MODULE 5: Question MN/05/01

An evaluation of the approach adopted by Jones, J. (1995) 'Self -Access and Culture: Retreating From Autonomy.' ELTJ 49/3: 228-34.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.

Any planned change, or innovation, is systematic. It does not simply mean people acting differently, rather it takes place in an environment which consists of a number of interrelating systems. Innovation in ELT management, in other words, operates in a hierarchical spiral of factors, the most powerful of which is culture.

The significance of cultural context in change is eloquently summarized by Holliday (2001) in the principle of "cultural continuity" which he takes from Jacob (1996):

> *Cultural continuity is achieved when meaningful bridges are built between the culture of the innovation and the traditional expectations of the people with whom we work.*
>
> *(Holliday 2001: 169).*

It is from this background that I attempt in this study to evaluate the approach to innovation adopted by Jones (1995) in establishing a self- access center for English language students in the Foreign Language Centre at Phnom Penh University in Cambodia. In this paper I will first outline the literature related to cross-cultural change in ELT management. The meaning and significance of self-access in ELT will also be briefly examined before I evaluate Jones' approach drawing partly from my own experiences of the interrelationship between change and culture, and partly from a small research project I have undertaken to inquire into the history and progress of a similar self-access center at a private university in Japan.

To be fair to the question, no detailed comparisons between self-access centers at the two universities is intended. Nevertheless, by drawing from experiences from two different backgrounds, we can make

conclusions beneficial to innovation in ELT management in general, and to self-learning programs—especially self-access centers—in particular.

1.UNDERSTANDING CHANGE

1.1 Change as innovation.

One of the inherent complexities of change is that it is a reasonably inexact term. What is referred to in this paper is not the kind of change that goes on about us all the time with no planning. Rather, it is a planned and deliberate change, sometimes distinguished by the term innovation which, at some level, "occurs within a system," (White 1988:115) and always has a change-agent therein whose role is "to initiate the innovation and assist in its adoption." (White 1988:118)

There is also the adopter or user of the innovation, for whose desire lines the changes are intended. Also of vital importance is the social context with which any system within which innovations occur, any agent or innovator, and any user or adopter, is closely linked. All these factors, although far from being the perfect definition, give a comprehensive summary of our knowledge of the nature of innovation even as we get it from a considerable body of research especially in the field of ELT Management.

The bottom line is, as White et al (1991:192) suggest, that "management is not simply concerned with maintaining the status quo…..an organization which fails to adapt and move with the times is one which will fall behind and eventually expire……" Management changes are thus a sine qua non also in ELT and education at large.

1.2 ELT and change.

Curriculum development is just one example of management changes often undertaken in ELT, albeit the most important. A host of others include what Sarwar (2001:127) collectively calls individualization methods. One of them is the use of self-access facilities, the main focus of this paper. What all of them have in common is that they are all, as methods of learning, grounded primarily in "the psycholinguistic and cognitive processes involved in language learning." (Richards and Rogers 2001:22)

Changes in ELT (and Education at large) thus take into account people's beliefs and behavior. Over the last few decades there have been considerable changes in attitudes or beliefs about what constitutes the most appropriate methodology to use in the classroom. With each new method comes change in beliefs and modification to existing behavior. As Sergent (2001:242), citing Delano et al (1994) suggests, "an innovation in a second language learning program is an informed change in an underlying philosophy of language teaching/learning brought about by direct experience, research findings or other means, resulting in an adaptation of pedagogic practices such that instruction is better able to promote language learning." Innovation in ELT thus implies deliberation, consciousness and change in belief and attitudes. It is as a result closely linked with the structures of the society from which it originates, especially with its culture.

1.3 Change and culture.

White (1988:119), citing Miles (1964:18), points out that "innovations are always operant in relation to a given social system; they affect one or more parts of the system crucially, and are in a very real sense rejected,

modified, accepted and maintained by existing forces in the immediate system." It may be the social system of a classroom, an institution, a region or nation at large. Whatever the case, any change will be successfully implemented and sustained only if the cultural system in which it is being introduced is taken into account. In a general sense, a set of cultural traits can be identified at each of these social levels. Strictly though, from our own experiences and from a considerable body of research in this area, it can be argued that the attitudes and behavior of both the "agents" and "users" of change (see *1.1* above) are greatly influenced by National culture.

One of the most accessible models of national culture influencing innovation in local settings has been provided by Hofstede (1986). Although his four dimensions of cultural variability were primarily conclusions from a research on work-related values, his article on "cultural differences in teaching and learning" (1986) also relates them to "differences in expected teacher/student and student/student interaction." (1986:301) He called the four dimensions *individualism* versus *collectivism,* large versus small *power distance,* strong versus weak *uncertainty avoidance* and *masculinity* versus *femininity.*

1.3.1 *The power-distance* dimension refers to "the extent to which the less powerful persons in a society accept inequality in power and consider it as normal." (Hofstede 1986:307) They accept and even expect that power will be distributed in varying degrees, although the expectation varies across countries. Western societies tend to have *small power distance* and are less hierarchical and more decentralized. Japan and Cambodia on the other hand lie in the *big power-distance* group, hierarchical, conformist and centralized.

1.3.2 The individualism/collectivism dimension correlates with power-distance. Countries with large power-distance tend to be more collectivist—where a tight in-group "protects the interests of its members" (Hofstede 1986:307)—while countries with small power-distance tend to be individualist with a loosely integrated social framework where people are supposed to take care of themselves. This dimension must thus be a big influence on how well or not learners work in groups.

1.3.3 Uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree to which members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations. *Strong uncertainty avoidance* cultures consider what is different dangerous. *Weak uncertainty avoidance* cultures consider what is different curious. They thus maintain tolerance and openness towards new ideas, and therefore create a positive climate in which innovation can flourish.

1.3.4 Masculinity and femininity oppose each other as social characteristics in terms of the social roles attributed to them. Hofstede's research indicates however that "the values associated with this dimension vary considerably less across countries for women and for men." (1986:308). This is perhaps the reason why very little is written about it in terms of its influence on innovation.

All in all, it is being argued that while profiles of cognitive ability and expertise cannot be underestimated, this 4-D model of cultural differences among societies is of paramount importance to the implementation and sustenance of ELT innovation.

2. THE SELF-ACCESS METHOD.

2.1 Meaning and significance.

Aston (1993), Barnett (1991), Miller & Rogerson-Revell (1993), McDonough & Shaw (2003) and Sarwar (2001) are some of the authors who have described *individualizing* the classroom and the learning tasks as the main reason for teachers to introduce self-learning programs such as the *self-access* method "aimed at improving students' language output as well as encouraging them to become independent learners." (Sarwar 2001:131)

Jones (1995) suggests that now an established method in ELT, *self-access* has its origins "in unorthodoxy, beginning perhaps in Illich's radical claim (1971) that most learning takes place outside the classroom," and "in the communicative approach to language teaching (which) likewise challenges tradition, shifting focus in the classroom from teacher to learners." (Jones 1995:228)

Where resources are available, institutions create fully fledged self-access centers. However, as McDonough and Shaw (2003) point out, "the provision of a measure of individual choice need not entail a full-scale reorganization of the classroom and resources; individualization may be started in a relatively modest way." (2003:210) Be it in a separate center as the two discussed here, or with just a provisional choice of tasks and activities in the classroom which learners can choose and do with or without the help of the teacher, self-access learning methods are built on the assumption that "direct teaching or lecture is only one form of learning experience, and that adult students are capable of taking their learning into their own hands." (Sarwar 2001:135)

2.2 Self-access and learner-autonomy.

Dickson (1987), cited in Jones (1995:229), predicts the ability of the efficient, responsible self-access center user to decide, without help from the teacher, on what work to do, find the relevant material, and set about doing the tasks in logical order and with the capacity for self-assessment. Jones calls this the "model of full autonomy" which "though seldom fully realized, is certainly regarded by proponents of self- access as a highly desirable outcome of learner training." (1995:229) It is seldom realized not least because autonomy is not a universal cultural trait, and it is certainly not part of most of the cultures of the so called "outer" and "expanding" circles of English use (Kachru 1994:137-8). Cambodia and Japan belong to these two respective circles and are experiencing a great deal of Englishization of their local languages. Yet they also have collectivist cultures, a large power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance, hence tend to be less autonomous. In his project in Cambodia, Jones advocates a retreat from autonomy—an attempt to make self-access relevant to local conditions. We return later to an evaluation of his approach.

2.3 A self-access center at a Japanese private university.

With the original purpose of making students study outside the classroom, and especially supplement their reading classes with library reading methods, a Self-Access Center (SAC) was established at Nagoya Women's University in April 2004. Its current design and administration however came in place from April 2005 with a full time teacher employed to oversee both the qualitative (pedagogical) and physical design of the system. She told this writer that she and all her colleagues in the English

Department are well aware, based on relevant literature and personal experiences, that Japanese learners tend not to take any interest in developing their own independent language learning. Nevertheless, this awareness has not constrained but rather informed their attempts to introduce self-access.

Designed on a *supermarket* system, (Miller and Rogerson-Revell 1993), the center "offers the learner the opportunity to look around and choose what to study."(1993:229) This is from clearly marked categories which enable learners to independently choose what they wish to use. The center, which is well equipped and continues to be supplied with learner-centered programs in the form of video, audio and computer assisted language learning (CALL), has been designed to allow as much private, individual study as possible. Noise reduction is also a key rule. The majority of seats have carrels, and group consultations and/or discussions at round tables near the entrance are expected to be kept at a minimum noise level. The students actually have access to another room at another floor where they can freely discuss in groups. The center, in other words, aims at optimizing individual motivation and autonomy on the part of the learners.

Both the teacher in charge and the head of the International Department of Language and Self Expression acknowledged that the main obstacle is the cultural influence on the learners' understanding of the concept of independent learning. They maintain, however, that the approach here is to keep reminding them (students) through learner training, to try and accept more responsibility for their learning. Right from the classroom, homework is set which requires learners to use the self-access center to do tasks, even to be able to evaluate their own work. Starting from next

academic year, plans are in place to introduce a system where volunteer students will be employed and involved in providing support to fellow learners, making learner-centered materials available and contributing to the design of the system and publicizing its wares.

All in all, the SAC at Nagoya Women's University fits Aston's (1993) description of the increasingly popular self-access centers for language learning which not only "offer a wider and more flexible range of opportunities, for language use than is possible in most classrooms," but also where, "insofar as the individual is free to choose the activities to carry out and the time to dedicate to them, learning is self-directed and autonomy is encouraged……." (1993:219)

3.0 AN EVALUATION OF JONES' METHOD.

Miller and Rogerson-Revel (1993:228), citing McCafferty (unedited:19), suggest that "any system for learning or teaching a language has to be justified in at least two ways—in terms of rationale, which has to be explicit, defensible and relevant, and in terms of realistic and practical applications."

In the following section, Jones' approach to self-access language learning is evaluated, not so much in terms of the outcome as the reasons that motivated him and the methods employed, vis a vis the learners' situation. It is evaluated, in other words, with the consideration that Jones' whole approach to innovation management takes into account not only the needs of the learners in question, but also their social-cultural background as contrasted with the western cultural influences the approach comes with. Also being evaluated is how the learners' social-cultural experiences

influenced the steps he took from the inception to the implementation of the innovation.

3.1 Rationale.

Miller and Rogerson-Revel (1993:228) have argued that "the rationale for establishing a self-access center relates closely to the human resources available or needed, and the type of learners who use the facility." The self-access center at Phnom Penh university is, in Jones' own admission, one "with a modest range of materials and equipment…….Confined to tape-recorders, video cassette recorders and televisions, its technology might not be considered sophisticated in comparison with centers in other countries." (1995:229) It might be speculated thus that the center in question is less equipped than the one at the Japanese university described above. What they have in common though is a group of learners who are eager to learn English for International Communication, but rarely study nor use it on their own outside the classroom.

This situation is by no means unique to Cambodia or Japan. It is a foreign language context situation—as opposed to a second language one—in which, as Brown (2001) puts it,

> students do not have ready—made contexts for communication beyond their classroom. They may be obtainable through language clubs, special media opportunities, books, or an occasional tourist, but efforts must be made to create such opportunities. (2001:116)

This is the same reason behind self-access centers as well as many other projects which universities undertake as much as their resources allow. It was also the rationale behind Jones' Cambodian experiment.

3.2 Jones' method and the national culture.

There is no doubt that the rationale behind the decision to establish self-learning programs in Cambodia, Japan and indeed many "Expanding Circle" countries, is explicit, defensible and relevant. Jones' approach to implementation however is wary of adopting wholesale the self-access method which comes loaded with the western value of learner autonomy. His approach thus takes into account the culture he identified within the university. It is a culture which doesn't so much value autonomy as an undiluted educational objective." (Jones 1995:229) It is, in terms of at least three of Hofstede's dimensions (see 1.3 above), and in contrast with most western cultures, a largely *collectivist* culture where "conformity is more highly prized than freedom of expression." (Jones 1995:229) This, in Jones' observation, meant that the group is a more natural way of working for the students.

Jones also observed a large *power distance* characterizing teacher/student and student/student interaction. He cites Chandler thus:

> The teacher's relation to his student, like so many relationships in Cambodian society, is lopsided. The teacher, like the parents, bestows, transmits and commands. The student, like the child, receives, accepts and obeys. Nothing changes in the transmission process, except perhaps the ignorance of the student.
> (Chandler 1983:88)

He noticed that the learner's national culture, notably its hierarchical and centralized nature, as well as their learning experiences, raise their expectations in teacher-centered approaches. It is these observations that

ultimately influenced Jones' approach in establishing the self-access center at Phnom Penh University.

3.3 Retreat from autonomy

It can be argued that the rationale behind most self-access centers around the world is that these facilities are what they are, places for cultivating individuality and autonomy in the learners—cultivating in them skills to go about their own learning. In Jones' view and plan, however, it would be some kind of "ideological imposition" to promote this kind of individualism and autonomy in the Cambodian education system given the cultural influences and learning styles described above. He dismisses it as "promoting a type of behavior that conflicts with the national culture at a deep level." (1995:230)

Jones thus suggests that it is practical and necessary to accommodate the local learning style in self-access. Specifically, he suggests that we can in fact reach into the learner's culture by introducing the unfamiliar—the self-access center itself—into the familiar—the tendency to work in groups, an all important feature of the Cambodian students' learning style. (1995:230) Jones claims support and guidance from earlier "teachers and researchers (for example Holec 1984 and Kenny 1993:431-42) who include cooperation and interaction in their understanding of autonomy." (Jones 1995:230-231) This approach is in direct contrast with other centers, as Jones himself acknowledges, and as this writer knows from the self-access center at Nagoya Women's University where even the teacher's presence is meant, among other things, to encourage and remind users to learn to take personal initiatives—to consciously pursue autonomy. Even the physical

design of Jones' center on the other hand is meant "not to deter students from interaction and cooperation." (1995:231)

In a nutshell, the objective of creating learning opportunities beyond the classroom is met by retreating from autonomy and adapting the self access center's design and use to the students' attitudes to learning.

3.4 learner-centered planning

Jones mentions the involvement of students both in the initial planning and consequent running of the center. Volunteers were sought "among the students to form a self-access advisory committee which would help staff make decisions about where things should be put....." (1995:232) This learner involvement must have fulfilled a number of purposes, especially making the learners feel they are part of the project. It meant that there was no feeling of alienation, and, as Jones puts it, created enthusiasm and a sense of pride and responsibility "which we believe other students are beginning to share." (1995:232)

This collective planning could in retrospect have been a seed for learner autonomy; for as Icy Lee (1998:283) suggests, voluntariness, learner choice, flexibility, and teacher and peer support in the design of self-directed learning programs, are factors crucial to the development of learner autonomy. However, as far as we know from his article, and it is an important feature of Jones' approach, no attempts are made to train, advise or argue, not even the less enthusiastic learners, towards individual autonomy. Together as a group, he gives students a sense of ownership and control of the route and direction the project was taking. This created a sense of enthusiasm and, as Jones comments, "with enthusiasm came a sense of

pride and responsibility for the self-access center which, we believe, other students are beginning to share." (1995:232)

Questions can be raised, however, about how free the learners were in their voluntariness and choice given the enormous effects *power distance* has on group dynamics. Couldn't the move to get together, plan and get involved in the center have been in obedience to those in power, particularly the foreign expert? From my experience in Japan group dynamic seems to be greatly affected by power distance. It may not be always obvious, but there is always inequality among members of a group—any group in a company, school or social setting—and senior members of the group ("sempai") are often listened to more than the junior ones ("kohai"). It seems appropriate thus also to raise the question about whether there was any unseen inequality in the group. We can assume it was likely so; for it was not in Jones' fundamental philosophy to counter the learners' cultural orientations. Just as their collectivist mentality is not countered but rather "seized upon as an inspiration for ideas in a culturally friendly self-access" (Jones 1995:230), so could the large power distance trait have been seized on to recruit and control users.

All said, Jones fulfilled in his approach the all-important requirement of "the involvement of students in improving the infrastructure, in providing support to other users, and in publicizing the facilities available, (which) creates potential for more efficient use and more democratic control of the learning resources which it is the task of such a center to provide." (Aston 1993:219).

3.5 Materials development.

Jones' emphasis on a group-oriented self-access center is further reflected in his views on the development and use of materials. As with the center-design itself, materials "need not be designed only for individual study. Learners can be invited to work together on the same task and compare and discuss answers before turning to the answer key." (1995:232) This is in accord with the physical design of the center which is meant "not to deter students from interaction and cooperation in any task they choose to undertake." (1995:231)

Jones even challenges McCall's (1993) advice "to plan your (SAC) lay-out so that anyone entering the center moves from noise to quiet." (Jones 1995:233). In his "sociable self-access center," noise must be accepted. Cambodia's is after all a culture where ambient noise is tolerated. (1995:233). While from the Japanese perspective silence is golden—and this explains the rule of silence in the self-access center at Nagoya Women's University—Jones discovered that in Cambodia, actually the absence of noise may be distracting, concluding that "a self-access center for individual study does not appeal to every learner." (1995:233)

3.6 Overall assessment; implications for learning

Jones is consistent in his rejection of the assumption that autonomy is an interculturally valid objective. In his view, an ideal self-access system "makes provision for those who want full autonomy and those who do not want any, and those between the two extremes." (1995:233). He however is inconsistent in assuming that all the Cambodian students for whom the self-access center was set up do not want full autonomy because of their

culture and educational background. The center, as described, seems to cater for only those students who do not want any autonomy. Jones gives no details of how and when he studied the Cambodian culture in general, and the learning culture at the university in Phnom Penh in particular, but he gives the impression that there were no students whatsoever ready for independent language learning, none already self-sufficient, none demonstrating any degree of autonomy. The approach to, and design of his center, further suggests that no amount of education, no amount of training, could foster in the learners the autonomy they need if they are to attain a certain level of competence to use the language in independent situations.

Nunan (1996), cited in Lee (1998:287), "rightly points out that some degree of autonomy can be fostered in learners regardless of the extent to which they are naturally pre-disposed to the notion." It is being argued that unless the advantages of autonomy as an educational objective—namely enabling learners to assume active responsibility for their own language learning—are proven harmful to acquisition per se, in the culture in question, efforts should be taken to train the learners and empower them to take charge of their own learning. Language planning, after all, is all about *social change;* it is, as Cooper (1989:30-31) puts it, "a deliberate effort to influence the behavior of others." Jones neither attempts to challenge the benefits of autonomy and individual responsibility in language acquisition, nor does he attempt to effect any change of attitudes on the part of the students towards this objective.

At the time of writing, I am employed as an English conversation partner at Nagoya Women's University. Learners are encouraged, besides using the self-access center, to go to the "conversation salon" and speak to the

partners outside classroom. While being sensitive to the learners' natural tendencies—like the Cambodian student the Japanese learner naturally prefers "hiding" in a group to standing out individually—the planners in this institution make efforts to encourage the learners to face the fact that an effective learner, and indeed user of a second language will also have to attain a certain level of autonomy. It may be unnatural to them, but a good number of students this writer talked to appreciate the enormous contribution of both the self-access center and the 'conversation salon' to their language development as well as their capacity to take on more responsibility for their own learning.

It is being argued that it is incumbent upon the teachers, the main agents of change as it were, to encourage, train, even coerce the learners if necessary, to undertake independent language learning outside the classroom; for this enables them to improve their language output as well as helping them become more autonomous and be equipped with the skills to undertake the "life-long endeavor" (Thomson 1996:78, cited in Lee 1998:282) that language learning is.

CONCLUSION.

Since Jones' report describes only the period (and process) of the self-access center's inception, it is very difficult for the reader to judge the success of the project. Whatever has happened ten years on, however, we can speculate that there has consequently been no greater autonomy nor individual responsibility developed among the users of the center. Jones did not plan for such a consequence either. He planned for learners developing the capacity to take responsibility for their own learning, not necessarily as

individuals, but in groups as culturally befits the Cambodian learner. He rejected autonomy as insensitive to the culture of the institution and to the national culture of Cambodia.

It has been argued in this paper that while sensitivity to the learner's culture is of paramount importance, innovation in ELT sometimes requires a deliberate effort on the part of the agents and/or innovators of change to influence the behavior of the users and/or adaptors for a greater goal. Contrary to Jones' views, and as this writer is informed by his experience at Nagoya Women's University and by a considerable body of literature, learner autonomy can, as a greater goal, be taught to the student "to free him/her from the traditional pedagogical limitations," (Armanet and Obese-jecty 1981:24) and to equip them with what Schwartz (1964), cited in Armanet and Obese-jecty (1981:28), has called the aptitude to manage one's own affairs."

APPENDIX: Questionnaire about SAC at Nagoya Women's University.

1. What is SAC
2. When was it started?
3. What was the main objective?
4. How was it received :
   a) by the school authorities?
   b) by the teachers, especially in the English Department?
   c) by the students?
5. Have you personally been around to see SAC and its progress from conception to its final incorporation into the system?

   If YES, how do you evaluate its acceptance, diffusion and importance to ELT management in the school.
6. Are you directly involved in the project NOW?

   In what capacity?
7. Self-access centers are established primarily for the students; "outside the normal classroom framework, yet playing a role within the curriculum, self-access is in an excellent position to promote the learner-centered philososphy." (Jones 1995).

   Have you noticed any OBSTACLES on the part of the students who use the center to the attainment of this goal?

   Are you aware of any SOLUTIONS taken?

   Do you have any suggested remedies for the future.

ONLY FOR STUDENTS

1. What is SAC?
2. Do you think you need SAC?

3. What are the good points about SAC?
4. What are the bad points about SAC?
5. How often do you use SAC?

Say about……..hours a day/a we

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