given the socio-political origins of autonomy, it is difficult to see how autonomy in education can be dissociated from autonomy in other areas. Holec sums up this problem when he writes:

the problem that arises is one of accountability on the part of the individual as between acceptance of responsibility in language learning and in the rest of his affairs...Can an individual "live" in a state of partial autonomy such as would relate solely to his learning

of languages in a general environment of dependence and passivity?

(Holec 1979: 34)

It would seem from these problems that the concept of autonomy in education is ethnocentric, which is perhaps unsurprising as it has developed in a limited number of industrially "advanced" countries. To what extent can we expect members of other cultures to embrace autonomy as an educational goal, if members of the source cultures need extensive training in order to become autonomous? Proponents of autonomy and self-directed learning are careful to state that these cannot be imposed, as this would constitute a contradiction in terms, the acquisition of autonomy relying on the will of the learner (Holec 1985: 188). Nevertheless, overseas students who study in the UK for example, are often expected to use materials designed for self-directed study, perhaps in self-access centres, and to show a high level of autonomy in their language learning in general.

Conclusion

In a critique of Malcolm Knowles, one of the dominant representatives of self-directed learning, M Tennant (1986) identifies in the notions of student-centredness and self-direction the "ethic of individualism". Future studies could profitably explore the favoured learning strategies and situations of students from different cultural backgrounds, and their attitudes to self-access learning. It may well be argued that self-directed learning has developed as an educational goal from ethnocentric foundations, and therefore is not relevant or desirable for members of other cultures. However, it remains the case that in self-directed study the learner is expected to work alone and, one hopes, to benefit from solitude. Some ability to be alone and the space in which to be so are essential for the individual's mental health, but not all cultures give equal importance to the individual and to these requirements. It would be of interest to see which cultures allow for these basic human necessities, and whether a lack of provision affects learners' willingness or capacity to take control of their own learning.

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