FOR MORE AUTONOMY

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This paper examines the working hypothesis that autonomy in education and language learning is something more significant than the ability to make responsible choices, relating more to exploration of the self-concept and to the realization of personal and group potential. Education is about empowerment and what it empowers is people's autonomy. This allows them opportunities to generate knowledge, as opposed to being passive consumers of it. What learners must do is initiate, plan, organize and carry out work of their own. This is autonomy in practice and can lead to the challenge of innate belief systems and assumptions. This in turn begins to unblock peoples' capacities for independent and interdependent thought and action. Experiential learning is one context in which autonomy receives a fuller exploitation. A particular example of this is discussed. Experiential learning is holistic, transcending both the subject disciplines and understandings of the curriculum as a way of organizing knowledge. Where autonomy is at work, the curriculum becomes a way of organizing what learners want to do. This validates the learners' voices, and is emancipating, no matter what languages are being used.

INTRODUCTION

The gap between second language education and broader issues in educational theory is of concern to Pennycook (1990), who raises a number of questions about this. On the surface, the questions raised (pp. 311–312) appear to relate mainly to second language learning. However, by scrutinising the questions, it is possible to find larger implications. Three examples may show what I mean.

(1) "How can students pose their own problems through the second language?"

The difficulty here is not the second language but the fact that generally speaking, in traditional educational approaches, students do not get to pose their own problems even in their first languages. The question thus becomes: "How can learning experiences be set up which allow students to pose their own problems?"

(2) "How can one validate student voice when the means of expression of that voice may be very limited?"

It is implied here that the problem is one of limited expression, in other words a problem

of a second language. But given that student voices are not always welcome in traditional education, where it is not usually the students who provide the knowledge and experience but someone else, then, for lack of practice, the means of expression of the student voice is limited in any language, not just a foreign language. In any case, the real problem is not that of limited expression but of validation. Who is to do it, and how is it to be achieved?

(3) "How can one work with limited language yet avoid trivializing content and learners?"

The problem here is not one of language, be it a first or a foreign language (except in so far as all education is a matter of language), but a question of the relationship between learners, content, and the educational process. Where students pose their own problems, not only are they providing their own content but in so doing are also providing the beginnings of a validation of the student voice. It is unlikely that the content thus provided will be trivial, or that the process of using it as a raw material for learning experiences will trivialize either it or the learners.

Pennycook is raising questions which relate to the overarching concept of empowerment, which he elaborates and relates to learners of a language (p. 311), hence his question types as given above. But in a consideration of broader educational issues it is apparent that what empowerment relates to is not learners of a language, or learners of chemistry, or history, as if the traditional subject disciplines exercised ideological constraints on empowerment, but that what is being empowered in education is a person's autonomy, and that this transcends the limitations of the subject disciplines.

Yet the concept of autonomy as it appears in the literature on second language teaching and learning does not usually take this point of view, and has additional complications which relate to its various meanings. Stevick (1980) makes these complications clear for us. In an initial reference to autonomy (p. 42) he describes it as: "the making of choices . . . and the exercise of initiative in attacking new material. The teacher cultivates the student's 'autonomy' by deliberately building choices into situations." Later he talks of the teacher "who offers to her students freedom and growth in addition to accuracy and fluency" (p. 289). And, finally, he talks of "that Self out of which one's future messages to the world must rise" (p. 294).

The first reference here, to autonomy as the making of choices, is a commonly held view of what autonomy is. The second, to freedom and growth, gives us a grander dimension to autonomy which is hard to reconcile with accuracy and fluency. Accuracy and fluency, however, return us firmly to the world of language teaching and the subject disciplines, with which many of us think autonomy of choice should be associated. The third and more mysterious reference, to the Self and the part it plays in our lives, introduces the most significant aspect of autonomy, and what which links it directly to the educational process, and particularly to experiential learning.

Legutke and Thomas (1991) have written about experiential learning and give their understanding of autonomy as "the ability to assume responsibility for one's own affairs" (p. 270). Elsewhere (p. 243), and more intriguingly, they discuss the advantages of project learning and remark that "It allows learners space to explore their own self-concept." It

seems to me that it is this latter sentence which is making the essential statement for the role of autonomy in education, which is something more than the ability to be responsible. For when learners take the opportunity to explore their own self-concept, specially in relation to others, this is their autonomy at work.

I hope to investigate this idea, and how it relates to experiential learning, in the rest of this paper.

AUTONOMY AS CHOICE: THE LEARNER AS CONSUMER

In the book *Educational Technology* (CERI, 1971: p. 26), the advantage of independent learning is given as follows: "it places upon the learner greater responsibility for his own learning, increases his area of choice and by its variety releases him from the boredom of one classroom lesson after another."

The idea here of responsibility and choice, as these relate to learning, has come to form the major part of the concepts of learner autonomy and autonomous learning as these appear in the literature on second language teaching and learning. But this view of autonomy is a limited one both for learning and for education itself. Constrained to choice among learning materials, methodologies, assessment procedures and so on, learners in this view are often also constrained to the subject disciplines. Language learners, for example, are expected to browse among language learning resources, where the target language may be treated as a subject discipline. This is eminently reasonable, but it is also eminently an assumption about what education is and how it works, and it functions to impose shackles on what can be learned. In other words, chaining a learner to some subject discipline is a restriction of that learner's autonomy, for it acts as a control on discovery, and on the production of knowledge. That learners may think they need this sort of constraint is neither here nor there, nor even surprising given the current educational status quo. Learners do not often have the opportunity to discover what might be educationally good for them.

A major example of autonomy presented as language learners being limited to choices among ready-made language learning resources is elaborated in Holec (1981). In Holec (1987) this idea has been developed into the notion of the learner as manager of learning. But management here (p. 146) is a matter of: (a) choosing objectives, (b) choosing content or materials, and (c) choosing what methods and techniques to use.

For Bertoldi *et al.* (1988) learners express their independence and self-direction in free access to a good resource center which permits learners "to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for learning how to learn English" (p. 161). This position on autonomy is very similar to that of Wenden (1987) for whom autonomous learning and self-directed learning are the same thing. Wenden writes (p. 8) that autonomous language learners are "not only more efficient at learning and using their second language but also more capable of self-directing these endeavours."

Self-direction is an aspect of autonomy, and we might expect it to find a flowering in negotiated syllabuses. According to Clarke (1991) the Negotiated syllabus is a quantum

leap of a radical nature in terms of learner autonomy, because the learners play a central part in its making. Clarke writes (p. 15) "that its content is entirely unknown prior to its creation." But in so far as Clarke assumes throughout his paper that what language learners negotiating a syllabus will end up with is a fairly traditional language learning syllabus (p. 25) and that what negotiation means is choosing or selecting—the Negotiated Model "allows full learner participation in selection of content, mode of working, route of working, assessment and so on" (p. 13)—then it is difficult to go along with the proposition that content in this syllabus is unknown prior to the learners making it known. Indeed, as Clarke points out, few learners, even adult learners, "would have any clear awareness of what they need or want to learn, let alone how they wish to go about it" (p. 19), even if given the choice. If this is true then the prognosis for the negotiated type of syllabus is poor.

A feature of the examples of autonomy in language learning which we have looked at is that they posit the learner as a consumer. These are market forces at work. The learner goes to the resource center or "bank of alternative activities and tasks" (Breen, 1987: p. 167), as she or he might go to the supermarket. It is rare that one comes across references in the literature to the creative abilities of learners, both young and old, which permit them not only to be consumers of ready-made resources and subjects, but even producers in their own right: producers not just of resources and methodologies, but of real-world tasks and pieces of work, and of their own learnings. This is the other dimension to autonomy, in which learners do not just choose, select, and re-arrange, but produce, create, clarify issues, propose solutions and make a difference to the world through their learning processes.

There are hints of this other autonomy in Britten (1988: p. 6) where, in a discussion about training teachers, he talks of "individualization of the trainee's teaching style." It is there in Wenden who refers to "both dimensions of autonomy" (p. 12), the first of which is "use of self-instructional techniques" and the second "an internal change of consciousness." She elaborates this as meaning that "learners must become critically reflective of the conceptual context of their learning" and of "what language learning entails."

Kohonen (1992: p. 18) links autonomy to personal growth and experiential learning. In order to achieve this second language learning should become learner education (p. 21). Learners need "to manage their own learning" and "to gain an understanding of language learning in order to be able to develop their skills consciously and to organize their learning tasks." Learners need not see themselves as consumers of language courses but can become producers too (p. 24). And yet, given a marvellous elucidation of cooperative learning as the way forward, what the learners appear mainly to cooperate over are lexical units, including rules, and various other language items. The learners are goal-oriented and aim for "mastery in the subject area being studied, such as foreign language proficiency" (p. 33). But is foreign language proficiency best conceived as a subject area for study?

An important issue here is that of how the language learning task is seen. If it is defined in advance as a body of knowledge, then the fact that a teacher is no longer transmitting this knowledge but the learners are negotiating over it instead does not make much difference. The view here of knowledge, and the curriculum, remains the traditional one. A paradigmatic shift towards cooperative and experiential learning, such as Kohonen

advocates, requires a changed view both of knowledge and the curriculum. In the changed understanding the learners use knowledge for their own negotiated and cooperative purposes. In other words they use the language rather than study it. And the curriculum becomes a way of organizing what the learners want to do, rather than a sequencing of knowledge.

Kohonen is interested in pedagogic autonomy, and stresses the importance of learner training. He gives an example of how this might work (p. 25).

> For instance, to learn about vocabularly learning strategies, learners might be given various vocabularly lists in L2, which they learn using different types of mnemonic techniques. Explanations of the rationale behind the different techniques will help them to understand why they work and to make personal choices depending on what seems to work best for them.

A couple of things are striking about this. Firstly, learner autonomy in this example relates mainly to choice, albeit an informed one. Secondly, the learners' experience is restricted to the learning of a language in which language is presented as selected items from a subject discipline.

Kohonen is a keen advocate of cooperative and experiential learning, and presents it in a theoretically convincing way. But I doubt that experiential language learning has always to be as constraining of a learner's autonomy and potential for experience as the above example suggests. I will be putting forward a somewhat different view of experiential language education in a later section.

AUTONOMY, THE SELF, AND EDUCATION

Abbott (1987: p. 48) has pointed out that no school subject, including EFL, is exempt from the process of educating, and that a shared objective here might be encouragement of "a capacity for independent thought and judgement." Yet, as Auerbach has commented, in discussing a competency-based ESL curriculum [cited in Graman (1988: p. 443)] "students are taught to receive knowledge rather than to generate it." This being demonstrably the case, then it seems a poor look out for independent thought and judgement. But Auerbach has implied the cure in diagnosing the disease. Students should generate knowledge, rather than merely consume it.

The proposition that what people need for growth is to generate and produce rather than passively consume matches not only intuitions and feelings about this but a distinguished body of work in social, cognitive, and humanistic psychology. What we need in order to grow, indeed the only thing we can really do, is to realize the potential we have. There is no choice here. Yet we do it with only moderate success, mainly because education in its consumer form works against the grain. Far from permitting us to generate knowledge and ourselves, consumer education sees us as its "pupils" only, tells us what to think and feel, encouraging the stereotyped, and inculcates the false consciousness of consumer ideology in which an individualized choice among ready-made products is the ultimate goal. Experiential and generative education is not like this, but sees the significance of a learner's own experiences and self-concept as a focal point for further growth.

Labenne and Greene (1969: p. 10) have defined the self-concept as "the person's total appraisal of his appearance, background and origins, abilities and resources, attitudes and feelings . . ." And they conclude that "a person's conscious awareness, what he thinks and feels, is that which primarily guides, controls, and regulates his performance and action."

van Dijk (1985: p. 52) has discussed the inner self in terms of "soft cognition." This consists of "opinions, attitudes, values, norms, feelings or emotions, interest etc." The inner self is the seat of our underlying assumptions and beliefs, and these, if they remain unknown and unacknowledged, exercise an undesirable influence on our behaviour, inhibiting our capacity for independent thought and judgement. Hoppal (1979: p. 246) has described this inner belief system to be "the deposited and accumulated substance of past generations, some sort of petrified 'past public opinion'." Petrification here indicates the falsity of ideological givens, and these clearly need challenging. This can be done. The bringing of this inner content to outer expression, and its submission to critical examination in relation to the social world, allows possibilities for growth. For the inner self is not merely a source of our disadvantages but a source too of our potential. This is where education can be emancipating. In providing opportunities for autonomy, the inner self is increasingly articulated in the terms of a person functioning knowingly in a more clearly defined context.

What we have here is a delicate relationship, a dialectic, between the inner and the outer selves, and the role of education as a force which empowers. For how else exactly is education to function? If it imposes dogmatically on the outer person then this is merely to add new accumulations to the petrified layers of the increasingly inhibited inner self. The alternative, and the real goal of education, is to unlock the inner self, permitting the generation of knowledge, as learners reveal their opinions and their problems, and find how valid these may be in the critical context of collaborative learning.

Autonomy is therefore a vital concept for education, for it is the only aspect of a learner's being upon which education can focus without detrimental interference, or conditioning effects. From this point of view, autonomy is not only the freedom to choose among materials and methodologies, or even to negotiate a syllabus. It is more important than this. To adapt some famous words of Carl Rogers, autonomy is the freedom to learn and the opportunity to become a person.

AUTONOMY AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

It is correct to suppose that what education is about overall is empowerment, as Pennycook has indicated, and I have suggested that what education empowers is a person's autonomy. As a shared objective for the academic disciplines, Abbott has proposed "a capacity for independent thought and judgement." I suggest now that one way in which to facilitate this capacity is to facilitate autonomy itself, and that a method of doing this is through experiential learning. Experiential learning is quintessentially "learning-by-doing." Legutke and Thomas (p. 215) write that experiential learning encompasses among other things "a holistic view of learning which transcends the traditional polarity of cognitive versus affect, and intellectual versus physical activity." What Legutke and Thomas are discussing

is language learning in projects. However, there seems no reason why a holistic view of learning should accept understandings of knowledge as being compartmentalized, or of the curriculum as a collection of subjects. In learning situations where participants are allowed their autonomy, permitted to speak out and generate their own activities, as in experiential learning, then they will inevitably burst through the constraints on learning imposed by dogmatic forms of knowledge, and bring a wholeness to the curriculum. "It is the pupil's own enquiry that becomes the integrating element" (Pring, 1976: p. 108).

Teachers may be concerned that experiential learning of a project or of an investigative research type—in short, any form of learning which is interdisciplinary—could neglect utilization of some particular subject discipline. This is no problem for language teachers, however, for the one subject such an approach is unable to neglect is the language the work takes place in. Rather than talking about language programs, or language projects, it may be better to talk of "a program in a language" or "a project in a language," and thus permit the program or the project to be concerned with something else other than, or in addition to, language itself. In this way we approach a solution to problems of content in language learning. For the project, or the investigative research carried out by the learners, provides its own content, which can be content generated by the learners themselves if autonomy has been allowed. The language used in this situation is the vehicle through which the learners handle the content and discuss their experiences. There is no need then to set up a special project for language learning as a separate activity.

This is not a piece of idealistic theorizing, for teachers at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Thailand, have been developing an approach based on the above assumption for the past 5 years (Hall and Kenny, 1988; Savage and Storer, 1992). The list of objectives below, which we give to participants at the start of our 8-week intensive workshop in language and technology, are derived from this approach. They appear with the rubic "These are some of the things we hope participants will do better as a result of the workshop."

(1) initiate pieces of work
(2) plan, organize and carry out pieces of work
(3) be able to explain why they are doing what they are doing
(4) be able to understand what other people mean when they talk and write about what they are doing
(5) examine their own work critically
(6) examine other people's work critically
(7) clarify ideas in speech and writing
(8) use media in the process of clarifying ideas and carrying out pieces of work
(9) elicit relevant information from other people
(10) work and cooperate with other people

Taken as a whole these objectives are a mega-strategy for the exercise of autonomy. Put into practice by a group of learners, this strategy sets in motion those aspects of experiential learning which Legutke and Thomas (p. 265) have called "process competence." A significant objective here is the requirement that workshop participants initiate pieces of work. I use the word "requirement" deliberately, for it is a deliberate intention of this

workshop that participants should exercise their autonomy, and one way of starting to do this is by transferring the responsibility for the generation of workshop content and use away from teachers and onto the learners. There are difficulties about this at first. The expression "initiate pieces of work" is, to begin with, incomprehensible to many of our participants and the first thing that has to happen is that they start to understand what it means. This is done through a series of tasks in the earlier part of the workshop, through which participants provide their own content in the presentation of texts they have chosen themselves, and of recorded interviews and discussions they have made themselves, which form the raw material for small group analysis and discussion. This is autonomy expressed as choice. But it is an uncontrolled choice, in so far as none of the texts or interviewees chosen are to be found in a ready-made bank of resources.

Further complications about learners initiating pieces of work stem from people's earlier experiences of schooling which have often allowed them little opportunity for autonomy. Some of our participants think they have nothing to say, or nothing to say that is valid. They are shy of speaking out in situations supposedly educative but in which they are merely pupils. For this is a teacher's territory and the provision of content and discourse the teacher's job. Dispensing with these old habits takes time and patience. Learners have to get to trust their teachers, and see that they mean it when they look for contributions on a large scale from workshop participants. A sign that this is happening is when participants abandon the pupil role and become investigative researchers. The change is striking, for these are learners exercising their autonomy.

A typical piece of investigative research, which is work initiated by the learners, hinges on what is basically a question. An example is "Why don't electricity consumers use the new types of energy saving devices available?" In seeking answers to this question a variety of data may be collected and analyzed, some sort of conclusion reached, and the investigation, its methods and outcomes discussed with interested parties. Investigative researchers stop asking teachers whether something is right or wrong, and begin to accept that teachers too have limitations and do not have to know everything. Investigative researchers are more confident. They discover what they can and cannot do, making more realistic appraisals of their activities and of their life-being in the particular learning context.

This is exhilarating, but for teachers it can be trying. As autonomy is established and investigative research proceeds matters can appear to get out of a teacher's control, and anarchy may seem to threaten. Teachers, becoming concerned for their pedagogic respectability, and for their authority and jobs, can experience doubts about the legitimacy of what they are doing. A key idea here is that of "matters appear to get out of a teacher's control," for it is often through a talent for control that a teacher is credited with authority and expertise. Yet if, as teachers, we see our educational function to be one of allowing and assisting learners to grow into their potential—in other words our task is to encourage learners to use their autonomy—then the fact that matters are now largely controlled by the learners, who are being responsible for their own learning, only shows how successful we have been.

Success can also be measured in other ways. The quality of work done by investigative researchers, in even relatively short periods, and the videos, tape slides, poster-boards and

interactive computer displays they can produce as a public manifestation of what they have done, justify the investment made in autonomy. A list of some videos and tape slides made recently as part of the AIT workshop is included in the Appendix. The titles given are also titles of pieces of work, and indicate the type and range of work done. These videos and tape slides are in the Language Center library at AIT.

In the AIT workshop, the move from the earlier, preparatory part of the program in the direction of fully-fledged experiential work is gradual, taking about 4 weeks. Figure 1 illustrates this forward movement as the fields, topics and themes, which have emerged from the earlier part of the workshop, are formulated into investigative research. As the participants begin to understand what is happening on the program so they cease to regard it as a collection of exercises done to satisfy workshop and teacher needs, but transmute the various tasks provided during the earlier part of the workshop into matters of personal relevance and into pieces of work. (The term "piece of work" is used to distinguish activity of real significance to a learner from its opposite "an exercise.")
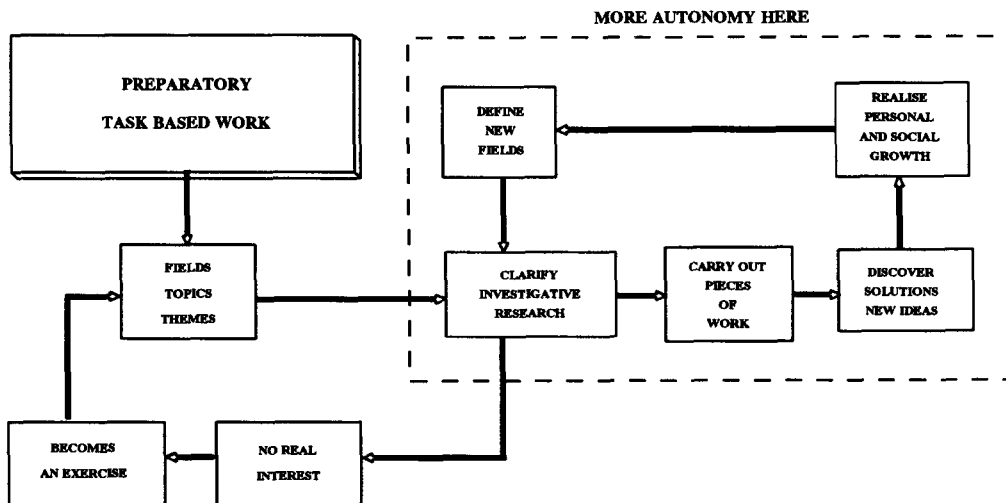
MORE AUTONOMY HERE

Fig. 1. Scheme for experiential learning from AIT's "Talkbase" workshop.

Figure 1 also shows the danger of retrogression into the pupil–exercise mode, as a result of which investigative research may remain locked in the exercise mentality and never become a piece of work. This is usually the result of learners being shy of collaboration, and reluctant to make use of their autonomy. But, persuaded to leave the classroom for long enough, making useful contact and data collections outside can provide the beginnings of a change.

Tudor (1992: p. 31) has given as his definition of learner-centered "active participation by learners in the development of their study programme." In a situation where learners are given sufficient autonomy to initiate, plan, organize and carry out pieces of work, and where in addition they are responsible to each other for their activities through regular reportback sessions, then this is learner-centered within Tudor's definition. Indeed, in

examining their own and other people's work critically (objectives 5 and 6 above) learners discover knowledge about themselves and others, develop the social skills of interaction and cooperation, and have some practice in planning their learning as they clarify what they are doing. This is what Legutke and Thomas (p. 265) have distinguished to be "process competence," a domain of skill different from but complementing "communicative competence." These are not skills which can be taught, but skills to be developed, through practice, in those situations which have as their basis an understanding of autonomy as a driving educational force.

CONCLUSION

Autonomy is not just a matter of permitting choice in learning situations, or making pupils responsible for the activities they undertake, but of allowing and encouraging learners, through processes deliberately set up for the purpose, to begin to express who they are, what they think, and what they would like to do, in terms of work they initiate and define for themselves. This is holistic learning and it transcends the subject disciplines.

There are signs that second language education is moving in this direction, and understanding it as located within broader ranges of educational, political and historical thought is a beginning. But there are a couple of hazards to beware of. The first is where language is reified into language as a subject discipline. The language here becomes the provider of its own content in the form of linguistic items. This is in conflict with broader understandings of language in which language is a vehicle of communication, with the educational emphasis falling on the content of the communication, not the vehicle. The second hazard relates to the curriculum. Where the curriculum is a way of organizing knowledge, this will perpetuate tendencies to see language as a subject discipline. There is an alternative to this, however. Where education intends a full use of learner autonomy, as in experiential learning, the curriculum becomes instead *a way of organizing what the learners want to do*. Its content here is the plans, rationales, objectives, intentions as to outcomes, assumptions and strategies of those learners and teachers who are collaborating in this context. The curriculum is the place where these people meet. It validates their voices, lets them raise problems, and acts to empower them, no matter what languages are being used.

I have been arguing for a wider understanding of the meaning of "autonomy," and for its being allowed a much larger place in education. Indeed it can be said that only when autonomy is being allowed to function is education taking place at all. For where autonomy is repressed or ignored—in other words where the learner has no say and no being—then what we have is not education but some sort of conditioning procedure; the imposition and reinforcement of dominant opinion. But education as an emancipatory agent empowers a person's autonomy, which allows new interpretations of the world and the possibility of change.

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APPENDIX: TALKBASE: AIT's WORKSHOP IN LANGUAGE AND TECHNOLOGY

Videos and tape slides 1990–1992

Videos
The Effect of Tourism on Forest Environments
Traffic Snarls in Bangkok
Foreign Investment in Thailand
Safety on Construction Sites
Why Farmers do not Cooperate
Impact of Dams on Fish Populations
Saving the River

Motivation in Training
Changing Attitudes to Forests
Bicycling to the Future
Electricity in Thailand
My Experience on Talkbase
Construction Explosion in Bangkok
Planting Trees for the Future
Making Progress in English
Coordinating Extension Work
Slum Areas in Bangkok
Thailand's Image
Lungs of the City
Ventilation in the AIT Cafeteria
Micropower for Remote Areas
Pollution of Coastal Waters
The Traffic Pollution Crisis
Deforestation in Thailand
The Chao Praya River: to Love It is to Clean It!
Drinking Water at AIT
Wildlife Conservation in Thailand: Successful?

Tape slides
Packaging and Trucking
Agroforestry
Foreign Aid: a Necessary Evil
Women Working in a Man's World
Single Mothers: a Social Problem
Sick Building Syndrome
Smoking & Society
Integrated Duck-fish Farming
Economical Electricity Consumption
Mosquitoes at AIT