Learner Autonomy and the Web

Gary Motteram, Deputy Director of the Centre for English Language Studies in Education at the University of Manchester. Co-ordinator of the MEds in Educational Technology and TESOL (on-site) and ELT (distance, or distance and summer attendance)

The Learner
Teachers
Materials Design
The Web for language learning
Bibliography

There has always been a perceived relationship between educational technology and learner autonomy. This is taking educational technology in its broadest sense and taking learner autonomy as the superordinate term. This has become increasingly true for computers and self access. In most recent books (eg Esch, 1994; Benson and Voller, 1997) in this area there are always references to this relationship. Lonergan (1994) in what might be considered a misleading article for those new to the field talks almost exclusively about technology when he writes about Self Access Centres (SACs) and in the same volume Fox (1994) spends some time "Demystifying IT in second language learning". In the more recent book Benson and Voller (1997: 10) make a more modest and measured assessment of the issues:

> New educational technologies are often perceived simultaneously as both a promise and a threat. The new technologies of language learning have tended to latch on to autonomy as one justification for their existence. Computer software for language learning is an example of a technology which claims to promote autonomy simply by offering the possibility of self-study. Such claims are often dubious, because of the limited range of options and roles offered to the learner. Nevertheless, technologies of education in the broadest sense (from the textbook to the computer) can be considered to be either more or less supportive of autonomy.

Computers have always been seen as somehow being the ultimate independent learning engine akin to Skinner's learning machines which were of course associated with behavioural psychology (much vilified in ELT circles) and certainly not part of the autonomous / independence canon. Why is this and can technology really offer learners something that they cannot get by other means?

It could be argued that the Internet / World Wide Web is the ultimate tool for language learning. It has acres of text, pictures, sound and video. It also has interactivity and increasingly ready made "self-access" (the term is used here deliberately) materials for our learners which can be "accessed" at any time day or night, by individuals, or groups of learners that are in the same place and time zone,

or learners that are spread the world over. The Web has now been legitimised by talks at conferences; witness the number of talks on the subject at recent IATEFL events and by articles in prestigious journals like ***ELTJ*** and ***System***. There are specialist books in the area, too, eg Sperling (1997), but the question for us is whether it can bring autonomy and independence along with the notion of self-access.

The general world of ELT often mistakenly uses the terms self-access, autonomous, or independent learning to describe activities of various kinds in which the teacher has more or less input in what goes on in the "lesson". In other educational worlds people talk of open, distance and flexible learning. Also, a related issue is that of lifelong learning. No longer do all of our students expect to come and sit at the feet of their teacher absorbing the fruits of their knowledge. Teachers are encouraged to take the role of bystander, facilitator, guide, helper, or in the CALL world Higgins' well-known distinction between Magister and Pedagogue. But note the cultural reservations of writers like Riley (1988) and Holliday (1994) discussed in detail in Tudor (1996). They point out the difficulties many cultures have with the notions of autonomous / independent learning and make it clear that learners will not necessarily fall naturally into this mode of learning. There is also a difficulty with people who assume that self-access, autonomous and independent learning are automatically the same thing are missing some important issues. See for example the discussions about materials design below.

Before we go on to see if the Web has anything to offer our autonomous / independent learners let us consider what we might be looking for in terms of the three "players" in the learner autonomy debate: the learner, the materials and the teacher.

The Learner

Dickinson (1993: 330-31) identifies five characteristics of independent learners:

1. they understand what is being taught, ie they have sufficient understanding of language learning to understand the purpose of pedagogical choices;
2. they are able to formulate their own learning objectives;
3. they are able to select and make use of appropriate learning strategies;
4. they are able to monitor their use of these strategies;
5. they are able to self-assess, or monitor their own learning.

Ideas like these as Tudor (1996:20) points out have led to the notion that learner training is inevitable if learners are going to become independent in their studies. We also have to be conscious of cultural background and make positive use of existing learning styles if we are going to make progress in this area.

Teachers

What role do teachers play in autonomous or independent learning? As has been said above, a variety of new roles have been proposed for teachers and to these can be added the role of counsellor and mentor. In some cases these latter roles may not be the roles of teachers, but other workers within the independent learning environment.

Teachers have found these changes to be challenging and do not necessarily accept these new ideas

easily, or in some cases old teaching wine is put into new learner-centred bottles. This is also a mistake that is commonly made in materials design for independent learning.

Materials Design

The design of good independent learning material is very tricky and can be very different from designing a good face-to-face lesson. One issue that we might face is that teachers have often spent many years coming to grips with classroom teaching and the skills of materials design and adaptation associated with this context. They will initially expect these skills to be immediately transferable into the independent learning environment. If this is not the case, and it cannot be because of the nature of independent learning materials, teachers may come to feel threatened by what they see as a new orthodoxy when self-access is introduced into a school and in addition may feel that their hard earned skills are no longer valued. Independent learning materials are not just textbooks cut up and covered with see through plastic.

As Race (1989, 1994: 42) says:

> Textbooks have been around for most of recorded history, and we've all experienced how easy it is to spend hours with textbooks without any substantial learning payoff. Learning resources need to contain much more than just information; looking at how people learn is the best way to determine what needs to be added.

Many learners will certainly feel cheated if they visit Self Access or Flexible Learning Centres and find that the material they are presented with is the same as that presented in class. Race is writing about Open and Distance Learning (ODL), but these sentiments are just as relevant to autonomous / independent learning materials designed for language learning as they are for any for any other subject. These ideas are well reflected in the ELT literature as well.

Sturtridge (1997: 72) sums up the views expressed above:

> Where centres have failed it was often because the organizers were obsessed with the quantity of materials they thought were needed, rather than the quality and as a result the materials bank was never evaluated, weeded or revised. Some contained materials that were intended for classroom use and which had not been adequately adapted for self-access work. This meant that sometimes learners were expected to 'teach themselves' from class textbooks which had been designed to be teacher-led. In a successful centre the materials should not only make allowance for the learners to improve linguistically but also to develop their way of working.

Sturtridge makes use of the past tense, but this writer feels that this is still too often the case now.

We need to be careful not just in the choice of the particular material, but in how it is presented as well. Sheerin (1997: 60) makes the interesting point that we need to be careful how we write materials so that they do not become "self-administered" objective tests and Race (1989, 1994: 42ff) highlights the need for what he calls the "learning-centred" approach. He points out that the core of open learning is learning by doing:

> ... people don't learn much just by reading the fine words of experts. People learn by having a go themselves. They learn by doing. They learn by getting things right. They learn even more by getting things wrong, and getting feedback on what was wrong.

The creation of material that reflects an autonomous / independent learning philosophy is not an easy task and when we look at a new medium like the Web we need to be careful that we are not simply

replicating the status quo in another format. Old wine into new bottles yet again!

Much early CALL material can be criticised for this. Much of the very early material was drill and thrill (or not, as many learners found out). Teachers quickly discovered that as Chris Jones (1986) said in a significant article, what teachers do with the material is more important than what the material is. These notions are of course familiar in other technology areas, so witness the revival of the fortunes of the language lab, but it is important that we add here, that it is not simply a matter of creating materials, it is also important to be aware of how the learners are dealing with these materials. If learners approach an independent environment with the same skills that they are used to deploying in the classroom, then the materials still stand a chance of not really working.

The Web for language learning

Let’s now turn to the Internet / Web itself and see what kinds of material are available for our students to make use of and how we might help them to get the most out of this "self access" experience and consider whether the use of such sources as the Web are a valid way of spending time and effort for our learners and also how the work that our learners do with the Web can fit more closely into an autonomous / independent learning paradigm.

The Web here is taken to include both the broad range of internet-based materials that are available mainly for free and the local intranet environment that may be set up on a local area network inside a school or a college with materials specifically targetted at those learners.

As was said earlier the Web consists of all the elements that we would like to introduce into typical lessons, but let’s be honest the bulk of it is text. So, what can be done with the bulk of the text that we find out there?

Well, first of all our learners can read it, something that many of them do not do very effectively. How? Well, the teacher could make use of the Web themselves as a resource and find a text on an appropriate subject to supplement today’s lesson. This can be downloaded and printed and put with an appropriate worksheet in the self-access centre. It can also be downloaded from its own Web site and placed on the school / college’s Web site and a suitable worksheet provided. The worksheet can be on paper, or a computer generated worksheet in an authoring package like Toolbook or Authorware. Or even in Word - see Brett (1997).

Whenever we are concerned with learners motivation is always an issue. The Web resource may be able to help us with this issue. Because of the wealth of information on the Web it is perfectly possible for learners to find their own texts. This can be done as part of the lesson, before or after it. How would this work? Well, for example learners might be following the topic of Travel. The Web contains a wealth of information about particular countries, or towns and cities. Instead of learners being forced to read the "set text" that the teacher or textbook provides, they can use the Web to discover information about places for themselves. Thus giving learners more choice. More advanced EAP learners can make use of the Web to find articles that are relevant to their own disciplines and so providing them with an authentic reason for reading. See Slaouti (1997) for a more detailed example of this idea.

Pictures can also be used in language learning, they can help to stimulate language, or can be used quite effectively to illustrate meaning. Finding appropriate pictures on the Web is not perhaps as easy as it is with text, but the advantage of them is that there is a constantly changing supply and in most cases they are copyright free for educational use at least.

What about more sophisticated media? Well there is certainly a regular supply of audio on the Web which can be used "live", or downloaded and stored for use with other packages. There is also increasingly a sophisticated range of video material that can be accessed and used in a variety of ways. Despite the speed restrictions on the network the technology is making great strides in this area.

One of the most reliable sources of live audio material are the sites that provide Real Audio broadcasts of news and other material for example. These can be used in a variety of ways both for use in class, the Self Access Centre (SAC), or for independent listening at home.

Video sources include such useful materials as previews of video films, people talking about themselves, or a site, or a company and so on. With modern authoring packages audio and video clips are easy to manipulate and pre-set tasks can be set up for use with these different media. See Meinhoff (1992) for a discussion of the way that news media can be used in conjunction with standard templates to help learners get inside the news.

It is certainly advisable if you are going to make a lot of use of the Web in your school / college to take advantage of such programs as **Web Whacker** and to pre-capture the relevant Web site to your own file server, or even to stand alone machines. You can than make sure that the material is actually available (hopefully) when you want to use it. It is so easy for someone to change the material that you had planned to used, or that has been set up for use in the SAC without your knowledge so that your carefully planned materials no longer work leading to frustration on all sides.

For more general meanderings around the Web this is, of course, not possible, but you can save yourselves and your learners a lot of grief and hassle by making sure that things are in place when they / you want to make use of them. This will need some planning and will need a certain amount of work on the part of the teacher, or the resources manager to make sure that everything is in its place and working, but well worth the effort.

So far we have considered the Web as a source of "authentic material", what about ready made materials on the Web and in what format do they come. Are these useful for the independent learner? Can they be used effectively? Do they fit in with our autonomous / independent learning needs?

Two useful and informative introductory articles are Eastment (1996) and Carrier (1997). Both of these describe a range of ideas and list useful sites to visit. The sites that are listed in these articles are ones that are often quoted, but how do we know that they are of value. At the moment there is no formal review system for ESL / EFL sites (and they are mostly in the US). However, there are sites that are mentioned in all the regular lists and it might be safe to assume that they can at least be a reliable starting point.

If learners and teachers are not going to be disappointed we need to be sure that what is happening is useful and relevant and not simply a waste of time. In order to begin this process let us look briefly at one of the most mentioned sites in the literature and on the Web itself, but to be fair does not claim to be a self-access site in any way. This is Dave Sperling’s Internet Café - http://www.pacificnet.net/~sperling/eslcafe.html.

This is clearly a site that is well looked after, it has today’s date on it for starters which is always encouraging and has a range of different links. The strength of this site is its interactivity. There are lots of things for the learners and teachers to do. Most of them are involve putting things up on the web site in the form of comments, questions, answers and there are a range of different language forms. We have graffiti, recipes, topic of the day and so on. There is also a chat room where you can talk live to other students or teachers. There are also specific examples of language like idioms, or phrasal verbs. Inevitably all of this kind of material is general and has to meet the needs of a wide range of students. Learners do clearly have choice and help on tap if they want it. The site could supplement the work of teachers in classrooms or SACs. It provides a site where an independent learner can get some extra help.

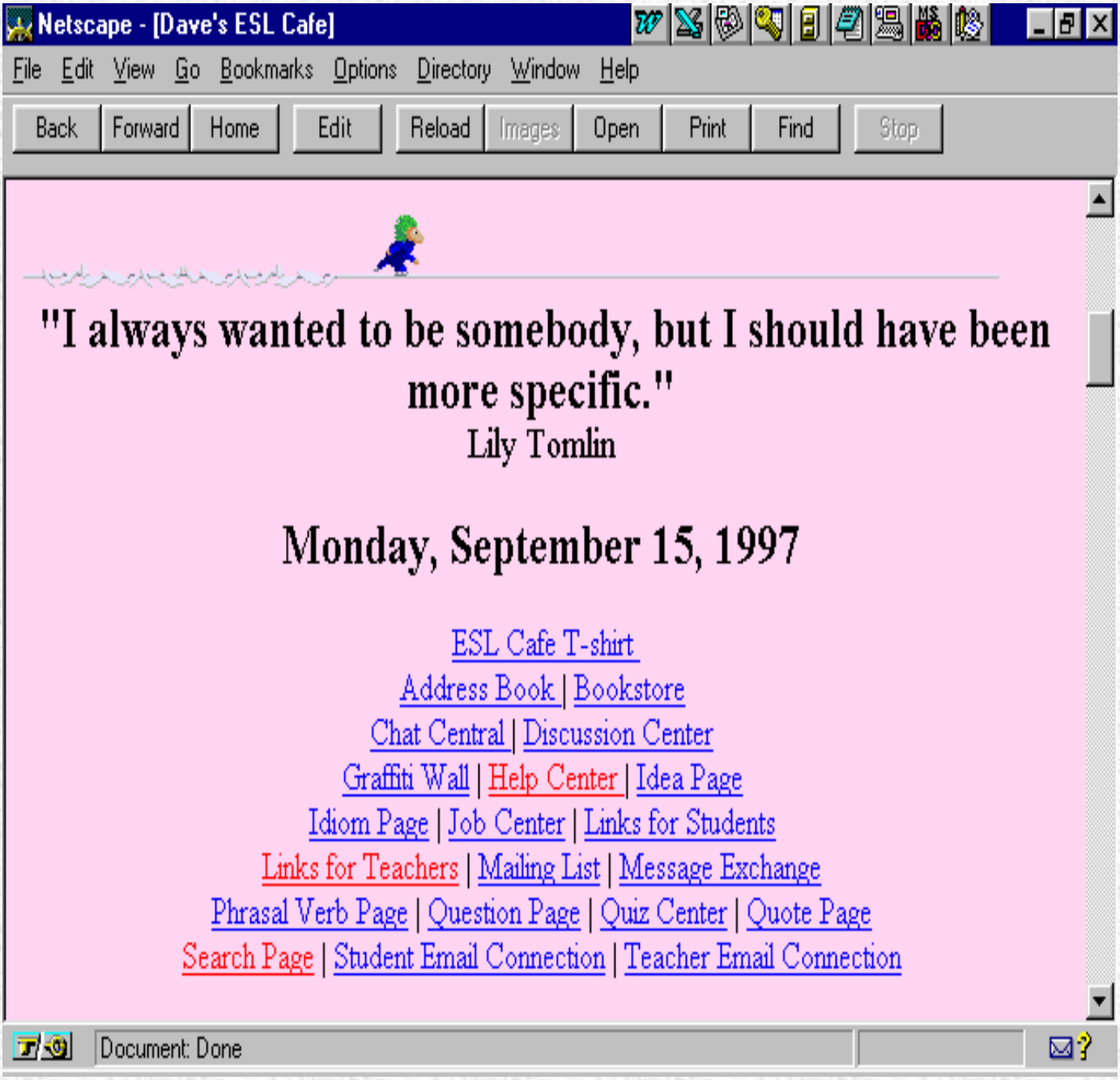

Figure 1 - The ESL Cafe

This site is mainly about interactivity. There are many other sites that are concerned with actual language games and exercises. A typical example is Study Quizzes for ESL Students at: http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/quizzes/. This site has a whole range of activities of vary kinds and here is the menu:

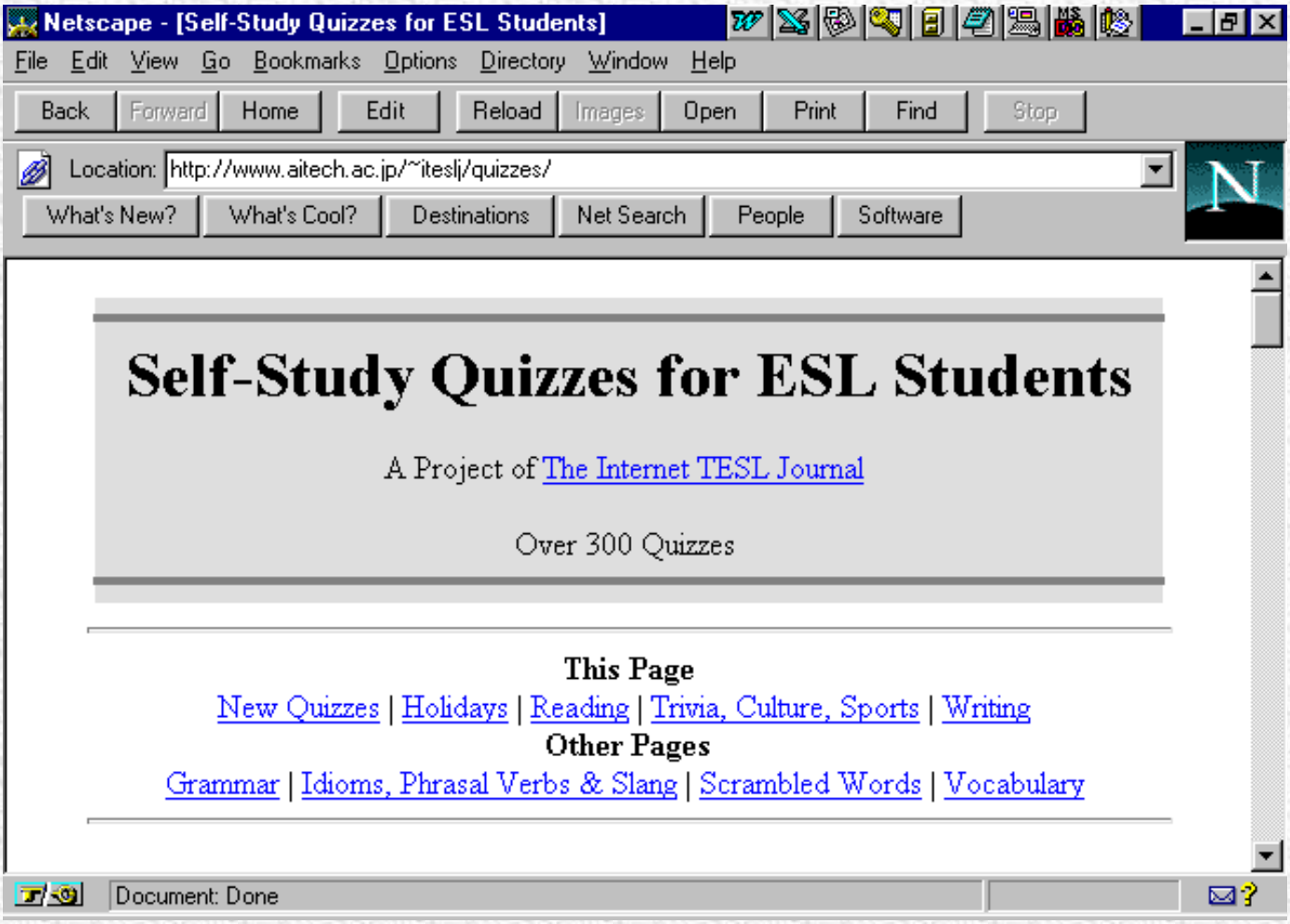

Figure 2 - ESL Quiz Site menu

This site is a sub page of the Internet TESL Journal at: http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/ESL3.html. This has a whole range of useful links of all kinds.

Other starting points might be sites concerned with Learner Independence itself. Two of these are the IATEFL Leaner Independence Special Interest Group homepage which is new and developing and is at:
http://www.man.ac.uk/IATEFL/lisig/lihome.htm.
Another similar page is the JALT Learner Development page at:
http://www.ipcs.shizuoka.ac.jp/~eanaoki/LD/homeE.html

A final composite that you might like to visit is:
http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/staff/visitors/kenji/student.htm. This site is the work of Kenji Kitao and S. Kathleen Kitao and is a very useful starting point for learner materials.

These general sites suffer from trying to be all things to all people, but they are regularly visited by learners and the exercises are done. They clearly offer an added dimension to our learners language experience. Maybe the fact that they are purely "self-access" is their attraction to learners, however, there is certainly space on the internet for some sites that represent the learning philosophies of independence / autonomy and have materials that are specifically designed to this end. There is also room for learner training in this area too. Learners are increasingly using the Web to gain extra experience and by giving them the tools to be able to look effectively at materials and to see what is useful we will be doing them a considerable service.

Bibliography

- Benson P & Voller P (1997) ***Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*** London: Longman
- Brett P (1997) "Do it yourself multimedia" ***ReCALL*** May 9/1
- Brookes A and Grundy P (1988) Individualisation and Autonomy in Language Learning London: MEP
- Carrier M (1997) "ELT online: the rise of the internet" ***ELTJ*** July, 51/3
- Dickenson L (1993) "Talking shop: aspects of autonomous learning" ***ELTJ*** October 47/4
- Eastment D (1996) "The internet for teachers and learners: survey review" ***MET*** 5/2
- Esch E (1994) ***Self-Access and the Adult Language Learner*** London: CILT
- Fox J (1994) "Demystifying IT in second language learning" in Esch (1994)
- Higgins J (1988) Language Learners and Computers London: Longman
- Holliday A (1994) ***Appropriate Methodology and Social Context*** Cambridge: CUP
- Jones C (1986) "It's not so much the program, more what you do with it: the importancce of methodology in CALL" ***System*** 14/2
- Lonergan J (1994) "Self-access language centres: implications for managers, teachers and learners" in Esch (1994)
- Meinhof U (1992) "Good news for TV news" ***MUESLI*** News March
- Race P (1989, 1994) ***The Open Learning Handbook*** London: Kogan Page
- Riley P (1988) "The ethnography of autonomy" in Brookes and Grundy (1988)
- Sheerin S (1997) "An exploration of the relationship between self-access and independent learning" in Benson and Voller (1997)
- Sperling D (1997) ***The Internet Guide for English Language Teachers*** London: Prentice Hall
- Sturtridge (1997) "Teaching and language learning in self-access centres: Changing roles?" in Benson and Voller (1997)
- Slaouti D (1997) "Harnessing the Web: an effective resource for LSP" in ***Lenguas Applicadas a las Ciencas y la Tecnologia: Approximacionas*** Universidad de Extremadura
- Tudor I (1996) ***Learner-centredness as Language Education*** Cambridge: CUP
- Software
  Information about Web Whacker can be found at:
  http://softrack.releasesoft.com/origin/info/webwck/info.html

---

Dernière mise à jour le 26/02/1998 - DIC/vb