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The Relationship between Self-Access Centres and Sociocultural Elements in Language Learning

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Abstract

As Kennedy and Edwards (1998) point out, infusing an innovation into a different society is not always easy due to the cultural discrepancy between adopters of the innovation from one side and its recipients from the other. This dissimilarity sometimes acts as a barrier against the acceptance of the innovation particularly if it is not planned thoroughly, and both implementers and recipients in dealing with it are not acknowledged of the outcomes and the solutions it may provide to many of their problems. In discussing the relationship between culture and change, this paper investigates the approach adopted by Jones (1995:228-34) in establishing a Self-Access Centre (SAC) in Cambodia. This approach was narrated by Jones in his paper "*Self-access and culture: retreating from autonomy*". This includes discussing the rationale and philosophy underlying the approach; the procedures implemented; the way Jones viewed the Cambodian culture and the way he dealt with it; and finally Jones' decision to retreat from autonomy. In evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the approach, I have offered the alternative suggestion of an eclectic approach to establishing a SAC for learners whose culture and upbringing have predisposed them against autonomy.

Key Words: *Learner autonomy, independence, individualisation, self-access centre, culture and change, cultural adaptation,*

1. Introduction

Kennedy and Edwards (1998: 17) argue that applying an innovation involves behavioural change, and its role should be not only to help people act differently, which is a surface phenomenon, but also to change the way people think about certain issues, which is a deeper and more complex type of change. Educational change maintains this complexity because it is supposed to be both quantitative and qualitative. Teachers can go through a training course, adopt a new methodology or employ new course materials, yet change in the classroom may also involve both teachers and learners in a re-think of what they believe in, and in the assumptions underlying their behaviour in the classroom. King and Anderson (1995:164) argue that change in ELT should be carried out systematically and incrementally because learners in socially committed societies usually view the change as an intrusion that may threaten their religious beliefs, social values and community cohesion. To avoid this, adopters of an innovation should undertake an ample study of the psychology of the society to identify the values that are regarded as desirable nationally. This can help cross many of the traditional boundaries that may impede the process of change.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Change Vs Culture

Despite the distinction drawn between change and innovation in that the former is unplanned whereas the latter implies some deliberation, the two terms can be used as synonyms in ELT (Kennedy and Edwards, 1998: 5). Innovation is the successful exploitation of new ideas and is found essential for sustained competitiveness and wealth creation. However, applying it in the classroom is influenced by the degree to which this innovation matches or fails to match the existing value systems of the society. The degree of acceptance or rejection is determined by the scale of similarities or differences between the innovation and the existing culture. In the case of

dissimilar cultures, unless the differences are recognised and some fit between the innovation and culture is negotiated, the likelihood of classroom change is not great.

The innovation is likely to be rejected simply because it is unknown and people are influenced by both rational and emotional factors in facing it (White, 2005: 137). Administrators, for example, may reject an innovation because it is against the stability with which they are familiar and may threaten their posts. Stakeholders, on the other hand, can rarely patronize an innovation unless it satisfies their needs and beliefs. This insistence is sometimes difficult for implementers and clients to approach. King and Anderson (1995: 156) also identify other causes of resistance at the individual and group levels. At the individual level, they argue that resistance to change may be a result of a combination of personality factors and prior experiences of similar change scenarios. These factors may include a lack of trust and misunderstanding of the intentions, low tolerance and contradictory assessment of the change. At the group level, resistance can be caused by a number of factors inherent in the structure of the society such as group cohesiveness and social norms. Due to such circumstances, change is likely to be perceived as a threat to the status quo because the group will value its social interactions highly.

Handy (1984: 12), on the other hand, claims that failure of an innovation in classrooms is due to the absence of comprehension of the social context of the students since an innovation does not occur in isolation, and schools constitute the major context in which an innovation is installed. This view is further asserted by Kennedy and Edwards (1998: 20) who find that the success of an innovation is strongly influenced by a number of external interrelating institutional, educational, political, administrative and cultural systems of a society. In spite of the tension between innovation and cultural stability, change is a necessity for the organisations striving for distinction, and cultural adaptation can be the only solution.

2.2 Cultural Adaptation

Culture is not too wild to be domesticated because human beings are adaptable and culture is often open to change. Multicultural organisations and societies are becoming more common nowadays due to the development in means of communication, and the new patterns of migration because of the global economy. We may find educational institutions that include students and teachers from different cultures. This creates a 'third culture' or 'cultural schizophrenia' (Handy, 1984: 13). The globalisation of culture is possible if people are able to employ a broader definition of culture and think more in terms of processes. Featherstone (1993: 83), in asserting this point, argues that a third culture can emerge because of bilateral exchanges between nation-states. This neither indicates the weakening of the sovereignty of nation-states nor the embodiment of a logic, which points to homogenisation. Adopting a third culture does not imply adopting either of the conceptual pairs of homogeneity or heterogeneity, integration or disintegration, and unity or diversity (1993). This third culture can be a fertile soil for implementing a guaranteed innovation, and this is often the context, which ELT managers need to consider for the establishment of a Self-Access Centre (SAC).

2.3 Self-Access and Autonomy

As Jones (1995) points out, the development of English language SACs has prospered during the last three decades because of the idea that the most successful English language learning takes place outside the classroom. This kind of study facility has been set up to enable learning to take place independently. It is argued by Oxford (1990) and Nunan (1999) that students have different learning styles and learning strategies. These characteristics are not easy to cater for in the classroom. Self-access, therefore, is regarded by Zrinska (2006) as the best way to provide students with the materials they find interesting, help learners work on their pacing, and encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning.

The communicative approach, in addition, challenges tradition and gives prominence to self-access through shifting focus in the classroom from teacher to learner. Learner-centredness, which is the logical development of this approach, assumes that not everything a learner needs to know can be taught in class. In addition, the learners should choose for themselves the materials they spend many hours studying. Teaching techniques, moreover, should promote learners' skills and linguistic potential (Nunan, 1999: 52). Autonomy is the central pillar of self-access. It can be difficult to maintain full autonomy at the initial stages of application, particularly if the idea is unfamiliar to students. This should be the goal, which implementers of the change try to achieve.

3. Evaluating Jones' Approach

Evaluation can play a diagnostic role in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of an innovation. If it is undertaken while processing, it can increase the chances of success, whereas carrying out final evaluation reveals new problems, which necessitate a new cycle of reconsideration. In evaluating the approach adopted by Jones (1995), it is insufficient to reflect on the outcomes achieved by such an innovation. Instead, I find it appropriate to investigate the rationale underlying the approach as well as the procedures and the other criteria adopted in implementing it.

3.1 Rationale

Jones' (1995) aim was to establish a SAC at the University of Phnom Penh in Cambodia. His original idea in setting up such a facility was that learner autonomy, whether full or partial, was a desirable object, that the ideal learner would be the one who takes responsibility for his or her learning and that self-access was the most valid test for this responsibility (1995: 228). He was also keen to develop materials and programmes that might coax students towards their potential as independent achievers. Before implementation, he maintained a specific definition of self-access in which retreat from autonomy would be perceived as a defeat.

In studying the psychology of the Cambodian students, Jones encountered two challenging points. The first was that ‘autonomy is laden with western culture and may encounter the traditions and conventions of Cambodian education with the force of ideological imposition, promoting a type of behaviour that conflicts with the national culture at a deep level (1995: 230).’ The second was that adopting autonomy as a learning goal requires much effort in syllabus planning and teaching. This challenge can be impossible to realise in a society, predisposed against autonomy.

Jones; therefore, found that retreat from autonomy was not optional. He depended on two points of view to enhance his satisfaction that the effectiveness of the centre required a modified innovation. The first view was that of Dickinson (1987: 13) who argues that autonomy is not an all-or-nothing concept and it may come by degrees. A learner, for Dickinson, may become autonomous in one aspect of learning and semi-autonomous in another. Kennedy and Edwards (1998) express the same view as Dickinson. They argue that incremental change can be the best course of action in societies where the innovation seems unfamiliar or contradicts the existing conventions. The second supportive view was that of Aston (1993: 221) who claims that the learners’ attitudes are the key to the success of any self-access system regardless of its underlying motivation and philosophy. In scrutinising the methodology applied in Cambodian classrooms, Jones noticed that a feature of students’ learning style was a tendency to enjoy working collaboratively. This advantage was seized upon by him as inspiration for ideas for culturally friendly SAC (P. 230). Retreat from autonomy, for Jones, was an alternative solution. He found out that transiting a person from a state of full dependence to independence was not a switch on/off button, which would be impossible to attain in such a society. This modified understanding of self-access and the degree of autonomy to be attained by students undoubtedly influenced his choice of the procedures and criteria of implementation, which I will discuss in the next section.

3.2 Procedures and Criteria of Implementation

Jones preferred to organise the centre in a way that kept the stability of the students' learning environment, which was to work collaboratively. He furnished it with 'square café-style tables, but did not install carrels because most Cambodian students care little for privacy and solitude (1995: 231).' He also noted that some students preferred to work alone but not did wish to be isolated from others, while they were using a cassette player, for example. This encouraged him to arrange one part of the room for students to sit and listen together. Giving them the opportunity to indulge in informal talk, he furnished a corner with armchairs and a magazine and newspaper rack. He was also keen to make access to the centre very easy with as little training as possible; therefore, he created 'a self-access supermarket where everything is displayed on shelves and marked clearly with a collection of instruction kits, colour-coded according to skills and sub-skills (P. 232).'

In this experiment, students were encouraged to work collaboratively in groups to do a listening task or a reading comprehension exercise. This was followed by a discussion of the answers before turning to the answer key or asking for help from the teacher. Individual work was not prioritized. The supervising teacher was no longer a guide or advisor as in most SACs, but one whose presence was a necessity and whose intervention was overwhelming. Jones preferred a 'guided SAC' (P. 231) to persuade students of the innovation and make them satisfied that the centre would improve their language competence in a relaxing environment.

Jones is found in agreement with other linguists such as Bachman (2003) and Richards and Nunan (1997) that 'self-assessment is a characteristic of the active responsible learner, one who cultivates a sense of his/her progress and perhaps level of competence (Jones, 1995: 233).'

To apply this in the centre, each student had a record sheet that included a column where a supervising teacher could offer encouragement and suggestions such as 'Try doing an exercise on listening to radio news'. Students were free to write a reply such as 'The news is spoken too fast. Is there

anything slower?' Jones considered this dialogue a step to encourage oral communication among teachers and students. In order to enhance the popularity of the centre, Jones resorted to two solutions. Firstly, he sought volunteers among students to form a 'Self-access Advisory Committee' (P. 232) whose job was to help staff make decisions about where things should be put. Secondly, university staff were encouraged to take samples of the centre materials inside their regular classes to get students acquainted with some of the centre's materials. These are the procedures implemented by Jones in establishing the SAC in Cambodia. Below is an extensive evaluation of the approach and the rationale underlying its procedures.

3.3 General Evaluation of Jones' Approach

Jones spent nearly one academic year in Cambodia to establish the SAC. This short period was surely a challenge for an expatriate to understand the cultural background underlying the educational system of the country. Incomplete assimilation of the nature of the Cambodian students and insufficient study of the psychology of Cambodian society perhaps influenced his approach to the innovation and the way he dealt with its clients (students). Retreat from autonomy, for Jones, was a necessity to diffuse his innovation. I think the experiment might have taken a different path if Jones had spent a longer time surveying, experimenting, evaluating, and processing.

From my point of view, Jones' approach in establishing the SAC was not successful and might not prove fertile in the long term. His retreat from autonomy was not fully justified: a view that I should like to clarify in the following points. I will begin with the strengths of the approach before displaying the weaknesses. Jones tried to popularize the centre among students through two steps. He firstly sought volunteers among students to form a 'Self-access Advisory Committee' whose job was to help staff make decisions about where things should be put. I think a step like this was worthwhile at least in the Cambodian context because:

- engaging students from the beginning implies their true participation in establishing the centre;
- students could notice for themselves how useful the innovation is to their learning progress;
- appreciating students' views, even they are simple, would underpin the success of the innovation;
- it would encourage other students to join the centre, thus gaining more popularity; and
- it could act as a social filter to gauge the appropriateness of activities and their conformity with local culture: an advantage since the teaching staff might not be aware of these issues.

In another step, university staff were encouraged to take samples of the materials inside their classes. Jones (1995:232) finds this as a challenging point to make use of the compulsory classes with which students were familiar to announce of the less familiar self-accesses centre. He probably was aware of the fact that human beings tend to cling to what they know, and if classes are what students expect, these can be used as a bridge to less familiar forms of learning, such as a SAC. A SAC is the equivalent of autonomy, no matter what degree of independence is achieved and a withdrawal from autonomy is a violation of the educational philosophy underlying the idea of self-access. It was not expected for the Cambodian students to develop individualism from the very beginning, but attaining it was not impossible. The initial difficulty arose because the idea of self-access is 'laden' with western culture, as asserted by Jones himself:

"The ideal good language learner, after all, is said to be the one who takes as much responsibility as possible for his or her own learning, and self-access is the most valid test of this responsibility. Yet the concept of autonomy is laden with cultural values, particularly those of the west. In cultures where autonomy is not held in high esteem, how can one build a successful SAC? (1995: 228)"

However, implementing such an innovation in a communistic society like Cambodia would need to take some time of investigation until students built their trust in the innovation.

A SAC is not a curriculum-based centre where students are obliged to do regular tasks. It is dedicated to ensure learner-centredness, which is the initial step towards autonomy. Grouping students to do listening tasks or discuss the answers of a text can be advantageous for exchanging views and getting quick help from other participants. Nevertheless, this technique embedded students' dependence on other fellows, added no innovative techniques that may distinguish self-access activities from regular classroom ones, and reduced the chances of students taking responsibility for their own learning.

The collaborative learning carried out by the supervising teachers would not enhance independence. In regular classes, let alone in SACs, group work is not the only learning procedure, and the classroom can involve a variety of open or closed pair work and individual work as well as jigsaw groups. It is not advantageous to stick to only one learning style. For most teachers, group work is favoured by the brilliant students in the group to develop a measure of autonomy through leadership. However, it rarely promotes learner independence because it can be the safest cradle for introvert students and those who are not aggressive enough to participate in oral communication or for the weaker ones who rely on the others to do the work for them.

Jones' emphasis was on the display (1995:232) and on access to the centre by visual recognition. He was keen to create a 'self-access supermarket'; however, is good categorisation and neat display enough for a SAC to attract more students and achieve better results? I think it is not enough because this element can be let down by the quality of the activities and facilities provided.

Self-assessment is a good technique; however, the way in which students' mistakes were assessed in the Phnom Penh Centre had nothing to do with self-assessment. Encouraging students to leave their works for the guide teacher to comment on them in the record sheets would not lead to true self-assessment since the teacher would be the inevitable reviser of activities.

Noise can undermine learning progress and loud noise is not accepted in language classes unless it is a necessary part of a specific activity such as drama, otherwise it can be a sign of reluctance and boredom. If the activities of the centre were encouraging and attractive, the noise would gradually die down and, if found, would be a sign of extra interaction and enthusiasm. In addition, Jones showed high sensitivity in the face of the Cambodian educational system as if this system were impenetrable. He preferred to follow the safest long route achieving no remarkable constant change as recommended by Kennedy and Edwards (1998: 65) due to the conservative techniques and activities. This perhaps resulted in the poor popularity of the centre at its initial stages. However, part of his cultural sensitivity is important and can be justified – especially in the early stages of the innovation – to keep a degree of stability in the educational system and so as not to revolutionize the existing conventions. Brown (1994) maintains a similar view that teachers should promote a sense of cultural understanding before asking students to engage in new activities.

"In teaching an alien language, we need to be sensitive to the fragility of students by using techniques that promote cultural understanding. Numerous other materials or techniques – reading, films, simulation games, and culture assimilation – are now available for language teachers to assist them in the process of acculturation in the classroom (Brown, 1994: 54)."

I think that Jones' retreat from autonomy and oversensitivity is unnecessarily cautious and pessimistic because it underrates the ability of the Cambodian students to accept innovative methods of teaching and learning if these are presented in the right way – as in the three-phase approach adopted below. Students may become cautious of an innovation, yet adopting it is not impossible if it is reliable, applicable and trustworthy.

4. Reconstructing the Experiment: Proposals for Improvement

In the High School in the United Arab Emirates, where I work, we have established our own English Language Self-Access Centre (ELSAC). It has been working for three years and achieved remarkable success in improving English proficiency among students. In the light of this

experience, I think the Cambodian students were not perhaps completely predisposed against autonomy as claimed by Jones, but committed to a culture, which is aware of change, particularly one that may jeopardize their social values and learning traditions, like all conservative societies worldwide including the Arab culture. In my opinion, establishing a successful SAC in Cambodia would not be impossible, and autonomy should not be retreated from or sacrificed, since self-access and autonomy are inseparable faces of the same coin (Dickinson, 1987:13). I think the Cambodian SAC could have passed through three phases of implementation. Here are the stages I think appropriate based on my own experience and with reference to the stages followed in ELSAC.

4.1 Non-Autonomous Phase: Recreation

In this phase, the innovation should not be introduced overtly eradicating the existing social values. If students realise that the innovation is antagonistic to their educational system, it will be rejected regardless of the good effects it may achieve. Activities of the centre in this phase (appendix 1) should be mainly recreational and relate to the lighter side of language. They may include English contests with rewarding prizes, acting English plays, crossword puzzles, word synonyms, antonyms and acronyms, besides other activities that can fit the interests of Cambodian students. Enriching the centre with these activities yields many benefits. The explicit aim can be entertainment, whereas the implicit aim can be providing students with a comprehensive idea about the materials of the centre, removing their preconceptions, overcoming any phobia against change, and popularizing the centre. In this way, enjoyment is not for enjoyment's sake, but for achieving high percentages of engagement. Independence hereby can be gained through initial dependence. Engaging students in acting a play, for example, matches the collaborative work preferred by the Cambodian students, yet it simultaneously gives the opportunity for individual assertion and personal excellence through the embodiment of characters. These activities can be best carried out inside the centre. This phase tends to treat the psychological or affective domain claimed by Nunan (1999) as a necessary element in presenting a new methodology.

4.2 Semi-Autonomous Phase: Guided Learning

This phase follows after students have become familiar with the materials of the centre and are no longer cautious about the change. If the Cambodian students are not aware of the benefits of independent learning, a guided SAC could be implemented from the beginning with intelligent support from the supervising teachers. This phase necessitates co-operation from the academic staff of the institution as a whole. They can ask students to consult certain dictionaries, complete certain essays, or reflect on one of Shakespeare's most famous plays, for example, all of which materials are available and accessible in the centre. Applying these activities in ELSAC (appendix 2) enabled students to be familiar with the materials of the centre and the best way they can use them for promoting their English proficiency. This phase tends to treat the cognitive domain (Nunan, 1999).

4.3 Autonomous Phase: Learner-Centredness

Approaching this phase depends on how effective the two previous phases have been. In my experience, the students are no longer afraid of the change and they are satisfied that their community cohesion is not threatened; besides, an improvement in their English proficiency is noticed. In this phase, students are expected to work independently and the wheels of autonomy are supposed to roll automatically. Teachers' role is no longer intervening, but monitoring, guiding and providing help when necessary. Gaining more success, the centre should be refreshed with new facilities such as computers, Net connection, photocopiers, scanners, and printers, and students should be trained to use these facilities. The students' points of view, moreover, should be tested periodically in case any improvement can be added. A questionnaire (appendix 3) can help satisfy students that they are not passive users of the centre. In return, accepting students' suggestions and criticism is a sign of democracy, which is the basis of self-confidence and learner autonomy.

5. Culture and ELT

In order to bridge the cross-cultural perplexities, Hofstede (1986:316) suggests two strategies: (i) to teach the teacher how to teach or (ii) to teach the learner how to learn. I prefer choice (i) over (ii) since the teacher is the one who is expected to take the responsibility and the one who initiates any form of change. In applying a new syllabus or methodology, for example, I try to give students ample introduction and explanation before implementing it in order to remove the ideational obstacles expected to impede the change. I also try to view whether learner-centredness, for instance, would be accepted, and if the innovation entails the use of technology. These precautionary measurements are always taken into consideration before applying any innovation to make students familiar with it and its tools in advance lest they get frustrated when they are formally asked to use it. However, the controversy about the best way of implementing an innovation has attracted the attention of a group of linguists and classroom researchers. According to Barrow (1984: 224), there are no specific answers to the question of how change should be implemented in the classroom because models of the change are not always the same and the social context is not necessarily similar. Holliday (2005: 169), on the other hand, gives priority to studying the real worlds of the students for whom this change is employed and argues that teachers should know how to deal with students according to their own terms.

Administrators may recommend coercive change; however, it can hardly promote language proficiency. I think cultural continuity is possible when initial meaningful bridges are built between the culture of innovation and the traditional expectations of the people. Brown (2005: 112) hereby recommends that teachers should adjust the innovation in a way that enables the best possible fit with the students' environment. Sergeant (2005: 246), in asserting this point, claims that a classroom innovation should match other existing elements of the society. Holliday (2005:169), moreover, argues that transporting dominant forms of professionalism in language teaching is not expected to achieve constant development unless it matches the cultural expectations of students.

6. Conclusion

Through this critical and practical evaluation of the approach adopted by Jones (1995) to establish a SAC in Cambodia, it can be noticed how the dissonance between cultures can to some extent affect the implementation of an innovation. Jones was consistent in claiming the difficulty of establishing a SAC, which is a western innovation, in a socially committed society such as Cambodia (P. 228). However, I believe he was too pessimistic in concluding that Cambodian students can hardly ever become autonomous learners. I assume that an innovation cannot be rejected because of its novelty but rather because of the absence of a complete vision of how the innovation should be introduced and gain familiarity. It can be noticed that Jones' approach did not appear to provide ample activities to trigger the Cambodian students towards autonomy and Jones himself did not provide evidence to show whether the students accepted or rejected the change. Jones was sensitive in his view towards the existing educational system and social conventions (1995: 228), but these are not too hard to be penetrated. Jones' retreat from autonomy resulted in creating a class-like SAC. I think students can become autonomous, at least nowadays in the digital age in which the 'third global culture' claimed by Featherstone (1993) has become the norm in most societies.

Culture and change are sometimes treated in a linear way and the lack of adaptability to change noted by Kennedy and Edwards (1998) can enhance this parallelism. In my view, the acceptance of an innovation, whatsoever the country, depends on three main dimensions: (i) the type of innovation introduced; (ii) how it is introduced; and (iii) how useful it is to the recipients. The gap between culture and change can vanish when reciprocal benefits are met. Eventually, an innovation can work when it is given normal cultural sensitivity and phased introduction, without compromising the basic principles on which it is founded.

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Appendix (1)

Phnom Penh University Self-access Centre

English Language Contest

Name / _____

Section / _____

=====

Answer the easy questions below, and then insert the answer sheet in the outside box. Do not miss the great withdrawal on next Friday. The winners will get fabulous prizes.

Seize the Opportunity! Act Now!

Question (1)

'Hamlet' is one of Shakespeare's most famous plays. Name at least five main characters of the play. If you are to dramatize any of these characters, which one would you prefer most? Why?

[Check your answer in the literature section in the centre]

Question (2)

Find at least five authentic English proverbs related to health.

[Check you answer in the dictionary of proverbs in the centre]

Example: An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Question (3)

Find as many prepositions as you could that begin with the letter 'A'. The more you get the more marks you will earn. [Check you answer in the grammar books in the centre]

Appendix (3)
Questionnaire

Please, kindly answer the questions of this questionnaire.

1. Have you ever joined a self-access centre inside or outside the university? If no, why?

Yes ()

No ()

2. How many times a week do you visit the Phnom Penh Self-access Centre?

Once ()

Twice ()

More () *Specify*

3. Have you ever participated in the activities of the centre? If yes, what are they? If no, why?

Yes ()

No ()

4. Have you benefited from your visits to the self-access centre? If yes, how? If no, why?

Yes ()

No ()

5. Does the centre help you progress in your study? If yes, how? If no, why?

Yes ()

No ()

6. Which materials do you often use: visual, auditory, or written?

7. What do you suggest for the development of the centre?

8. Other remarks
