
INDIVIDUALIZATION REVITALIZED

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INTRODUCTION

Through "trial and error," a person can get satisfactory results by trying several methods and learning from his mistakes. Similarly, as an institution, Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) has adopted this approach in finding the best way to make its language teaching as effective and as satisfactory as possible.

Founded in 1977, CULI adopted the fundamental principle of English teaching/learning through the individualized learner-centered approach. Around 1984, the pendulum swung from the individualized approach to the communicative approach in which teachers assume a greater role and the focus is on student interaction. Later in 1990, CULI reconsidered and once again adopted the individualized philosophy as part of its teaching methodology.

INDIVIDUALIZATION AT CULI : THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

CULI has provided services for 15 faculties where the needs and abilities of students in terms of language vary greatly. The following cases illustrate the learning/teaching situations at CULI at different periods of time, proving that CULI has always adhered to the learner-centered approach.

***CASE 1** Pensri took **Foundation Reading I** in her first year of study. She was required to take a placement test in order to be "placed" according to her level of language proficiency. Placed in level 3, Pensri had to study-on her own-nine units of lessons on different topics and language functions. She rarely attended class since she could do the exercises (mostly reading comprehension exercises) outside of class hours.*

When Pensri completed each unit she took a unit test before going on to the next unit. If she failed, she was assigned remedial exercises. As her pace grew faster, she could complete all the lessons before any of the other students and had plenty of time to do other activities.

From 1977-1983, individualization was adopted. Whatever the approach happened to be, it was found that good students like Pensri were able to get by without much difficulty. Pensri worked on her own without the assistance of a teacher. Although Pensri did not choose her own learning materials, the learning could be considered totally individualized.

***CASE 2** When Suwit started **Level 1 of Foundation Reading I**, he was almost totally hopeless as regards learning the language. During the course, Suwit found himself lost most of the time and unfamiliar with the learning approach. Although a teacher's assistance was available, Suwit needed it at the start of the learning process not at the end when he had already made mistakes. Suwit had to do remedial exercises for every unit and sometimes found it discouraging. He had got used to the conventional teaching technique used at his secondary school where the teacher directed the teaching.*

Individualization does not mean learning in isolation or lack of contact between teachers and students. For lower-intermediate students a teacher's assistance is, of course, necessary. Like the majority of Thai students, Suwit might feel the transfer from direct teaching to total individualization too abrupt and need some time to adjust in the first year of study.

CASE 3** Winai was a **Communication Arts** students who was also required to take **Foundation

English I (a compulsory course for all Chula students). He liked the subject very much although some of the lessons he found were irrelevant to him as a Communication Arts student. Winai's performance was outstanding; he liked to work in pairs and groups where only English was allowed. Winai felt that he needed to practise more, since, to him, English was essential to his future career.

The communicative approach was adopted by CULI in 1984. Still the focus was on the students, who had a chance to study and practise language skills in real-life situations. However, there was a limited chance for students to practise English after class on their own and the facilities for independent language-learning were not available at first hand.

CASE 4 *Manas, an engineering student took Foundation English I as required by the university. He regularly attended class. It was the teacher who directed the teaching, facilitated communicative activities and gave feedback, etc. After each lesson, Manas was assigned extra work to do in the Resource Center. There, he did the self-study exercises, graded according to the level of each student's ability, and afterwards checked his own answers against the answer key provided. Sometimes he asked for an explanation from the teacher who acted as a consultant in the Center. He also took the opportunity to read English magazines, enjoy language games and play with the computer whenever he felt the mood to do so. He found this quite beneficial since it enabled him to practise English outside of class hours.*

Since 1990, individualization has been re-examined and integrated with the teacher's approach in the classroom to supplement direct teaching. Students get more exposure to English in the Resource Center where language learning facilities are provided.

INDIVIDUALIZATION REDEFINED

The students in the cases cited are involved in individualization, but it is clear that there are differences in the degree of learner responsibility and teacher involvement. It might be added that CULI has been involved in individualization on two different levels:

- **total individualization.** The term refers to

situations in which students are working without the direct control of the teacher.

This approach is considered successful in that

- students can learn at their own pace and work on materials designed especially to suit their level of ability;
- students can get immediate feedback when they finish the lesson since the answer key is provided right there in the book;
- good students can complete the course earlier than others and have time to prepare themselves for the exam or other activities.

However, in the context of CULI, there were several factors which hindered the success of total individualization.

- Students were more product-oriented than process-oriented. Some of them found it was not really necessary to come to class since the answers were provided in the book. This would do no harm if lower-intermediate students who needed proper guidance did not absorb the same learning habits as the more advanced students and just came to class to do the unit test.
- Students were familiar with the learning under full control of the teacher; they were likely to feel more secure with spoon-feeding as a way of teaching. Unfortunately individualization was not adopted in other subjects; if so, students would have been more familiar with the approach and would have derived greater benefit out of it.
- The activities provided were not varied. Limited choices of language activities demotivated students, especially when they had completed the assigned task.
- In terms of classroom management, teachers cannot provide equal assistance to all students since there are 25-30 students of different levels in one class, all doing different materials at one and the same time. In some cases, lower-intermediate students, who need help

most, occupy almost every class hour.

- **partial individualization:** The term refers to situations in which individualization supplements a traditionally taught course.

The teacher is responsible for teaching in class while the students work on the supplementary materials on their own in the resource center. This approach will be discussed in the next section.

TEACHING/LEARNING APPROACH ADOPTED AT CULI

	TOTAL INDIVIDUALIZATION (1977-1983)	FULL-CLASS TEACHING (1984-1989)	PARTIAL INDIVIDUALIZATION (1990-)
TEACHER'S MAIN ROLES	-facilitator -monitor -consultant	-instructor -evaluator	-instructor -consultant
STUDENT'S RESPONSIBILITY	-finish course books -take the unit tes: after each lesson -do remedial work, if he/she fails	-attend class -do the task assigned as classwork or homework	-attend class -do the task assigned as classwork or homework -do the supplementary exercise in the resource center
STUDENT'S PACE	-individual choice	-no choice = lock step	-teacher's decision + individual choice
MATERIALS	-graded according to the ability level of the individual	-core materials for all	-core materials for all -supplementary materials for individuals
EVALUATION	-unit test -achievement test	-assignments -achievement test	-assignments -supplementary materials -achievement test

THE EXPERIMENT ON PARTIAL INDIVIDUALIZATION AND THE USE OF SELF-STUDY MATERIALS

CULI launched a pilot project, from June-September 1990, to investigate partial individualization and the use of self-study materials in the Resource Center. Since the Center could accomodate approximately 900 students, the groups chosen for the experiment were students from the Faculties of Science and Engineering (totalling 824 students) who were studying Foundation English II one semester later than students from other faculties.

COURSE ORGANIZATION

The regular teaching took about 3 hours a week per unit in class while students spent one hour / unit practising their language skills by themselves in the Resource Center.

THE SELF-STUDY MATERIALS

The self-study materials were designed to enable students to learn the language individually

outside of class hours. The self-study materials consisted of the following:

1. THE UNIT SHEETS: There were nine sets of self-study materials whose topics and language points corresponded to the main course materials. Each set of self-study materials was classified into three levels depending on their difficulty and complexity; thus the materials accorded with the students' ability as follows:

- Advanced students = Level A (pink) ;
- Intermediate students = Level B (yellow) ;
- Lower-intermediate students = Level C (blue) .

2. STUDENTS' ANSWER SHEETS: Students wrote their answers on the answer sheets provided and kept them in the brown folders distributed to them at the beginning of the course after finishing the activity. They also had to record their progress in the "Record of Use" section. During the semester, the teacher would check the completion of each task and at the end of the course give marks according to the number of assignments completed.

3. AUDIO-VISUAL AIDS: Some activities were accompanied either by videotape or cassette tapes to help students gain greater exposure to the language of native speakers of English. Students could check out the equipment, such as tapes, headphones and diskettes, from the counter.

4. TAPESCRIPTS AND VIDEO SCRIPTS : If students found some parts of the listening activity too difficult to understand, they could consult the available tapescript or videoscript. However, this was encouraged only after students had finished the activity.

5. ANSWER KEYS: Students were allowed to check their answers independently against the answer key provided. This answer key incorporated scoring and evaluation criteria. This was designed to help students know how well they had done on the task. For some activities, accuracy was the main emphasis. For example, if students got less than 50% of the items correct, they were encouraged to ask for an explanation from the teacher who acted as a consultant in the Resource Center.

Evaluation

From the experiment, it was discovered that most students (83.32%) were in favour of this learning approach although it is quite new to them and different from the usual teaching techniques to which they have been exposed. The students' evaluation and the problems they encountered can be summed up as follows:

1. TEACHING / LEARNING APPROACH

- 1.1 Most students (83.32%) liked the learning approach. They found that they were not totally cut off from the teacher and at the same time they had a chance to study on their own.
- 1.2 About 70% of the students believed that the approach helped them gain enough confidence in learning the language. This shows a high level of motivation on the part of the students as well as positive attitude towards language learning. If these characteristics of a good language learner can be retained, it is hoped that more students will be confident enough

to choose whatever learning materials appeal to them.

- 1.3 However, a majority of students (55.66%) never asked for help from any of the teachers who acted as consultants in the Resource Center. This was probably because:

- they were not familiar with the approach
- they did not have time to ask for help as problems arose because they had to go to class
- they understood the lesson very well
- they copied the answer key

It is expected that if this approach is adopted in all CULI courses, students will quickly become familiar with it as they will use it from their first year of study. Also, it is hoped that for every class, the process rather than the product of learning should be emphasized and self-discipline in learning should be encouraged.

2. SELF-STUDY MATERIALS

- 2.1 Students found the lessons interesting (70.67%) and suited to their level of ability. This is because the materials contain sufficient activities, some of which are accompanied by audio-visual aids. Students, therefore, have a chance, which they lacked in class, to practise listening skills.
- 2.2 The self-study materials helped students to gain a reasonably good understanding of what had been taught in class (66.16%).
- 2.3 The materials also allowed them to make moderate use of what they had learnt in class (53.43%).
- 2.4 Students gained greater exposure to the English language through English magazines and newspapers, video and listening selections, as well as computer games. According to the results of the experiment, most of the students used these materials though not directly related to the course (73.60%).

However, students had problems in coping with the following skills:

LISTENING: Students did not have enough practise in listening skills. Therefore, some of them found it hard to understand the audio-visual aids used in the lesson.

READING: Students had vocabulary problems and found the answers provided were inadequate.

WRITING: Writing was the skill with which the students had the most problems. What they needed was for the teacher to correct their writing.

These problems, in fact, are common problems all language learners have to tackle. To be a good language learner, students should be encouraged to solve problems on their own, e.g. they may look up the meaning of a difficult word in the dictionary. However, to ease such problems, more potential answers to both reading and writing exercises should be given while the writing exercises should be more controlled.

3. AUDIO-VISUAL AIDS

- 3.1 Audiotapes, videotapes and computers were provided for the students in the Resource Center to give them more exposure to English through advanced technological aids.
- 3.2 Audiotapes helped support individualized learning since students could listen to the selection at their own pace.
- 3.3 Individual audiotapes compensated for what the actual classroom situation was unable to provide due to acoustic or technical problems.
- 3.4 Computers seemed to attract students most as they enjoyed playing language games.

According to the results of the experiment, however, students found that

- the quality of the audio-visual aids was not good enough (50.84% for audiotapes and 51.73% for videotapes.)

- they could not rewind the videotapes and whenever they liked since one monitor would be assigned to more than ten viewers.

It is hoped that once the Resource Center becomes fully operative more audio-visual aids of better quality will be provided and, if possible, a student will be able to watch videos individually rather than in groups so that he can practise his language skills more effectively.

WAYS TO MAKE INDIVIDUALIZATION MORE SUCCESSFUL

There are several factors which contributes to the success (or failure) of individualized language learning. These may include the learning materials, the teaching equipment, the physical environment and the students' attitudes towards learning the language.

When individualizing a program, the teacher may have to take the following into account:

Materials

Both learning materials which are commercially available and those which are specially written for the program should share the same characteristics.

1. They should be clear in their objectives. Students should have a clear understanding of what they are trying to do and should be able to assess the objectives of the materials against their own purposes in learning the language.

2. They should contain sufficient activities and exercises to enable students to achieve the objectives of the various units/lessons. The instructions should be clearly stated and the exercises should be varied and not be too lengthy.

3. They should provide feedback in the form of answers and explanations. It is not enough just to give students correct answers; they need to know where they went wrong. In this particular case, a clear and comprehensive description of language points is needed. The easiest way to give feedback is to use multiple choice questions, a technique that is normally used at CULI when reading and listening activities are designed. As for the writing exercises, the simplest way to give feedback is to make the exercise more controlled while at the same time trying to predict other answers that students may possibly come up with.

Audio-visual equipment

In a real classroom situation, using certain audio-visual aids such as cassette players is a waste of time, not to mention a failure, due to acoustic and technical problems. Videotape players are not available in all classes owing to budgeting constraints.

To support individualized learning in the Resource Center, one should consider the following:

1. Audio-visual aids and other hardware should not be used simply to equip the room with hi-tech machinery. Frequently, they are left idle and no real use is made of them. Therefore, one should keep in mind how to exploit them to the utmost to facilitate individualized learning.
2. From experience, listening or reading for pleasure is a successful way for students to acquire the language skills they need. In the Resource Center, therefore, the atmosphere should be relaxed and the activities involving audio-visual aids should occasionally be designed simply for fun and entertainment.
3. If a video cassette player has to be shared by several students, a junction box and earphones are of great help.

The Author

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Teacher-student preparation

Since individualization has been integrated as part of teaching / learning procedure at CULI, a transition from direct teaching to individualization must be felt by most students. Therefore, the following suggestions may be helpful in running a course adopting this approach:

1. There should be a course orientation given to both teachers and students, to familiarize them with the teaching approach.
2. Students should be made aware of their individual responsibility, a point which needs to be emphasized. In addition, a more wholesome attitude towards language learning should be fostered, i.e. that education should be viewed as a formal process for acquiring learning rather than as a game in which the players score points by getting the right answers (Dickinson & Carver, 1980).

CONCLUSION

For more than a decade, CULI has been involved in individualized learning to varying degrees. At present, CULI partially individualizes its learning programmes for the first-year students; they are taught in class and study on their own in the Resource Center afterwards. Thus, students feel that they are not studying in isolation but gaining more confidence in learning the language. Through a partially individualized learning programme, what students learn in class and on their own in the Resource Center have reinforced each other.