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AUTONOMOUS LEARNING IN ELLE: CYBERNAUTICAL APPROACH AS THE VIADUCT TO L2 ACQUISITION

Jacob George C.¹

***Abstract:** Recent researches on cognitive methods show that institutionalized language learning is a constant source of stress, and a psychological obstacle leading to discomfort and insecurity. In the ELLE (Electronic Language Learning Environment) of the current times cybernautical approach opens attractive horizons by relaxing and empowering the learner, through its emphasis on communication, and by increasing interaction between the learner and the ‘teacher-facilitator.’ This paper shows how the cybernautical approach fosters L2 acquisition by valorizing ‘meaning’ and ‘content’ over ‘form’ and ‘competence in grammatical structures.’ The attempt in the paper is to analyze the essential ingredients of the cybernautical approach and explore the practical content of the method in the context of the Sultanate of Oman. The focus of the presentation is on the (re)defining of the learning space—the classroom—which has today become a major constraint owing to its spatial (fixed location) and temporal (fixed class timetable) inflexibility.*

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Key words: *cybernautical approach, ELLE (electronic language learning environment, constructivist theory, behaviorism*

INTRODUCTION

The history of language teaching is probably coterminous with the history of education. Through the centuries scholars have been engaged by the problem of effective language teaching. There are and have been many books, many methods, and many ideas about solving the problem. A wide variety of goals has been set, and a wide variety of rationales for foreign-language study have been offered: to become able to think more logically, to understand one's native language better, to become acquainted with the great literature of other cultures, to have access to the scientific literature of foreign co-workers, and to be able to communicate with others in their language. Today we talk of that last rationale as the basic one, because ultimately it subsumes the others.

Once acquisition of the *communicative skills* is considered as the final, the eventual target, the end of the language-learning process, we tend to consider it the criterion by which success in language learning is judged. We believe that it is the very skeleton, musculature, and life blood of language. Just as one cannot build a machine intended to do a complex task without incorporating into it step by step the capability of accomplishing that task, we believe that language can never become a tool for communication unless communication is the content, the emphasis, and the day-to-day routine of class work.

CYBERNAUTICAL APPROACH IN COMPARISON WITH OTHER APPROACHES

With the advent of the cybernautical approach, a fundamental shift is changing our way of conceiving teaching and learning. Contrary to the rigid and prescribed practices normally associated with teaching methods ranging from the traditional (grammar-translation, audio-lingual), the modern (communicative), to the non-conventional (Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning), the cybernautical approach stands out by virtue of its greater flexibility and adaptability. In the ELLE (Electronic Language Learning Environment) of the current times, cybernautical approach opens attractive horizons by relaxing and empowering the learner, through its emphasis on communication, and by increasing interaction between the learner and the '*teacher-facilitator*.' Compared to the earlier teaching approaches, the cybernautical approach accommodates a paradoxical amalgam of interactivity and autonomous learning. It presents the challenge of a comprehensive, well-thought-out and concerted application of the new modes of solitary discovery—the cybernaut is first of all an explorer—and co-operative interaction. By redefining the very nature of the three poles of the learning situation—the teacher, the learner and knowledge (in the present case, the mastery of a language)—this approach fundamentally changes our way of conceiving teaching and learning.

Interestingly, recent researches on cognitive methods show that institutionalized language learning is a constant source of stress, and a psychological obstacle leading to discomfort and insecurity. As Bogaards points out in *Aptitude*, 'To be deprived, be it temporarily, of one's linguistic powers is for most learners inhibiting.' We know however that the lesser the focus on the object of study (language), the greater the ease felt by the learner and the larger the reduction of affective filtering. This is why all

the so-called non-conventional methods use an aid, with the aim of distracting attention from the process of learning: music (Suggestopedia), props (Total Physical Response), tape-recorder (Community Language Learning), or even coloured sticks or cuisiniere rods (Silent Way). The cybernautical approach, besides offering an entertaining tool, equips the communicating learner with just such a 'defensive screen' behind which it is not necessary to react instantaneously.

HOW DOES CYBERNAUTICAL APPROACH WORK?

If one accepts the distinction between language learning and language acquisition, the cybernautical approach fosters acquisition. According to Krashen, learning is a conscious process which concentrates on form and the knowledge of grammatical structures, whereas acquisition is unconscious and focuses on meaning. For Krashen, a knowledge of language rules does not mean that the learner is able to use the language naturally. Acquisition, because it concentrates on meaning, leads the learner to acquire unconsciously, the forms of the language. Like the communicative approach and the non-conventional methods in which content is more important than form, the cybernautical approach puts communication first. Once the technology has been put in the background, few obstacles would appear to impede communication between learners or between learner and teacher-guide/'*teacher-facilitator*.'

If we accept the fact that the learner is an active individual who participates willingly in the learning process, it is obviously necessary to create favorable conditions for the individual appropriation of this learning. The teacher's role in the presenting of learning material is thus paramount. Since the cybernautical approach forgoes a 'fixed' manual, the teacher has continually to

enrich the course site/cyberspace with a variety of documents and at the same time monitor the pedagogical value of the links/materials supplied. The learner consults the various sites at will and may choose to go further in a personal quest of discovery: learning is no longer linear, since the learner can select which path to follow.

In the cybernautical approach, the function of electronic mail and the bulletin board is to allow learners to express their fears and to catch the 'ear' of their peers and their teacher, thus producing an 'echo effect'. The teacher is thus aware both of the learners' language and of their feelings, can take their reactions into consideration and not hesitate to ask for their comments after each activity. In this way teaching ceases to be centred on the teacher and focuses on the learner, which has the effect of encouraging individual development.

A GLANCE AT VARIOUS RELATED THEORIES

Whereas recent theoretical thinking appears to be reassessing the recourse to the behaviourist method (use of rote learning or drills) that the communicative approach seems to have banished, neuro-scientific research suggests that the two hemispheres of the brain are not mutually exclusive as both are engaged in language learning. Left-hemisphere activities (drills, for example) are as important as those engaging the right hemisphere (experiential activities). Back in 1968, Rivers came to the conclusion that second-language learning took place in two stages: in the first stage through a behaviourist-type process, and subsequently in a much more conscious manner, reflective, and thus cognitive. The marriage of the experiential and the cognitive, or the 'intersection of the interactive and the reflective,' is the forte of electronic communication, after a long separation of the two in

education. 'We should note that computer-assisted communication offers an ideal environment for learning language through use, that is to say through the experience of using language and reflecting on this use.'

This intersection takes place not in solitude but in the context of 'social' interaction characteristic of the 'interconnectivity'. In Piaget's constructivist theory knowledge is built through the social relationship of the individual and the environment. Rather than reacting to the environment, as behaviourism asserts, the individual acts in relation to it. In the behaviourist approach, the individual passively learns by repetition, by imitating a model, whereas in the cognitive approach the individual already bears the germs of knowledge, which grow through a process of maturation. Group work, collaboration, enquiry, role-playing and simulation all help develop the individual's cognitive structures.

In theory, the new communication technologies are following the cognitive path. De Kerckhove talks of 'the migration of psychological processes such as memory and intelligence from the inside of individual minds to the outside world of connected-knowledge media'. This interaction between the internal and external shows that the new educational technologies can serve, at least in part, the procedure advocated by Piaget.

CONTRIBUTION OF CYBERNAUTICAL APPROACH

Traditionally the three poles of the learning situation privileged the position of the teacher, owing to the latter being rooted in an institutionalized context for which, and in whose name, he/she taught. The link forged over the centuries between the lecturer and the classroom or lecture hall constitutes a tenacious paradigm. The cybernautical approach revises and modifies this paradigm and offers:

1. the immediacy of access to resources
2. a meaningful context.
3. experiential learning.
4. learner initiatives.
5. communication and interaction between participants.
6. the overall involvement and presence, physical or virtual, of the teacher/adviser.

The cybernautical approach can be best illustrated by using a triangular model which places the teaching/learning process 'P' in a circular space 'S' which encompasses and determines it (Fig. 1). The relation between the functions situated at the three 'poles', or

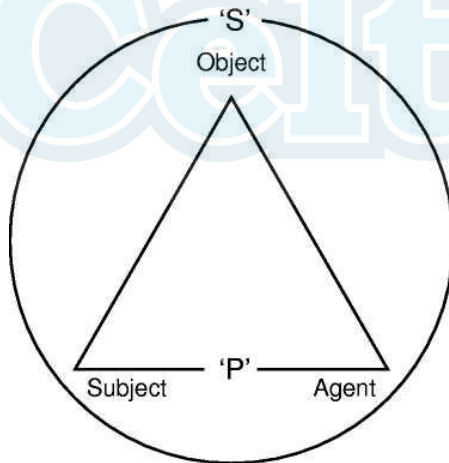


Figure 1

vertices, of the triangle offers an effective tool for formulating the cybernautical approach.

The progressive occupation of the traditional teaching/learning space, i.e., the transformation of the classroom into a cyberspace, involves fundamental changes to the nature of the Subject, the Object and the Agent who effects or fosters the interplay of the other two. In the traditional class, the Agent, invested with the authority of the institutional place of learning, used this status to define the nature of the Object (for example, the type of English to be taught) and to determine the activities of the Subject (the learner). When the learning space—the classroom, which has today become a major constraint owing to its spatial (fixed location) and temporal (fixed class timetable) inflexibility—is transformed into a virtual space, part of the Agent's power is transferred to the more mobile Subject, who assumes it in order to redefine the nature of the pursued Object. The language being studied takes on a wider number of facets (regional, sociological and professional variants, non-standard registers); the students—whose life is divided, with increasing difficulty, between study and paid work—demand a greater flexibility in the conditions of their learning activities; the Agent's former dominant and exclusive role becomes shared with electronic tools, which tend to take it over entirely; the 'Agent' henceforth includes multimedia technology.

The teacher, who shares the function of Agent with a technology capable of taking over some of its aspects, must put into place the different forms of cohabitation. Besides the pedagogical requirements of a general nature, the teacher adopting the cybernautical-approach is invested with new functions and has therefore constantly to master new skills; these new functions include:

1. the planning of teaching that combines the virtual and the real
2. the mediation of interpersonal relations between learners

3. the management of the class website and of electronic communications
4. the finding, and pedagogical evaluation, of net/interactive resources

The learner develops personal learning strategies (self-direction) and plays a very active role in the course-learning program. The order of syllabus items and the time given to each is flexible.

ELLE

Communication is, without doubt, the principal objective of ELLE. However, autonomy, independent learning and social interaction are involved just as much. Excluding oral expression, which is still in the embryonic stage of development in this new context, none of the other three skills (aural comprehension, reading and writing) has the upper hand. Vocabulary acquisition, for long neglected (Tréville & Duquette, 1996), is well served by the potential of the new technologies (Elkabas & Wooldridge, 1996; Wooldridge, 1991). Whereas the traditional manual, whatever its methodology, presents a static, fragmented image of the language, the ELLE manual is an open book offering multiple linguistic varieties (commercial, literary, political, scientific, etc.) and local colours (African, European, Canadian, etc.). In the future the main task of the teacher will not be to write a language manual but rather an instruction manual, a sort of pedagogical guide to networked cybernautical resources.

The teaching/learning space of language acquisition is, to varying degrees, more or less artificial or more or less natural. The greater the extent to which language practice takes place in the classroom, the more artificial it is; the more it happens in a space shared with other activities, the more natural it is. A learning space

shared with the purchase of a train ticket is an example of what we call a natural space; it is also the case with the Internet which is used as a learning space as well as a place to buy a plane ticket.

The traditional learning space is the classroom, which exists in a fixed location at a fixed time. Besides its artificiality, the classroom is a source of stress (except for extroverts) because of this spatial and temporal rigidity. The cybernautical approach offers, even demands, a redefinition of the learning space, which becomes variable in terms of place, time and content. The place includes the multimedia laboratory, the home, the cybercafé, the computerized classroom and the traditional classroom, which can be replaced by any other meeting place. The time is in large part what is available to the learner, who learns when it is preferable or possible to do so. Meetings (between learners, or between learner and teacher) take place either without spatial or temporal constraint (e-mail) or at an agreed location and time (the classroom, for example). The content of the space consists of the participants in a given activity (see the triangle): for example, the learner alone (Internet, e-mail), several learners together (free-access multimedia laboratory), or several learners with the teacher (classroom or directed laboratory).

Through the impetus given by the information revolution, a widening in the scope of language skills offered to the learner is taking place. To the four traditional skills (oral, listening, reading and writing) is now added the mastery of the teaching/learning space itself. A person who does not adapt to the life of a foreign country has difficulty in assimilating its language. A person who masters the classroom is what is called a 'good student'; the good student is the one who plays the education system's game. The cybernautical approach offers a wider variety of persons, 'conformists' and 'non-conformists', learning spaces which encourage them and motivate them to be 'good learners': the

classroom for the 'good students' and the extroverts, the multimedia laboratory with its exercises for the shy and the methodical, the Internet for the explorers and the adaptable. As to classical language skills, we can note that reading, listening and oral expression are all by nature 'direct' modes of linguistic activity (subject-object), whereas writing is always mediated by rules. Writing (in all circumstances, at all ages) is an activity in which one is conscious of the medium: 'how does one say...?', 'how do you spell...?', 'is there agreement of the past participle?', 'indicative or subjunctive?' (subject-rules-object).

The new educational technologies are able to answer the needs of reading and listening; oral expression can never be satisfactory in a pedagogical environment, unless one is content with simulations (always a pale reflection of the natural oral situation) or one is a child, for whom everything is real—the physical environment, dreams, myths, games.

The cybernautical approach may be criticized for an imbalance in the treatment of the four language skills: it is obvious that oral expression is the least developed of all. This in itself justifies, at least for the present, the contact between teacher and learners in a physical setting. The sending of an electronic oral message is possible, or immediate 'discussion' over the internet is possible, constraints of net-speed and related technical problems sometimes can make it impractical.

It is also true that learners are not all capable of managing their learning through the medium of a machine or of being autonomous. Ideally, it would be desirable to set up a class where all learners have the same learning profile.

More than just another new teaching/learning method among so many others, ELLE offers cybernauts an access to the world of language and culture that a classroom study centred on the teacher

is incapable of providing. Characterized by a learning experience freed from the artificial stresses of the classroom, enjoying the twin advantages of immediate and reflective communication, determined more generally by the learner's needs, and creating a symbiosis of the authentic document and the teacher-guide, ELLE opens up new paths to the acquisition of knowledge.

The change to the epistemological paradigm that it reflects sits ill, however, with the inflexibility of the study programmes of many institutions, which continue to separate the computer from the teacher (classroom hours vs. laboratory hours). It is strongly suggested that the configuration of the three poles of the teaching/learning Process ('P') changes when the Space ('S') that encompasses it is transformed.

CONCLUSION

One of the most important contributions of the cybernautical approach is that it answers the linguistic needs of different types of learners: the visual and the verbal, the active and the reflective, the extrovert and the introvert. With the cybernautical approach, learners are engaged in significant language activities as well as developing their ability to 'learn to learn'.

The communicative approach has made the authentic document its main platform; there are no documents more authentic than some of those found on the Internet: newspapers, advertisements, historical documents, tourist and gastronomical sites, etc. The immediacy of access to these documents makes this technological capacity all the more attractive.

The teacher is present in all learning spaces: guide to the use of the Internet, creator of laboratory exercises, arbiter of language usage, moderator of discussions on content, adviser on questions asked by e-mail, manager of the different spaces. In the

cybernautical approach, the teacher's principal role is to accompany the learner, whether 'live' or at a temporal and spatial distance. To accompany is to exercise a noble profession. All learning is a journey of initiation; if it is the Master who teaches the Tradition, it is the Guide who accompanies the novice on his or her journey of appropriation of knowledge.

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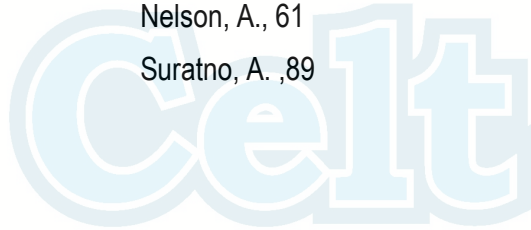
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