Interview: A Special Talk with Dr. Hayo Reinders*
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Interviewer: Talking about different modes of learning, do you think there is anything that differentiates learning a computer game from learning to speak a foreign language?

Hayo Reinders: There are obvious differences, but I think there are also many learning principles that underlie video games. There is so much learning that goes on in video games. Simply playing a video game without learning will make you totally unsuccessful at playing the game. You'll stop playing it. And if that happens, then as a game designer, publisher, or company, you would have failed because you lose that person. You lose a chance to sell your program because they will stop telling their friends about it. So, the aim for game designers is always to engage the learner, always make it interesting.

Interviewer: OK. So, you would agree that repetition is important in foreign language learning, but not boring repetition. It needs to be interesting?

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Hayo Reinders: That's absolutely the key. There's a lot of repetition that goes on. There are a lot of similar storylines that keep reoccurring, and every time something changes or there is an additional challenge, it keeps you on the tip of your toes. As a teacher, you want language learners to feel the same way. You want things to be familiar. You want balance. You want something new within a familiar context.

Interviewer: So, do you feel like you didn't see interesting repetition much in traditional textbook activities or grammar practice?

Hayo Reinders: I have to say game designers are incredibly good at providing engaging repetition. As teachers, we can still learn a lot from them.

Interviewer: So, you wouldn't think, for example, that students who prefer fun language learning activities such as those they can get from technology to more traditional classroom activities should forget about this kind of fun and force themselves to do more serious traditional study?

Hayo Reinders: Quite the opposite. Quite the opposite. If we can encourage learners to interact with the language in whatever way in whatever context, then this is a large part of our job done.

Interviewer: So, you would disagree with a statement like "no pain, no gain" for language learning?

Hayo Reinders: Well, there is a lot of pain involved in video games because if you want to be successful in playing a network game with hundreds or thousands of people online, and to go on to the next level, you have to play for hours. You have to try and keep trying and make mistakes again and again and learn from others. You have to strategize. You have

to collaborate with a lot of people. A lot of pain, if you like, is involved. So, in terms of effort, pain, yeah, there would be a tremendous amount of pain involved. But, it is not pain in the sense that it has to be boring or it has to be a tedious activity.

Interviewer: This is the difference, right? You are not advocating the old-fashioned kind of drilled pain.

Hayo Reinders: Yes, exactly. That is where the difference comes in.

Interviewer: More collaborative, more interactive, more tasks which engage the learner?

Hayo Reinders: Absolutely. And that links with students' interests. We start with the students. We say that we want our activities to be authentic. Yes, that's true. We say we want to motivate and encourage students. That's true. But how about looking at what the students actually do in their own lives outside of the classroom and starting with that. Bring that into the classroom.

Interviewer: Maybe some older English instructors and professors may not be as comfortable with this as the current generation of undergraduate students.

Hayo Reinders: Yes, absolutely right.

Interviewer: Some authors have claimed, probably quite controversially, that "students should not be misled into expecting all language learning to be 'fun,' believing that one can master a second language by only playing games and engaging in ever-entertaining activities" and that this is "counter-productive to long-term success." Can you give your opinion?

Hayo Reinders: I would imagine that people who feel like that are often driven to this conviction because of what they know about educational games. If you have ever seen or played an educational game, you will understand why students don't like them. They are boring. They try to put students into a sort of a fake fun environment with the content of a language classroom. It's like translating something into a digital format that is not supposed to be in that format. That's very different from the task games that most of our learners play for fun because they want to, because they are motivated outside of the classroom. So, there's a different medium that we're talking about there.

Interviewer: So, authentic games are not the same as educational games? How ironic that authentic games are more pedagogically sound than educational ones!

Hayo Reinders: Absolutely. Seymour Papert, a professor at MIT, where they produce a lot of interesting work in the area of learning through video games and technology in general, has once said that as soon as you bring an instructional designer into the development of a project, the project suffers. You bring in the game designer, and you can be sure of getting a good result. There is so little time in our classes to engage learners with the language, so you have to draw on the students' lives outside the classroom, by making a bridge between the classroom and the world of computer games, for example, especially in a foreign language learning environment like here in Thailand. Of course, you can't easily offer that bridge because there is no language exposure easily available. So, if you can make use of a medium that does make use of a foreign language, let's say English, that's fantastic.

Interviewer: Richard Donato has just reported on research in which it was found that language teachers who were also content-trained got better results than teachers who were only language-teacher-trained and tended to focus on grammar in class. What's your opinion on this?

Hayo Reinders: I can only speak about my own experience in New Zealand, in a second language environment. We have seen a great shift over the last two years towards content-based teaching and we've seen increasing integration between content-based teaching and language support. I'm actually using the word 'support' on purpose here rather than 'language teaching.'

Interviewer: Scaffolding?

Hayo Reinders: Yeah, but by 'support' I mean mostly informal types of language help. I do not mean courses where teachers come to classrooms, but support structures like a language counseling service, self-access centers, online materials, and other types of flexible support that are available. A support network should surround any course. That is the model we are clearly moving towards at least at our university, and many other places that I have visited, not just in New Zealand. And I think this is very, very successful.

Interviewer: So, you would agree with integrating skills through content rather than seeing students learning isolated skills that aren't working toward a unified task?

Hayo Reinders: It's difficult to generalize because different contexts require different tasks or approaches. If you know that you have a body of students who expect a

certain type of teaching, why would you completely deny them those opportunities?

Interviewer: And also teachers' belief?

Hayo Reinders: Absolutely. If you are an administrator or director of a school, and your teaching staff are not familiar with this type of teaching, you can't force them to implement it. There's a place and a time for everything.

Interviewer: Do you think what makes a successful EFL learner is changing as technology is changing?

Hayo Reinders: Yes, very much so.

Interviewer: And, for example, to what extent do successful learners in a foreign language tend to use computer games, the Internet, and television as study opportunities?

Hayo Reinders: Apart from looking just at the most successful learners, I prefer to look at learners in general. Learners nowadays, young learners especially, are different in a number of ways from learners in previous times. The way they operate is different from learners before. The types of tools, the number of tools, the access to tools is very different from before. Of course, it's going to affect how people learn, and importantly, it's going to affect how people expect to be learning. So, if, as a student, you are used to having access to answers immediately and to information immediately, and if you are used to being able to connect with other learners and work together and automatically share information or meet other people in whatever format or context, you're going to expect that from your classes as well. But then you walk into those rooms with the teacher in front of the classroom,

and it's all gone. It becomes a separate entity, removed from your normal life. Because normal life is open, collective, shared, collaborative, networked, and it's personalized. It's all relevant to you. And then this classroom environment suddenly is in many ways...

Interviewer: ...out of the dark? From what you are saying, a teacher-centered classroom is quite a nasty shock to many young people used to more complex and engaging learning environments. Now, the Internet is playing an important part in the progress of globalization. Probably most EFL classes, as opposed to ESL classes, tend to be in monolingual settings. How can technology, the Internet, and online games enrich such monolingual environments where there isn't a way of doing tasks without students feeling the urge to switch back to their mother tongue?

Hayo Reinders: People's lives, especially learners' lives, are not separated any more between countries, or between languages. How should we respond to this? I'd like to consider the classroom as a starting point, as an open source of information, open source of support, not as a closed environment. If you open it up, then suddenly it becomes like a room in a larger house which encompasses students' lives or life in general. So, for example, let's look at the Wiki project where students had to write information about their school. Rather than just writing an essay about some boring topic that they knew only their teacher would read, suddenly, it was about other people in other countries looking at information about their school. They felt responsible for it because it was connected to their lives.

Interviewer: Where you work, do you see more collaboration between students from different countries, completing tasks online in real time?

Hayo Reinders: Absolutely. There's a lot of research being done at the moment on this. We need to look at learners and learn from the learners. We always talk about life-long learning, but, how about the concept of life-long teaching? I don't mean teaching throughout your entire life but continuously developing yourself. Develop your life-long teaching skills while you're teaching yourself. If you know that your learners have different preferences, different approaches to learning, then, as a teacher, it is our duty to at least draw on that. Start by looking at the learners. Ask them what they are doing, how they are doing it, why they are doing it.

Interviewer: Sometimes when new technology is introduced into the classroom, there can be a reaction by teachers and possibly students in support of more traditional approaches. How can we help to ensure a balance between the old and the new?

Hayo Reinders: The key word is always balance. Several people have used this word to talk about implementing innovations—that you need to take it step-by-step. You need to find a balance. With any change you have to keep people feeling comfortable. But, that doesn't take away language instructors' responsibility to keep moving forward with innovations.

Interviewer: Maybe, there are sometimes so many new things that some teachers may not know where to start?

Hayo Reinders: Yes, that's probably true, but some innovation is better than none.

Interviewer: How can SACs (Self-Access Centers) be best used to encourage a focus on independent learning?

Hayo Reinders: They have their place. I think one of the practical purposes they have is to support language teachers to implement things, to allow experiments because it is a more open environment. It allows teachers to try out things that they normally would not feel comfortable doing in the classroom. They are also a place to start from the learners and their interests. SACs can have an effect on language teaching practice because by encouraging learners to use SACs, they start thinking about their own learning and making decisions about their own learning, and bring their own ideas and lives into the learning environment. And as a teacher, you can't ignore that. At some point it has to have an impact on your language teaching.

Interviewer: So, you think that could be one way of introducing new technology into classrooms by piloting new technology and new ways to use technology in SACs first before introducing it into the formal curriculum?

Hayo Reinders: That's a good idea, especially because in Thailand there are so many SACs. The facilities are there. And because they are so open, they allow you to experiment.   I mean, one very small simple example at the University of Auckland is that we know that a lot of our learners have MP3 players, especially Ipods, which are particularly popular. So, we downloaded a number of podcasts and created simple exercises, multiple-choice questions, that they can answer on their Ipods. So, now we see students coming into the SAC with their Ipods and downloading those materials onto their Ipods and taking them away and listening to them on the bus or wherever. Now, we are reaching

students and also creating a bridge between classroom learning and their own lives just by using something that has become part of young people's lives.

Interviewer: Something that is creating new learning spaces?

Hayo Reinders: Yes, exactly. Incidentally, and related to the topics we have talked about today, I would like to share with your readers some information about a new journal that I edit with Terry Lamb from Sheffield University. The journal's title is *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* and it is published by Multilingual Matters (www.multilingual-matters.com). I hope the journal will be particularly relevant to Thai teachers and researchers, not only because it focuses on learner-centered approaches to teaching, but also because it will publish the online version of all articles in the language of the author's choice. This makes it an excellent oportunity for those who want to share their work with Thai colleauges, in Thai. There is so much interesting work being done in Thailand that I hope many of your readers will contribute their ideas. I also invite people to visit my website (www.hayo.nl) and get in touch with questions or to share their experiences.