Articles

Forgotten histories: Learning from learners in the past

Louise Sorensen with Andy Barfield

Andy: Thank you for doing this interview, Louise. I wanted to start by asking you how you came to be interested in the self-directed learning of ordinary Scandinavians in the 19th century...

Louise: In quite an unusual way: my PhD research was funded by a Concordat scholarship between the British Library and the University of Sheffield, and the main stipulation behind the scholarship was that it had to be based on one of their Scandinavian collections called the Hannås Collection of Scandinavian Dictionaries, Grammars and Linguistic Literature. This collection contains approximately 700 works concerned with the study of languages in Scandinavia from the late 16th to the late 20th century. It soon became evident to me that the so-called popular language works, i.e. language works written for the general population often by non-academics, were the most strongly represented, and as most of these were basic language teaching manuals, I started to investigate self-directed learning. Works from the 19th century were the most numerous, and this was linked to general societal developments at the time, hence why I focus on that period.

Andy: What exactly caught your interest?

Louise: I was fascinated by how people who often had no prior experience of learning foreign languages suddenly found themselves in a situation (usually as a consequence of trade, travel or migration) where they had to learn a foreign language. I was interested in how they approached this task, especially considering the limited options available to them: foreign language education was almost non-existent for the lower classes, private tutors were too expensive, and most language teaching manuals were of the traditional school grammar type.

Andy: You mention also globalization in the abstract to your thesis. Who exactly were the learners that you looked at and what were the forces of global capitalism that they were responding to?

Louise: Initially, I decided to concentrate on three groups of learners: Scandinavian emigrants to America, merchants resident in Scandinavia involved in foreign trade and leisure travellers. The forces of global capitalism they were responding to were quite easy to identify and they emerged rather quickly in 19th century Scandinavia, which had been almost completely isolated prior to this period. I argue that industrialization played a major part in the emergence of a capitalist middle class: they were the ones who were engaged in foreign trade (particularly with Britain) and, as a result, also had the means to become leisure travellers. Yet, I soon discovered that these two groups were not the most interesting. First of all, there was a limited number of language teaching manuals published for them, which led me to believe that the merchants learnt languages by engaging with their trade partners and did not really have the need to study languages. Secondly, in the case of tourism and travel, there were quite a number of guidebooks published both for visitors to Scandinavia and for Scandinavians visiting other countries, but the language element was negligible. I drew the conclusion that 19th-century tourists were actually rather similar to those of the 21st century where the majority of us only

Louise recently completed her PhD at the University of Sheffield on the self-directed learning of ordinary Scandinavians in the 19th century. In this interview, done over email and by Skype in August and September 2010, Louise contextualizes her research and talks about the insights that she gained from these learners in the past.
bother to learn a few basic phrases when we go on holiday abroad!

The most interesting group by far was the emigrants. Their situation mirrored many of the major societal changes of the time. The majority were poor rural dwellers who found themselves redundant in light of the increased mechanization of agriculture, and their only option was to emigrate. These people were true self-directed learners in the sense that they had no prior knowledge of English (had never even heard it spoken before), but they made a concerted effort to learn the language by purchasing language teaching manuals written especially for emigrants.

**Andy:** So, they hadn't had any formal education at that point?

**Louise:** No not really, most of them had really only gone to primary school until they were about 11, 12 years old, and that was just basic reading and writing, so they weren't really even familiar with their own language (in a formal sense).

**Andy:** But they were literate?

**Louise:** Most of them were. There was quite a big drive in the 19th century in Scandinavia to get widespread literacy, but not really until the second part of the century did they achieve it. The mass-scale migration didn't really start until the 1860s...

**Andy:** And they were rural dwellers moving off the land... mechanization was taking away their livelihoods and forcing them off the land to emigrate...

**Louise:** Yes, especially in Norway and Sweden—it wasn't that bad in Denmark where there was more agricultural land, but in Norway and Sweden there wasn't really that much land anyway, so a lot of them didn't even own land. They tended to work for the bigger landowners, but that stopped...

**Andy:** And the emigrants then were both men and women at that time?

**Louise:** Yes, it was family migration in the early period; in the early 20th century it turned into young people who tended to emigrate to the cities instead, and a lot of them would return home at some point, but the families settled in America for good.

**Andy:** Were you able to find accounts of their approaches to learning in their own words, or is your analysis based more on the self-instruction materials that they used?

**Louise:** I was hoping to find personal accounts of their approaches to learning, but there were actually very few. In the emigrants’ letters and diaries they make few references to the learning experience, and these are almost always positive (sometimes bragging about being ‘true Yankees’ now). From background reading, I knew that language teaching manuals for emigrants were published in large numbers and often studied on the journey to America, but I am fairly sure that once they were on American soil, they were simply too busy to study the language and just learnt by communicating with Americans. I concluded that they didn't do any formal study. But their children went to American schools. Of course, many of the adults never became fluent in English, especially in the earlier period where it was possible to live in almost entirely Scandinavian settlements. My analysis is therefore based more on the materials themselves. It is obvious that the authors were trying to make language learning easier by simplifying grammar sections, providing detailed guides to pronunciation and appendices with useful phrases and dialogues relevant to the emigrants’ lives.

**Andy:** So, these self-directed learning materials they were using were geared to the spoken language?

**Louise:** Yes, very much. The guide to pronunciation would be the first part of the book, and it would often be about 15-20 pages, which was quite unusual really for the time, and with somewhat basic means of transcription, just using the standard alphabet to transcribe words and sounds.

**Andy:** Was that presented then in isolated words or in phrases?

**Louise:** They would sort of build it up, so they would start with a guide to how to pronounce each letter of the alphabet (for example, ‘y’ would be ’hvel’), and then move on to words and phrases in the following sections. Most authors did admit, though, that English pronunciation was almost impossible to learn from a book, but I think we should admire their efforts in promoting the spoken language.

**Andy:** Can you talk me through—I don’t know what would be the right term—a chapter, or a unit or a lesson in one of these books?

**Louise:** There would usually be a grammar section, even though some of them dispensed with it. And that would be very traditional, so you would still see all the Latin terminology, and they would try to explain what the parts of speech did and
how they function in the language, and that was the only section that didn't really change when you compare it with traditional school grammars. But some of them, as I said, did try to simplify it, and you do see a few instances where they have actually translated the Latin terminology into the native language. But I still think it was too complicated probably for most of them to understand.

**Andy:** So, these guides were trilingual?

**Louise:** Transcriptions, they would usually be written in Danish, Norwegian or Swedish... and then English, and then they would use Latin terminology for the grammar section. It would have been very difficult to actually learn a foreign language from these manuals (which is also what we find today for those who have ever tried to learn a language from a teach-yourself manual).

**Andy:** You call them self-directed...

**Louise:** Yes, it's very obvious when you look at them—from the titles to the introductions to the way they are structured—that this is something you were meant to do without a teacher. They were often called Help Yourself or How to Learn English in 100 Hours or something like that. It was really competitive in the way they tried to outdo each other to publicize their works.

**Andy:** So from the materials there wasn’t any notion of the self-directed learning being group-based or interactive, or community-based in any way at all?

**Louise:** No... nothing at all... but I did get the impression that they would study together. So they would actually go beyond what the books advised them to do. Especially before they left Scandinavia, they would get together during the long winter nights and study together. Very rarely someone in the community would know some English, and they would travel long distances to speak to that person.

The journey to America was probably where they had the most time to study together, and I have read recollections of teaching manuals being passed around between the passengers. If they really made a concerted effort to learn the language is difficult to prove, but there might be a clue in the way the manuals developed with each new edition. If you compare a first edition with the sixth or seventh, let's say, the only section to have changed (and expanded) is the phrases and dialogues. Pronunciation and grammar were left as they were perhaps 15 years earlier. If we factor in how commercial the genre was, then they were probably just responding to consumer demands for a 'glorified' phrasebook. The ideal was to provide a self-contained language course, but reality proved that these good intentions were not achievable. There is a lot more thinking today behind the way that people can direct their own learning, but I don't think back then the authors really thought too much about it when they wrote their books. They were really just sort of money-making enterprises most of the time...

In my research I do make links to autonomous learning today, though I am careful not to claim that the situation in the 19th century was entirely identical to today's. By providing a historical perspective, I am trying to highlight that there will always be people to whom traditional classroom-based learning is not available and that they have to turn to self-directed learning in some manner or other. Migrants are the most obvious example, especially considering that many of them will be unfamiliar with learning foreign languages. I also try to highlight the fact that the 'teach yourself' genre of language manuals has received very little attention, despite it being a lucrative financial endeavour and calls for language teaching professionals to help improve it (if it is at all possible).

**Andy:** So context is critical?

**Louise:** Yes, when we assess the language learning experiences of self-directed learners of the 19th and 21st centuries, I stress that they must be analysed on the basis of the full context, i.e. today's self-directed learners have access to more technology, which can help them learn pronunciation, for example, whereas 19th century learners only had books. Hence, when we dismiss the guides to pronunciation in the emigrant phrasebooks as amateurish and not at all useful, we must remember that this was the only way to really explain how the foreign language should be pronounced. The self-directed learners I investigated were early beneficiaries of a new approach to language teaching aiming to move away from the traditional grammar-translation method and instead focusing on the spoken language. This was of course again a direct response to their everyday lives where they had a greater need to learn to speak the
language rather than reading literature or doing written translations.

Overall, I just really want applied linguistics (and especially in Britain where this is sometimes synonymous with language teaching) to make a note of its history and be aware that there are lessons to be learnt from investigating learners in the past. The feeling of autonomy in language learning adopted in the 19th century was in tune with the spirit of the age. People were experiencing the notion of autonomy in their private lives as a result of industrial advances and were no longer afraid to take charge of their own language learning. They thus rejected the conventional view that education as a means to self-improvement was only for the upper classes.

**Andy:** In a nutshell, then, how would you put it?

**Louise:** Something like this: In my thesis I have tried to illustrate that one of the central objectives of applied linguistics—to devise solutions to real-life practical problems associated with language and communication—was already present in the 19th-century even if it had not been formulated by the academic community yet. We must not forget that we can learn from learners from the past.

**Email:** l.sorensen@shef.ac.uk

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