Individualization in Advanced English Programs

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The potential exists for much greater individualization of learning experiences in Thai university English programs. And individualization in learning results in more interest by program participants, for teachers as well as students.

Rationale

The potential has developed because of the upgrading of university instructors and improvements in the academic preparation of entering freshmen. For example, only eight years ago, in our provincial institution, Silpakorn University at Nakorn-Pathom, we felt fortunate to be able to attract anyone with a Bachelor of Arts degree to become an instructor in the Department of English. Nowadays we are able to select the most talented among competing Masters' degree holders. Because of a similar trend among primary and secondary teachers, I now find freshmen prepared and eager for far more challenging English courses than I could have imagined five years ago.

Better educated, more skilled in English and more experienced in teaching, present university instructors are prepared to take responsibility for *all* of a freshman or sophomore's English course. There is no need to fragment a student's course among teachers with the idea that the better teachers will compensate for that portion of the course taught by less competent teachers. And with one teacher responsible for all the content or skill areas of a course, the student can enjoy more individual attention when necessary, individualization of objectives, evaluation and content in the course, as well as closer integration of the content and among skill areas.

Individualization means that, first, although there may be five, ten, twenty or fifty other groups of freshmen taking the basic or special English course, the instructor for a group controls course materials, objectives and evaluation for that group. Secondly, the instructor may individualize assignments, materials, objectives and evaluation for students within a group, according to individual and overall curriculum needs and interests, as well as the instructor's own interests and background.

Barriers

This may sound wonderful in theory, but difficult to implement. The technical or professional problem might seem overwhelming. I would argue the contrary. Because of the recent proliferation of published learning materials and literature in teaching English as a second language, individualization has become, with respect to techniques, relatively easy. The more imposing restraints are institutional, psychological and temporal.

Department and faculty administrators tend to worry about order. It is part of their responsibility. For example, thirty different reading exams for thirty different sophomore groups may appear chaotic or impossible to manage. In fact, if course teachers organize and administer their own exams, there will be no confusion. Students need only to be told where to sit to insure that they receive the appropriate exam. And with different exams, there can be more flexibility with respect to time and place for exams.

Lack of confidence may hinder some instructors. One does not worry so much about justifying and defending exam questions, evaluation standards, practice material, homework assignments and classroom techniques, if twenty-nine other teachers are following exactly the same course. An instructor may not realize that gains in personal perceptions of safety through conformity are more than compensated for by losses in learning standards. Techniques acceptable to all are likely to reflect the "least common denominator" with respect to challenge. Old, established material also tends to lack challenge, it may not reflect a teacher's interests or approach, and it seldom reflects the interests of new generations of learners. The professional instructor must learn to revise, re-select, re-set, reform and renew, for every new class and course, in order to inspire better learning.

In any event, perfect conformity is never attained. Individual instructors themselves have developed skills in English and teaching in a variety of useful; successful ways. Cognitive style among students and teacher-student rapport for a given group will vary as well. And all these variables affect student reactions to classwork and homework practice, and learning achievement, Even though sets of teachers perceive that they are giving students exactly the same course, with exactly the same "objective" standards, it is unfair of a teacher not to consider all the variables which actually disrupt this conformity. And because these variables are not easily weighed, if they can be assessed accurately at all, the instructor, at last, must make a subjective decision when defining a student's achievement. It is risky, but necessary and just, *and* a more accurate evaluation, than so-called "objective" measures alone. Of course, criterion-referenced exams also are very useful, even indispensable, but are only indicators or guides for the instructor in defining individual

achievement. Attempts at conformity, therefore, may be unjust for students as well as self-deceptive for instructors.

But students (mistakenly) may perceive conformity as desirable and fair. Usually it reflects lack of confidence in their instructor's skill and objectivity. When students learn to trust an instructor's ability and attitude towards them, they understand that their instructor is best qualified to determine approaches in learning and methods of evaluation for them. As university English instructors have improved, this problem has declined. And with the end of conformity in Thai high school graduation standards, students have become more flexible in their perceptions about good teaching and evaluation.

Time remains the ultimate barrier against individualization in learning English. Given a group including students from four different faculties, who therefore have four kinds of curriculum needs, or four groups of students, one hundred twenty students with one hendred twenty sets of varying skills, one hundred twenty sets of problems, how does a teacher attain the ideal of meeting each student's needs and stimulating each student's interests? There are only so many hours in a day or so many days between terms to plan objectives, materials, classroom exercises and evaluation criteria. And there are only so many days in a term to learn about individual student needs.

Reality

In practice, instructors rarely have few enough or homogenous enough students to approach the ideal of perfect individualization. Even after many years of experience and belief in the ideal, I have not done as much as I could. Some of my efforts, however, may be of interest to other instructors, and adaptable to other courses.

Probably the easiest and commonest form of individualization is giving choices of composition topics, both in practice work and on exams. Currently, for example, my freshmen students have topical choices as well as choices in forms of composition: description, narrative or argument. In the "rhetoric" course for junior English majors and minors this term, the emphasis is on "creative" writing. For the exam, students can choose to compose either poetry or short fiction, or part of a play, with few restrictions on subject and style. Last term juniors had to write a term research paper based on a question different for each student, and they were required to formulate their own questions on topics of their choice. In the past I have worked individually with English majors on year-long "Senior Projects."

When teaching lower secondary students, I employed some individualization for revision of grammatical structures. I prepared a set of $6'' \times 10''$ cards. For each

structure to be tested, I typed exercises, with 10-20 items each, on the cards. The exercises were similar to the kinds of problems the students would meet on the exam. I created 30-50 different exercise cards. Each card was titled, according to the kind of structure it reviewed, and there were directions for completing the exercise.

The cards were spread upon the teacher's desk. Students chose cards and wrote answers in their notebooks. Then they turned the cards over, where correct answers to the exercises had been typed. They checked their own work and consulted the teacher if they had difficulty understanding the problem. Each student worked at his or her own pace. Then they returned the card and chose another one.

In contrast to the usual hour-long and enervating explanation of structures, students seemed to enjoy revision with these cards. I added to their interest by writing all the exercises myself, making the material relevant with references to local places, problems and even students themselves, much to their amusement.

Individualization in reading mainly consists in providing a variety of materials for skill practice. Students select the articles, stories or passages of most interest. When students are still mastering comprehension skills, this is rather time-consuming for the teacher who must simplify or edit material and prepare comprehension-type exercises for each passage. Also, at this level, material choice is limited to brief articles or stories. With more advanced students such as Arts freshmen, the skill objective may be higher--analysis--and the material need not be simplified. And the questions for all material are similar, depending on the approach to analysis. For example, my freshmen, for all non-fiction that they read, must identify and explain the most important information in the article. For a story, they must outline the plot and explain any symbolism that appears in the story (among other tasks).

Of course, instructors must spend more time in evaluation of analyses, because analysis includes justifying one's decisions. For any given article or story, there may be a variety of "best" responses to the questions. This leads to highly individualistic responses, even in practice work where some students tend to seek help from others.

In addition, the instructor may distribute alternative reading materials in a class where interests range widely (or where the instructor wants to stimulate new interests). Sometimes I give students two non-fiction articles and ask them to analyze the one which most appeals to them (though I suggest that those students doing poorly in non-fiction analyze both articles).

Over the years I have developed a "news article reading lab," consisting of more than one hundred newspaper articles mounted on $8'' \times 14''$ cards. They are classified only according to length. I select thirty or so, and let each student choose

one, to analyze as classwork practice. Many students seem fascinated with the material, and concentrate intensely in the exercise. Some of them enjoy telling each other about their articles, or looking at others' articles after finishing their own. But I can not make any claims about achievement with this technique, though it seems to stimulate interest in reading non-fiction.

Aural work may be more difficult to individualize with respect to materials and topics, though individualization occurs in the processes involved. For example, if students are learning note-taking in English, outlines or summaries of any given lecture may vary, yet all could be successful, though all students hear the same material. In group discussion, input varies widely (It is tempting to say "completely" or "absolutely" as an idea or question is repeated only rarely, and when someone failed to hear or remember the question or idea in the first place.) and students react differently to others' inputs, though all focus on a single topic. On exams, when I test students in four different groups, though the topic is the same, each discussion proceeds in a different manner, and students may contribute successfully in different ways. In the past, when the objective was ability to discuss topics not known in advance, the four exam groups had four different topics. The individual experience was even more varied.

This term, some students are encountering individualization in evaluation. First term, about thirty percent of my freshmen did relatively poorly in one or several of the four skills. Those students have been informed that, for the exams their poorest skill will count more than it will count for other students, when achievement is translated into grades at the end of the term. I hope this will inspire those students to devote more effort into improving the skill where they are markedly deficient.

I have never individualized objectives and standards as such. In fact I have not given it much thought. However, I always assess the work individuals do, and keep each student aware of how well he or she is doing with respect to the objectives. For the moment, I remain content (and challenged) to seek and develop objectives important to all as preparation both for studying English as a major or minor and for using English in learning other subjects in the curriculum.

Conclusion

I have made no claims about achievement with respect to individualization of learning materials and methods in teaching English to advanced students in Thailand. I have observed, however, that to the extent that an instructor can devote time for individual and unique learning materials and experiences, students respond

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This academic session, CULI's Foundation English Course has been offered for the first time to all first-year students at Chulalongkorn University. The course consists of three components : Reading with Writing, Listening, and Spoken Communication. Work on the Foundation English Reading Course is now nearing completion. The first published version of the first-semester course is now available. The second semester course is at present being prepared for publication and will be available in November. Work is also continuing on the development of the Listening and Spoken Communication courses. As these materials are still in an early stage of development, it is not expected that they will be published for some time.

EAP Reading Course: consists of 37 modular units, of which 31 already exist in at least draft form. 22 of the 37 are being piloted in the faculties of Engineering, Political Science, and Commerce and Accountancy at present. Revision of all units should be finished by March 1980, and the bulk of the units should be published (offset-litho) by June 1980.

EAP Writing Course: sufficient first draft units will need to be ready for pilot teaching in the second semester of this academic year. To date, roughly $7/10$ of the necessary materials have been written, and are at present being further developed. It is planned that a revised and properly published version of this course be ready by November 1980.