

INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION AND THE TRENDS OF ENGLISH TEACHING

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I. Introduction

Teaching personnel, subject matter and pedagogic skills are the insoluble problems confronting ever-progressing education. The teaching and learning of English as a branch of educational activities is no exception.

English, as the most important, if not the only, foreign language taught in our schools ranging from junior high to college, taxes much of the time and energy of the students, teachers and linguistic educationalists. Students find English lessons difficult and uninteresting. Parents complain about their children spending so much time and energy studying English and with so little success. Teachers resent crowded classrooms, prominent differences in students' learning capacities and inadequate subject matter. And, administrators demand teachers with better qualifications and more effective methods. In short, people acknowledge the ill-success and claim that efforts and progress should be made toward a workable program for the improvement of teaching and learning of English.

Ever since the early seventies, an increasing number of teachers and researchers¹ beginning to think that learning effectiveness is related to the interaction between learner and environment, with much emphasis set on the learner's unique needs, interests, motivations, learning styles, aptitudes, previous learning and various personal factors. Many of the proposals for changing the traditional system are referred to as "individualized programs" which have largely been considered as the most effective teaching methods in meeting the function of education and thus, individualized instruction has gotten its revival² and is

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enjoying popularity in America and Europe, even in the Asian countries, such as the Philippines³, Thailand⁴ etc.

II. Individualized Instruction

Individualized instruction is a popular but ambiguous term. It is not a kind of "one-to-one" tutoring in its narrow sense. It is, in fact, not a methodological but a curricular approach to teaching, emphasizing the organizational framework of the class (Chastain, 1976: 198). It is the recognition that students have different abilities, that they learn at different rates of speed, and that a single method or technique is not equally successful or appropriate for all learners (Newton, 1984: 23). In other words, it is an open-end process of helping each student find the best sequence for his personal style using the most suitable materials we can obtain so as to achieve his particular goal. During the past decades, quite a few changes have occurred in basic methodological principles or in the types of classroom activities employed to accomplish chosen goals.

2.1 Development of Individualized Instruction

The formal development of individualized instructional program in America began in the later decades of the 19th century as a reaction against the age-graded lock-step system in which all students, regardless of differences among them, were constrained to study the same materials in the same way for the same length of time (Harris, 1960: 222).

Shortly after the turn of the century, with the increasing sophistication of psychometric tools, it has become clear that students differ not only in intelligence but in creativity, competence, and performance which increase as students move through the grades (Thomas, 1965: 3). According to estimates by Ralph Tyler (Sperry, 1972: 2), approximately one fifth of the children in the United States do not attain the level of literacy required for available employment; and in both rural and urban slum areas, forty to sixty percent of students in the sixth grade perform at second grade level or below on standardized achievement tests. Educators are thus aware of the significance of individual performance and the demands for recognition of individual worth. They repeat their concern for adapting to the needs of the students over and over again which provides the justification and basic premise for many educational innovations and experiments, leading to the individualized types of instruction.

2.2 Types of Individualized Instruction

The following list clearly indicates that individualized programs have been part of American formal schooling almost from its inception and that the revived interest in individualization has taken a bewildering array of types.

- (1) Tutoring: The original individual instruction, once exclusively for the rich, has been suggested in the employment of contemporary public schools (Polos, 1966: 404-405).
- (2) Correspondence courses: One of the first efforts to individualized instruction, they were available as early as 1873. By 1882 a systematic plan for the study of foreign languages was announced. Weekly assignments of reading and translating sent to the student were corrected by the teacher "with notes and suggestions adapted to his individual needs." (Noffsinger, 1885: 10) Carnegie Study showed that between 3.5 and 5 million students were enrolled in correspondence courses (Pearse, 1967: 10).
- (3) Self-paced unit plans: By 1888 Search had initiated the Pueblo Plan, a laboratory scheme permitting a student to pace his own coverage of the course rather than await his turn in daily recitation (Search, 1894: 84-85). Parkhurst's Dalton Laboratory Plan (1922) and Washburne's Winnetka Plan (1963) presented course work in self-instructional units that each student worked through as fast as he could. The Project for Individually Prescribed Instruction (IPI) at Pittsburg (The Oaklead Project) and such independent study programs as the one at Nova High School (Kohn, 1967: 31) also feature self-paced unit-sheet packages and individual assistance.
- (4) Programmed and computerized instruction: With programmed teaching by the text and machine, the student works at his own pace and either correct his answer to the question in each frame or has it corrected for him automatically. In "intrinsic" programs incorrect answers may result in the presentation of first or second order branches leading to a correctional sequence or a subprogram (Crowder, 1963: 85). Such as Moore's responsive environment laboratory, permits students freedom in exploring the possibilities of the equipment; e.g. digital device, tapes, films, slides, and other audio-visual aids with programs.
- (5) Independent study programs: The fashion of the sixties in individualized instruction, independent study refers to any program that is "characterized

by the attainment of some freedom from the constraint of supervision.” (Bishop, 1967: 9) The Montessori Method, revived in America (Rambusch, 1962), is a form of independent study offering the student a range of alternative activities that he can explore according to his interest, the teacher standing by to assist him in working through the sets of learning materials he chooses.

- (6) Grouping for individualization: Some advocates claim that grouping is a necessary part of individualization (Clymer and Kenney, 1962: 268). Subgrouping for teaching (ability groups, interest and activity groups, teach-ability groups) and group work as method (Nation, 1989: 20-24) have, therefore, both been suggested as means of individualizing instruction.
- (7) Administrative plans: Most innovations for individualization require modifications of classroom and school procedures, but many plans for school organization and operation (such as non-graded school, plans for dividing students into classes according to their intelligence, ability or achievement etc.) have also been introduced to make individualization possible.
- (8) Personal programs: These forms of individualization are usually found in private schools where the institution can be adapted to the student rather than the student to the institutional pattern of prescribed instruction and competitive achievement (Neill, 1960: 4). Although they owe much of their philosophy and strategy to the progressive movement, these programs are more inspired by the work of such persons as Neill (1960), Friedenberg (1959), Erikson (1965), and Holt (1964 and 1967).
- (9) Remediation and teaching exceptional children: More progress has been achieved in the clinical diagnosis· treatment of individual learning problems. As Doll pointed out, “Each of us is a slow learner in some area, at some speed and for some reasons.”⁶ Peter (1965), among others, has already broken this ground, describing a method for the adaptation of teaching and resources to individuals based on diagnosis of their needs within regular school contexts.
- (10) Miscellaneous individualized programs and suggestions: There are many people who make suggestions for far-reaching change. For instance, Goodman (1966: 33-36) among other proposals, urges that students be permitted to travel and to work on farms as part of their formal schooling; and, Newman and Oliver (1967: 36-37), as part of their proposal urge that students be involved in the adult community and in

tasks that take them outside schools. One of the most radical developments in individualization is occurring at the preschool level where specialists are tutoring infants and training mothers to tutor their own by stimulating the child with objects, toys, games and tasks appropriate for his stage of physical and mental development (Hess and Bear, 1968; Pines, 1967), making certain that experience and environment facilitate the fullest realization of potentialities at each level of maturation.

This list, though still far from being complete, is long enough to illustrate the confusion about individualized instruction and to suggest partial solutions or fashionable modifications that can be introduced without seriously disturbing traditional relationships and procedures in the schools. At the same time, we may summarize from the list some characteristics (or advantages) of individualized instruction and find out the requirement of its application as well.

2.3 Characteristics of Individualized Instruction

While examining why individualized forms of instruction appear to be goals worth developing, we may find the following characteristics of individualization at work.

- (1) It nurtures independent learning by allowing the student to make choices and plans, to evaluate and think independently and to develop individual interests and commitments.
- (2) It meets the student's abilities. Individuals do differ extensively in their abilities and should be taught by different instructional procedures. Individualized instruction suggests non-graded or self-paced programs. In this way, a realistic sense of achievement is developed which encourages the use of one's abilities.
- (3) It caters to the needs of the student. Since students vary in their motivations, interests, goals and needs, individualized instruction can satisfy them respectively.
- (4) It inspires the student's initiative by providing more opportunities for students to inquire, discuss and solve questions of real concern to them.
- (5) It creates a dynamic learning system by asking students to participate in a variety of classroom activities. Activity-centered learning is another characteristic of individualized instruction.

2.4 Requirements for Individualized Instruction

Experience and experiments indicate that certain fundamental requirements for individualization will have to be met if progress along these lines is to be realized (Glaser, 1972).

- (1) The conventional boundaries of grade levels and arbitrary time units for subject matter coverage must be re-designed to permit each student to work at his actual level of accomplishment and at his own rate of learning.
- (2) Students must be provided with appropriate instructional materials in order to assure increasing competence in self-directed, and self-paced learning.
- (3) Special professional training must be provided to school personnel so that they can accomplish the evaluation, diagnosis and guidance of student performance on an individualized basis. Detailed information about each student is, of course, required for this purpose.
- (4) Well-defined sequences of progressive, behaviorally defined objectives in various subject areas must be established as guidelines for setting up a student's program of study.
- (5) A student's progress and present level of attainment must be measured by adequate methods and instruments for evaluating his abilities and accomplishments so that a teaching program can be adapted to his requirements and readiness.

After looking through this section, one may procure a general conception as to what individualized instruction is.

III. Trends of Individualization Toward English Teaching

From what we mentioned above, it is clearly understandable that current educational reform is largely oriented toward advances in individualizing education. And, the possibility of individualized instruction in English and other foreign languages has also been subject to pedagogical discussion among language teachers during the past decades, but its application was mainly confined to programmed materials. Of late, however, computer based or computer assisted instruction has been widely utilized for purposes of individualization.

It seems that the present renewed and intensified interest in individualization toward English and other foreign languages teaching is the result of the three primary trends which are briefly stated as follows.

3.1 The Trend of Individualization Toward English Teaching is the Reaction Against the Audio-Lingual Curriculum That Tended to Neglect Individual Differences

The audio-lingual curriculum which has assumed dominant role in the foreign language education ever since the success of American Army Specialized Training Program during the Second World War, has some of these outstanding features (Richards and Rodgers, 1988: 44-63; Newton, 1984: 17-25; Chastain, 1976: 102-128; Lado, 1964; Rivers, 1964):

- i. It is supposed to begin with a purely audio-lingual phase and during the first level of the curriculum audio-lingual activity dominates over reading and writing. All new materials are introduced first audio-lingually.
- ii. Student responses are highly controlled during the first state of the curriculum (they consist chiefly in memorization, repetition, and minimal sentence manipulation). Creative free expression is reached at the final stage of the curriculum.
- iii. The curriculum is divided into levels. Each level is supposed to represent a specific amount of material covered and learned by the student.

The first of the above mentioned features of the audio-lingual approach serves primarily the purpose of stressing the basically audio-lingual nature of language and tries to free the student from spelling mispronunciation. However, it does overlook the support deriving from visual stimuli and visual memory which may be very essential, even in the initial phase of learning especially for students with strong visual modality preference. In other words the audio-lingual emphasis ignores the existence of aptitude differences among students.

Although the audio-lingual curriculum was never meant to neglect reading and writing as a goal of instruction, the postponement of those activities to the later stage does, no doubt, clash with the motivation of students who may see the primary goal of language learning as the acquiring of reading or writing skills. Moreover, the delaying of creative free expression to the last stage of the curriculum can create an even more serious clash with student motivation. It may be considered that the control of student response in the initial stage of instruction is the desire to have the student avoid error and to have them produce as many correct responses as possible; yet, it has no justification even on purely pedagogical grounds (Rivers, 1964: 157). Or, it may be based on the assumption that the student's over-all motivation will be strong enough to sustain him through a prolonged period of memorization and drill activity, but it can only be justified for a

small part of students and certainly can not be made for all or even many.

Graded curricula have always been beset by problems: most teachers usually detect that after a year of lock-step instruction in the classroom, different students progress differently. Since students do learn at different rates, real learning presupposes individualization, paced by the student himself, and closely guided by his teacher.

Individualization of instruction can be applied to any one of the three respects. It is possible to individualize (a) the goals of instruction (b) the methods of instruction (c) the speed of instruction. In short, the tendency of individualization toward English and other foreign languages teaching can well compensate for the weakness of the audio-lingual curriculum.

3.2 The Trend of Individualization Toward English Teaching is in Line with the Present Learning Theory Which Stresses the Role of the Learner Rather Than the Role of Teacher (Hahn, 1989: 9-10; Champeau de Lopez, 1989: 4; Newton, 1984: 19-21; Chastain, 1976: 200-204; Smith, 1971: Lenneberg, 1967 and Chomsky, 1959 etc.)

The audio-lingual approach was based on the behaviorist assumption of the nature of learning and teaching. Learning was thought to be effected primarily as the result of reinforcement of behaviors occurring as responses to specific stimuli. Within this "S to R approach" to learning, the learner and his specific characteristics do not play an important part. During the recent decades, however, there has been a steady trend away from this approach to teaching and learning toward one that recognizes the importance of the learner. Noam Chomsky, for instance, pointed out in his "Review of Skinner's Verbal Behavior" (1959) that the incredible "creativity", which is inherent in human language, makes language acquisition impossible to be accounted or by a mechanism of selective reinforcement of responses. And, ever since Chomsky, the language acquisition has shifted toward "innate capability", a tendency well illustrated by Eric H. Lenneberg's book *The Biological Foundations of Language* (1967). Moreover, psychologists discover that different individuals may have different ways of perceiving and organizing information based on a combination of cognition and personality. (Champeau de Lopez, 1989: 4) All these explain a general transfer from the stress on the importance of teacher to the importance of learner.

Leon A. Jakobovits, an American psycholinguist, expresses that it is really impossible to "teach language" (1970: 146) in the strict sense of the term because

we can neither describe language adequately nor do we have any precise information about the mechanisms involved in its acquisition. He sees the only function of the teacher is to provide “compensatory instruction” – the essence of which is to help the individual student **WHEREVER** he needs and **WHENEVER** he actively tries to solve a particular problem. It is correspondent to what Cora Hahn points out in her paper (1989: 9) that affective characteristics have at least as much influence on learning as do ability factors.

Then, we may come to the conclusion that the situation, in which students of a foreign language class under individualized instruction can play more significant roles in determining their learning activities for the improvement of their different language skills, corresponds with the current trends of learning theory.

3.3 The Trend of Individualization Toward English Teaching is being Facilitated by the New Advances in Technology, Especially the Utilization of the Computer for Instructional Purposes (Huang, 1986: 221-227; Su, 1986: 1-30; Yao, 1983: 11-22)

As pointed out before, until recently individualization of instruction had been largely equated with programming. The emergence of computer based (or computer assisted) instruction, nevertheless, introduces to programming a potential for flexibility and adopting learning to the individual, and therefore, facilitate individualization and its application to English and other foreign languages teaching.

In short, individualization of instruction seems the most flexible and effective language teaching and learning method we may develop in this century.

IV. Proposals and Conclusion

Individualized instruction and the trends of its adoption into English and other foreign languages teaching have been justified theoretically as I stated in the Sections 2 and 3. We, English teachers in the Republic of China, with the improvement of English teaching always in mind, should try to work out all possible means for its realization. While confessing that several obstacles may stand in the way toward the development of a full-fledged individualizing program under the present situation, namely, pressure of the traditional school systems, shortage of funds for equipment, buildings, teaching training, material adaptation etc., we

still hold an optimistic view for the application of individualization to English teaching in this country, at least to a certain extent.

Under the bondage of the current "lock-step" school system, we suggest classifying students of the same grade into different classes, the smaller the better, according to an English aptitude test, with revised texts, simpler and less in content, for those "weaker" students as the first step of adaptation to the individual differences. As far as I know, a part of the junior high schools in this country have already adopted this proposal.

In the meantime, we shall take the student's learning objectives or needs into consideration. For those vocationally-oriented students give them a kind of English emphasizing practical use; and for the academically-oriented ones, give them different kind of English for their advanced studies. Within each option, however, the instructional program will be relatively fixed.

Viewing the fact that no matter what testing or homogeneous grouping has been done, each member will still vary widely in many other characteristics, we advocate the universally setting up of an "English Skills Clinic" to provide remedial as well as supplementary work to the regular English teaching courses of all levels, secondary schools, junior colleges or universities. In such a Clinic, the "weaker or slower" students will be given the opportunity to succeed through the help of the teacher, since they will have the extra time and attention which they require; and the "gifted" students will be prompted to further progress by tapping, at a pace suited to his needs and ability, from a large collection of material provided under the guidance of the teacher.

These are the three patterns of adaptation to English teaching in the traditional school system and steps toward individualization. We sincerely hope this study will call the public's attention to English teaching. We also hope that a substantial fund will be available in the near future, either appropriated from the Ministry of Education or granted from National Science Council, and any interested Foundation, to the formation of English Teaching Research Program like Hawaii English Program, to take the responsibility of large-scale researching and planning for the betterment of English teaching here in the Republic of China thus making this country a real show-window of English teaching in all of Asia someday. If so, this study will not have been conducted in vain.

NOTES

1. The researchers such as American psychologist Cronbach Lee J., in his essay "The Two

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- Disciplines of Scientific Psychology", *American Psychologist*, Xii (1957), Cronbach L. J. & Snow Richard E., *Individual Differences in Response to Instruction* (Stanford U., 1969) and also see Berwald, J. P. "Supervising Student Teachers in Individualized Foreign Language Classes", *Moder Language Journal* (1974).
2. The practice of individualized instruction can be traced back to Confucius' (in ancient China) and Socrates' (in ancient Greece) teaching to their disciples. In the 19th century John Dewey, an American educationist, advocated the theory of individualization and caused its revival.
 3. Northern Luzon Teachers Colleges in Laoag City, the Philippines has started a non-graded primary at NLTC Laboratory School since 1972. Details see *Education Journal*, Northern Luzon Teachers College, Vol. II, No. 1 & 2 (November 1972 and April 1973).
 4. See Smith, Larry E., "Don't Teach – Let Them Learn", *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 2, June 1971, 149-151.
 5. Such as Church College, Farrington High School, Kalakaua Intermediate School, Hale Mohala Free School, Kalihi-Uka Elementary School, schools in China Town (San Francisco), Defense Language Institute (West Coast Branch) and San Francisco State College etc.
 6. See E. Doll's preface in Hellmuth J. (Ed.) *Learning Disorders*, Vol. 1 (Seattle: special child publications of the Seguin School, 1965), i-ii.

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