

TESL

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WHAT IS INDIVIDUALISM IN TESL?

by Larry Smith

Individualization is not new, but it is current. When I say that I am reminded of a quote from *The Four Quarters* by T.S. Eliot, "... And what there is to conquer ... has already been discovered once or twice or several times ... There is only the fight to recover what has been lost and found and lost again and again." Even though it is not new, individualization is a popular word in the vocabulary of many educators with a high degree of frequency. We have "found" it once again.

If we study the written philosophy of ed-

ucation in almost any country we find words like these, "Education from the earliest school years should be directed to the all-round development of the human personality and to the spiritual, moral, social, and economic progress of the community, as well as to the inculcation of deep respect for human rights and fundamental freedom." Individualization is said to facilitate this all-round development, but what is individualization?

Individualization means many things to many people. Practically any teacher, on some grounds, can claim to be individualizing instruction. If he has lowered the class enrollment from 60 to 30, he can work more individually with the students. If he calls his students by name instead of by number, no doubt that is more personal to each individual. If he uses programmed materials which allow students to work

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at their own pace, he can say that he is individualizing instruction. He may have conferences with individual students or he may instruct small groups in particular skills. He may allow small groups of students who

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share some common interest to work together, and individual students may select their own materials from the available resources, and if so, he will proclaim to the world that he has an individualized class. Does he? I suppose that depends on one's definition of individualization.

I believe that individualization, more properly called personalized learning, is an approach which offers appropriate, not necessarily different, instruction for each student. The key word is "appropriate." It does not mean that the teacher teaches each student on a one to one ratio. It doesn't mean the student always works alone or even in small groups. There are times when people like to be members of a total community. There is something, I believe, quite real in "group spirit," which is more than a sum of the individual parts. "Appropriate" instruction would also allow the student to study when he wants to as well as how he wants to and with whom (or without whom as the case may be.)

Individualization is desirable because students differ. Each person is unique and learning activities should be based on this uniqueness. The following list provides some of the ways in which students differ which are relevant to learning:

Interest	Motivation for learning
Background	Attention spans
Language proficiency	Perception
Imagination	Sensitivity
Learning styles	Curiosity
Learning rates	Anxiety

I know of no one who says that all people are the same when talking about these things, and "appropriate" instruction is vague enough to please almost anyone as long as he can decide what is meant by "appropriate." Why then don't we see individualized instruction everywhere? In ESOL classes, I think one of the principle reasons is that the theoretical framework is not clearly understood or accepted.

THEORETICAL GUIDELINES FOR INDIVIDUALIZATION IN ESOL

1. There is no one way to learn language. Any way a person learns is valid. If a student wants to memorize dialogs, let him. If he feels that studying grammar rules helps, allow that.
2. There are no "correct" or "proper" sequence for learning the so-called "four language skills." It is not necessary to follow the listening, speaking, reading, writing order or any other sequence. Of course there is a sequence for each person which will depend on his goals and objectives.
3. There is no set of language skills necessary for all people. I doubt that most people need to learn English at all. Those that do can decide for themselves what skills they are interested in. Maybe only reading will be enough or only "Taxicab" spoken English.
4. Language skills can be learned at any age. If while in school a student studies only reading but discovers later he needs a speaking knowledge, he can at that time study to develop that. Learning can take place throughout life and the sooner we destroy the idea that one must be in school to learn, the more likely we are to promote genuine education.
5. Each learner is unique and much more than a reactor. He brings many things with him to the learning environment.
6. The amount of time spent for learning should not be a very important factor. Each student has a different rate of learning and even the same student will differ on different days. Usually learning is more important than the time it takes.
7. Class size is not a principle consideration. Since individualization is not one to one teaching, any "regular" class can be individualized.

How This Effects the Teacher

Under this approach the teacher takes on a new role. He is not the sole dispenser of knowledge who knows all. The student must have many sources of questions and answers. Individualization should not be equated as 1:1 instruction. The theory of individualization requires the teacher to

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take a new role, but not a less important role. *The teacher*, and each one also is unique, *remains the most important factor* in the classroom. The best materials can be made ineffectual by the teacher and the worst materials can be brought to life. To choose, adapt, and create materials for the class is one of the functions of the teacher in an individualized classroom. Another is to encourage the students with inspiration and guidance. Being an example of scholarship may be the most important thing. Of course he helps each student as needed and is a coordinator or facilitator of activities.

How This Effects the Student

The goal is to have him be the planner, director, and assessor of his education. This is the goal we hope he has reached at the end of formal schooling. He can't do it at the beginning of kindergarden and may not ever reach it. We shouldn't expect too much too soon, yet we should allow the student to "try his wings." The teacher helps him to be successful in his planning and works with him in evaluating his work.

Students should be encouraged to tutor one another. Of course this is not new. Students have always learned from each other and if we can use that force in our ESOL classroom, we will probably be more successful. To get the most from peer tutoring, students should be heterogeneous in terms of ability, age and sex.

Students should not be constantly placed in competition with one another; however, competition should not be avoided when it seems natural.

How This Effects the Classroom

An individualized classroom looks different. The desks are not usually in neat rows and the students almost never are involved in the same activity. Some may be reading while others are writing or listening to tapes. This approach demands that there be an ever increasing bank of materials designed to facilitate individualized programs for all levels of ability in each language skill.

The classroom is not quiet because there

is a great deal of activity in it. It is educational noise however, not the sounds of chaos. It is difficult to describe the difference but any teacher recognizes the distinction immediately.

Now, let's go back to the teacher who claims to be individualizing instruction because he has lowered the class size, calls his students by name, uses programmed material, instructs small groups in particular skills, has individual conferences, and allows students to select their own material from the available resources. The question is not so much, "Is this program individualized?" as it is, "To what *degree* is this program individualized?"

If the teacher is doing all of the above, his class is more individualized than if he is doing only two or three.

In deciding the degree to which any program or class is individualized some of the questions we must ask are:

1. Is this program elective or required?
2. Is the goal decided by the student or the teacher?
3. Does the student, with the teacher's help plan his own program by choosing from the available materials the books, tapes, films, etc., he wants to use to meet his goal, or is he told to study book X, pages 1-2?
4. Is the method and pace of study determined by the student or teacher/administrator?
5. Is evaluation done by the student in conference with the teacher or is it decided by class rank or some examination?

No longer should we let go unchallenged a statement by a teacher that he has an individualized class. We should seek to know the degree to which individualization has been made possible.

There is no approach which makes students more individualistic. There is an approach however which does increase the opportunity for each of them to express and develop his unique characteristics. Good teachers have been working toward this for centuries. I hope we will continue to develop such an approach--call it individualization or any other term which is currently popular.