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**CASE STUDIES IN TEACHER-ASSISTED
SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING OF ENGLISH**

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ABSTRACT

Ces huit études de cas sont représentatives du genre d'évolution linguistique et pédagogique observée lorsque les étudiants MIAGistes de Nancy prennent en charge (avec l'aide d'un professeur) leur propre apprentissage de l'anglais.

*The case studies featured in this article are taken, with kind permission of the publishers, from **Learner Training : the learner-centred language classroom**, MOULDEN and RILEY, Cambridge University Press (forthcoming).*

In a recent paper (MOULDEN, 1983) we reported the results of a five-year investigation of the relative merits of teacher-directed and learner-directed learning of English as perceived by French students of engineering and data-processing who had experienced both learning modes in parallel. Although this paper contained a description, in general terms, of the learner-centred approaches employed and details of some of the (then) current students' starting objectives and working methods, it did not provide any information on what happens to and what sort of results are obtained by learners fresh to self-directed language learning. The present paper will attempt to remedy this omission to some degree by relating a number of case histories from the 70 or so students we worked with last year (1). These case histories were not selected with an eye to presenting self-directed learning in the best possible light, but to illustrate a range of motivations, levels, objectives, techniques etc. They are representative of the kinds of evolution and learning outcomes we are presently observing.

Case Study 1 : (duration of project 10 h.)

Monsieur A, (a low intermediate level learner) wanted, with a view to keeping in touch with broad developments in the field of his future profession, to be able to understand, in detail, articles in English aimed at the general public and dealing with technical and sociological aspects of computers. He carried

out a trial run by attempting written translation of the start of a relevant *Newsweek* article which did not appear to be impossibly difficult. He found that detailed understanding came very slowly and that both technical and non-technical vocabulary were posing a lot of problems. A rapid check of his translation by the teacher revealed inaccuracies but there was no time to look into the sources of these immediately.

Monsieur A then decided that he would try to assess any future progress by observing the evolution of :

- a) the number of vocabulary problems encountered per unit length of article
- b) the speed at which translation proceeded and
- c) the accuracy of his translation.

Quantification of these criteria was to be achieved by noting how many times the dictionary was consulted and how many lines of article were translated per 2 hour work session and by the density and gravity of errors in translation detected by the teacher.

His working material consisted of a *Newsweek* article on computer crime in the U.S., a dictionary of everyday English and a dictionary of computer English. As he only had about 18 h of work before him and was a slow, meticulous worker who detested not getting a job finished, he decided to devote - provisionally - all his time to work on the article chosen. His working procedure was to read the article all through to try and get the general drift of it and then to translate it line by line, in rough first of all, and then making a fair copy to submit to the teacher at the end of each work session. All unknown vocabulary was looked up in one or the other of the two dictionaries and listed with a translation. These lists were read through at the start of each work session. The teacher's underlining of errors from the previous session was also examined before translating fresh material and correction attempted. Unresolved problems were looked into during the fortnightly visits of the teacher. Improvements in working technique made spontaneously by Monsieur A over the 10 h project duration included reading through the accumulated translations before starting work so as to "put himself back into the picture" and reducing time spent looking up words in the dictionary by looking first in the vocabulary lists made by himself.

Improvements in working technique initiated as a result of discussion of problems and scrutiny of working tactics with the teacher were :

- a) reducing "sticking" on problem words by reading on (and back) from the problem word looking for contextual clues to meaning not always available in the dictionary,
- b) saving time during dictionary work by avoiding searching in grammatically irrelevant entries,
- c) analysing sentences grammatically before attempting translation and
- d) checking each sentence translated for coherence with the preceding translation before moving on. Although at the end of the 10 hours of work there had been no significant change in the amount of text translated per work session, the incidence of vocabulary problems had fallen steadily and appreciably, translation errors were zero over the last three sessions and Monsieur A had the satis-

faction of getting finally to the end of his article. He then discontinued work on this type of text in favour of more technical ones with which he needed to be familiar for his course on data bases.

Case Study 2 : (duration of project 46 h)

Mademoiselle B, an advanced learner, was not, initially, too clear about her language needs, but as she was envisaging a technico-commercial career she decided to try to improve her detailed understanding of articles on business and management topics. A trial run on an article in the World Business section of *Newsweek* confirmed her feeling that her global understanding of this type of article was satisfactory but revealed that she had vocabulary problems to the tune of about 20 unknown words per column of print. She decided to work on these problems via a series of photocopied business texts that she selected for several weeks in advance from *Newsweek* and *International Management* magazines together with a dictionary of everyday English and one of business English.

Her first working technique was to read the articles carefully from beginning to end, looking up all unknown words in the dictionary and recording them (whenever possible) with indications in French of their general sense, which she obtained from exhaustive study of all the dictionary had to say about them. She felt that it was easier to memorize the general meaning of a word and deduce (when the word was next encountered) particular shades of meaning from context than to learn all of these at the outset. At the teacher's suggestion she tried vocabulary memorization exercises based on looking for associations between the words to be learned and colours, forms, people she knew, etc. but found that, for her these, techniques were difficult to apply. She did report, though, that memorization was being aided in the case of a good number of words by their more or less frequent re-occurrence in the articles she was reading. Remembering the words was no too much of a problem for her, anyway, since she tested herself on her vocabulary lists every 2 or 3 weeks and usually chalked up a score of between 50 % and 70 %, which she judged to be satisfactory. The teacher suggested she might remember more words if she tested herself by underlining the problem words in the articles and tried to remember their meanings in context. This idea was duly tried and rejected as retention was not improved and testing was considerably slowed.

Despite her progress in learning vocabulary, Mademoiselle B was not satisfied with her work so far and broke it off to join a group of her classmates who were working on the comprehension of video-recordings of American films. Her stay with them only lasted two weeks. She judged the groups' working technique (or, rather, its absence at this time - see case study 5) to be ineffectual and returned to her previous objective. Having traced her dissatisfaction with her work to the fact that her continual and prolonged excursions into the dictionary (which necessitated much backtracking to refresh her memory each time she returned to the article) produced an impression of getting nowhere fast, she tried a second working technique. This time she noted problem words as she came to them and only stopped reading to look them up if she was unable to get some

idea of their meaning by examining their context. She then stopped reading half an hour before the end of the working period and devoted the remaining time to looking up in the dictionary the words she had listed. The new technique satisfied her more because it provided a sensation of forward movement. Only two or so words out of ten called for dictionary consultation. She rapidly modified this technique again by preceding work on articles with a rapid read-through. This, she found, gave her a better grasp of the articles as a whole and also solved some potential vocabulary problems by virtue of the sense of obscure words becoming clearer either through reoccurrence of the words in different contexts or through the arrival of enlightening information not available earlier on. In spite of the reported advantages of preliminary skimming this part of her technique was rapidly dropped - apparently because she felt uncomfortable with the "approximateness" of it.

At this time Mademoiselle B decided to enlarge the range of her reading matter by taking in the occasional non-business-oriented article from *Newsweek*. She found this added to her pleasure in reading and prevented her interest in the main objective going stale. Over the weeks she had now learned to plan her work periods wisely. The first quarter of an hour or so was spent in choosing future reading material well in time for the teacher to make photocopies for the next "class" and from time to time on a quick test of her knowledge of recently noted vocabulary. The next hour would be devoted to reading and the last three-quarters of an hour to dictionary work and writing up a short report of what she had done.

With the passage of time Mademoiselle B. was coming to a slightly clearer perception of her possible future needs in English. She was beginning to think that the sort of career she planned might necessitate being able to follow business discussions in English. However, her periodic leisure-time encounters with B.B.C. radio and British or American films in the original were showing her that as much as 50 % of what she was hearing was "getting away". She became sufficiently concerned about this to request a cassette recording of a spontaneous conversation to work on. A week later she asked if a transcript of this cassette was available. After one period's work on the cassette with transcript, Mademoiselle B. reported, with visible delight, that she thought she had made something of a discovery. When she replaced - in her latest reading technique - a magazine article with a cassette transcript plus simultaneous listening to the cassette, several problems which had been chafing her for some time were eliminated at a stroke :

Firstly, her dissatisfaction with the speed at which she managed to get through her reading ; reading along with the cassette forced her to go faster.

Secondly, her growing concern about her possible need to improve her listening comprehension and the almost total absence of any aural element in her work so far ; the cassette gave her a means of getting the pronunciation of familiar and unfamiliar printed words into her head.

Thirdly, her occasional distraction by to-ings and fro-ings in the classroom and the eruptions of the inevitable class loudmouth ; the headphones allowed her to retire into a peaceful little world of her own.

There was also the bonus of finding that the meaning of the printed text was often made clearer by the intonation patterns heard on the cassette. This happy event occurred quite late in the course (Mademoiselle B. just had time to start work on more appropriate recordings - transcribed discussions on economics subjects) but she was very satisfied, not only with what she had discovered about what she wanted to learn and the promising technique she had developed for learning it, but also with the linguistic progress she had made ; faster reading at last and about 250 new words learned.

Case Study 3 : (durations of projects 10 h and 20 h)

Monsieur C., a pop music performer and composer in his spare time, needed to understand in detail the English language manual of the Yamaha synthesizer he had just acquired, in order to put it to use. At first he found the manual heavy going and ascribed this to a lack of "technical" vocabulary. His strategy was to read quickly through the part of the manual he was currently interested in to get the general idea and then to work through it slowly for detailed comprehension. Much of the missing vocabulary he was able to find in an ordinary big dictionary and the rest the teacher was able to supply. Reading speed gradually increased as familiarity with the recurring technical vocabulary grew. On returning home after each "class", Monsieur C. was able to assess how successful his reading comprehension had been by applying what he had understood to the task of making the synthesizer work. At the end of 5 weeks he was having no difficulty in programming the sounds he wished to create and judged that his objective had been attained.

He then turned his attention to aural comprehension of British and American pop-songs. As a musician he felt that an understanding of the lyrics of these songs would deepen his appreciation of the work of their composers and interpreters. He also wished to be able to concentrate on understanding them for up to 45 minutes at a time (one side of an L.P. record). He set to work, therefore, armed with a collection of cassette recordings of the Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel, Joan Baez, Donovan, etc., together with transcripts. Initially his stamina ran out after about 10 minutes of concentrated listening and his segmentation problems were such that, for much of the time, he was just hearing a string of vocal noises over the music, but no words. Consultation of the transcripts suggested that segmentation was indeed the main problem as he understood the songs in written form with very little difficulty. So each week, he practiced intensive listening by listening hard to one song after another until he got tired. At this point he would work on segmentation by taking the songs one at a time, listening to each from start to finish with the transcript and then going over them a line at a time with the transcript, replaying each line two or three times and looking up in the dictionary the occasional words he did not know or could not guess from the context. The words he had had to look up he listed and revised at the start of each work period. After 5 or 6 weeks of this he found that he could listen carefully for 45 minutes at a time without discomfort and that he was able to understand much of all but the most difficult songs without the trans

cript after one run-through plus listening to each line three times at most. From this moment on the transcripts were only useful as a final check of comprehension and for work on the handful of problem words encountered in each song.

Ten weeks or so after his pop-song project, Monsieur C. was, despite his success with his objective, becoming dissatisfied with his working technique. What was bothering him was, firstly, the changes in difficulty between songs on one cassette and between one cassette and another and secondly, the fact that his method did not provide for recycling of the vocabulary he was picking up but not always remembering. He felt that these problems might be remedied by working on a progressive listening comprehension course. So he spent his next work period listening to the first chapters of 4 or 5 such courses at his level before choosing one (*Cours de Compréhension Avancé*, C.R.A.P.E.L.) which, although it did not cater for his desire for built-in vocabulary review, pleased him because of the variety, shortness and authenticity of its recorded extracts, the presence of a song at the end of each unit and the fact that answers to exercises and transcripts were provided. He worked on this course chapter by chapter, following the instructions all through, going over items he got wrong and noting new vocabulary. At the start of each work period, he would listen to the extracts worked upon the previous time to make sure he still understood them and do any revision discovered to be necessary. After a few weeks, though, he found that doing nothing but course all the time was monotonous and so relieved the monotony by alternating work on it with work on song cassettes - sometimes doing both types of work within one work period, sometimes doing the course one week and then songs the next. A regular feature of Monsieur C's last few weeks of work on his second project was revision of frequently-used irregular verbs, as these had given him some trouble when trying to understand his songs.

At the end of this second project, Monsieur C. got the feel of how far he had come when he listened to a few of the songs he had found incomprehensible at the start and noted that he was able to understand everything in them but the very occasional word. This, taken in conjunction with the ability he had acquired to work his synthesizer, his stock of new vocabulary (not all forgotten), the thorough work done on 5 units of the advanced listening comprehension course and his revision of irregular verbs, led him to judge the linguistic outcome of his work to be very positive. On the methodological side, he was pleased to have discovered a less "scholastic" kind of material than that to which he had been accustomed and also to have become aware of the fact that he would prefer to work on songs in a more progressive and systematic way, i.e. with material of gradually increasing difficulty, taking one accent/one topic at a time and regularly reviewing the new vocabulary already studied. He planned to make a start - the following year - on constructing a more suitable personal working method by introducing an oral expression component (in collaboration with another learner) into his existing system. This, he envisaged, would allow him to use new vocabulary and thus, hopefully, retain it better.

Case Study 4 : (duration of project 26 h)

Mademoiselle D. an intermediate level learner, was not, probably, aware of any real needs in English at all at the time English classes started. She did produce, though, quite a long list of vague ideas on the subject which she whittled down to two when she realised how little time was going to be allocated to English. One of these two ideas (reading computer literature) did become - a little later - a genuine and much more sharply-defined need as data base descriptions in English became required reading when the data base course started up. But this task did not pose Mademoiselle D. sufficient problems for her to have to work on it during English class time. This left with her "need" to work on some kind of everyday listening comprehension. This she wanted to do via a course-book. So, over a period of weeks, she experimented with courses at various levels which were entirely or partially devoted to listening comprehension. The first course she tried (C.R.A.P.E.L.'s "Beginner's Course") was much too easy. The second (C.R.A.P.E.L.'s "Advanced Comprehension Course") was much too hard. The third course (C.R.A.P.E.L.'s "Intensive Aural/Oral English Course") was not - unlike Goldilock's porridge - just right, but too boring, since Mademoiselle D. had already worked through a considerable portion of it during earlier studies in English. Fourthly, she tried *Colloquial English* (Coles and Lord). This course "clicked". The level was about right, the business situations played out in the dialogues interested her and she appreciated the gradual progression of difficulty in the recorded items. Having found something to her taste, she adopted work on the course's dialogues as her objective and stuck faithfully to it right up to the end of English classes.

For the first two or three units of the course, Mademoiselle D's technique was :

- a) to listen to a dialogue straight through without referring to the transcript in the coursebook,
- b) listen to it straight through again with the transcript,
- c) look up in the dictionary and list, with their meanings, all the words she had not understood,
- d) listen to the dialogue straight through once more without the transcript.

As the course became more difficult, though, Mademoiselle D. began to find this technique less and less satisfactory. The dictionary search step was getting so long and tedious that by the time she returned to the dialogue she had already forgotten a good number of the words she had just looked up in order to understand it better. As a result of this observation, Mademoiselle D. started to fiddle around with her original technique and, after trying and discarding one or two variants of it, finally settled for the following :

- a) listen to the dialogue straight through without the transcript,
- b) go through the dialogue without the transcript again but taking it in small portions, playing and replaying each portion until she had understood as much of it as possible,
- c) go through the dialogue carefully once more using the transcript and dictio-

nary to fill in the bits she had not yet understood and making a list of unfamiliar words as she went along,

d) listen to the dialogue all through without stopping and without the transcript.

This final technique she found to be much more effective than the first one (she understood much more on her final listen to the dialogues than had previously been the case) and much more pleasant too (elimination of the long, wearisome dictionary step and the better comprehension arising from more detailed study). She also claimed that in spite of the increased number of listens in the final technique she was now getting along faster than before. By the end of English classes, Mademoiselle D. had got through the dialogues in the first 6 units of *Colloquial English* and reported she was retaining most of the vocabulary she listed. She also noticed that she had "got her ear in" insofar as she now needed to concentrate much less in order to segment successfully than had been the case when she started to work on her project. However, in her mind, the important progress she had made was her unaided development of a more satisfactory working technique. She felt that she could now quite cheerfully work up her listening comprehension all on her own. Indeed she showed every intention of doing so when, at the end of her studies, she brought along a collection of blank cassettes and requested copies of listening comprehension courses so that she could continue to work on her English.

Case Study 5 : (duration of project 38 h)

Mesdemoiselles E. and F. and Messieurs G, H, I, J, K. and L. (levels from intermediate to advanced) had worked individually or in pairs for about 4 weeks on various (mainly aural comprehension) objectives before they realised that films on videotape were available, at which moment they hastily dropped their initial projects and decided to work together on global comprehension of American films, with which they had already had contact in the original via local film clubs and late-night T.V. showings. Their original new objective was global comprehension, only a minority of the group being interested in going into detail.

Their first periods of work together were poorly organized and passive affairs. No attempts were made to assess individual performances and pinpoint problem areas or even to do anything about non-comprehension. The first time the group met they simply sat and watched the film through from beginning to end (with subtitles hidden) and then left, the English period having come to an end at the same time as the film. The second time, people who had not understood certain passages began to ask others for help while the film ran merrily on as before. At the third meeting, sufficient frustration had accumulated for the group to decide spontaneously that, in future, they would stop the film every 15 minutes, build up by exchange of ideas and dictionary consultation a rough picture of what they thought had happened and then proceed to view the next 15 minutes, unless global understanding had been poor enough to warrant a re-run of all or part of the preceding 15 minutes.

This preliminary working technique was gradually refined. A few weeks later

it had become :

- a) watch 15 minutes of film with subtitles hidden and then pool individual interpretations in order to arrive at a partial common comprehension plus a list of obscure points to clear up,
- b) watch the 15 minutes again with the subtitles to check comprehension thus far and to elucidate the points not understood,
- c) break up into subgroups of 2 and 3 armed with dictionaries and sound track transcripts and go through the sequence seen word by word, translating orally and noting the meanings of any unfamiliar words encountered and finally,
- d) watch the sequence for the last time without the subtitles. With particularly difficult films, step a) would be omitted. The procedure just described was further improved a little later on by stopping the film not every quarter of an hour but every time someone got lost.

By this time, the original group objective of global comprehension had expanded to include detailed comprehension as well and an (almost) generally satisfactory working technique had been developed. The only problem the group was aware of was that one of its members was getting fed up because her lower listening comprehension level was frequently leading to her feeling lost and because she would have liked the film subtitles to have been used much more often. This problem was resolved by the learner in question leaving the group of her own accord and transferring to her objective of global comprehension of lectures on data processing. This allowed her to get individual attention from the teacher and go at her own pace with her own methods working on transcribed lectures from commercial pedagogical material. A couple of months later she had acquired and invented a small collection of personally suitable techniques, had made tangible progress and felt much more confident about her listening comprehension.

Meanwhile, the video group had come to the end of the stock of transcribed films and, wishing to keep comprehension as detailed as possible, had had to alter its technique again. Subtitles were now resorted to only in cases of great difficulty. Problem passages were normally elucidated by playing them over and over and gradually assembling the bits and bobs gleaned. Where neither persistence nor subtitles (often laconic, sometimes plain wrong) could produce total illumination, the problem was noted and presented to the teacher when he came, together with all the other problems accumulated since his last visit. The group found that the absence of transcripts forced them to make greater efforts to understand and also felt that retention of what they learned in this way was increased because the knowledge gained was so hard-won. The residual problems were not frequent enough or commonplace enough to justify or facilitate systematic work on them and the group were perfectly satisfied with having a teacher on call to simply repeat and explain passages obscured by ferocious accents, terrific speed and colourful language. Some of them were reassured by the fact that, quite often, the teacher had to listen several times before getting the message and even gave up in despair on one or two occasions.

By the end of the project, the group had considered or tried several methods for assessing their linguistic progress, but without success. Their first idea was

to gauge progress by watching a fresh portion (10 minutes or so) of a reference film every few weeks and to try to see if their comprehension had improved. Attempts were rapidly abandoned when the probable meaninglessness of their results dawned on them. The teacher's suggestion that they might try keeping a record of their problems and then re-watch samples from the films worked upon at a later date to see if the original problems had diminished or disappeared was approved in principle but rejected on practical grounds (it would have been too, too depressing to watch bits of the same films yet again). A record of problems was kept nevertheless, but the variation in difficulty from film to film prevented any conclusions about long-term progress being drawn. It was noticed, however, that films usually seemed to get easier as one went along. Most of the group has a strong gut feeling that their comprehension had improved and, on looking round, were able to collect together a few observations which seemed to confirm this impression : most of the vocabulary listed was recognized on review - in written form at least ; people thought they felt much more at home with the American accent than they had at the start of the project ; earlier cravings for transcripts had disappeared ; problems were less frequent and films got through more quickly and a portion of film accidentally re-watched a month after it had been worked on was understood perfectly, whereas it had caused problems on the first encounter.

Thus, on the credit side, the group could flatter itself that it had made worthwhile progress (with very little in the way of intervention from the teacher) both linguistically and methodologically speaking during its five months together. On the debit side, there had been a certain amount of friction due to disagreements on choice of film and working technique. For this reason, and also to allow individuals to work on their personal linguistic problems, the group decided that future work would be carried out in separate groups of 2 or 3, each group spending one hour per work period before the video screen and the other hour working on individual problems (using audiocassette recordings of the film soundtrack) or making transcriptions of the film. This latter activity was particularly favoured by the people who wished to see a more tangible end product to their work (and particularly welcomed by the teacher as a way of lightening his load of transcription work).

Case Study 6 : (duration of project 12 h)

Monsieur M., an intermediate level learner, had three needs, one of which was urgent and connected with his studies. The pressing need was his wish to know whether he would be capable of understanding the PASCAL computer language manual (written in English) which he knew he would soon be required to use during his computer programming course. His first contact with the manual showed that there was quite a bit of specialised vocabulary with which he was not familiar, so he set to work ploughing through the manual, noting and trying to learn new vocabulary as it occurred. After four 2 h periods of this, though, he noticed that his vocabulary problem had practically disappeared and, after a rapid investigation of the rest of the manual, concluded that he had now acqui

red enough specialised vocabulary to allow him to face with confidence the linguistic side of his coming adventures with PASCAL.

He then turned to his second objective, which is the one this case study is primarily concerned with. This objective, unlike its predecessor, was speculative. Monsieur M. thought he might well need, in his future career, to make telephone enquiries in English connected with computer hardware. The teacher suggested he formed an idea of his present capabilities in the matter by inventing himself a likely telephone enquiry situation and preparing himself for a try-out over a real telephone system with the teacher taking the role of switchboard operator and various other hardware manufacturer personnel. Monsieur M's preparation consisted of trying to imagine all the turns his enquiry might take and what might be said to him and then writing down what he thought were suitable things for him to say and committing them to memory. Several simulations were then recorded on a small cassette recorder hooked up to the phone. Into all but the final simulation the teacher introduced snags such as a wrong number, indistinct non-availability of the person sought, pronunciation of figures quoted etc.

On listening to the simulation, Monsieur M. decided that his aural comprehension was satisfactory but that his oral expression left much to be desired. When unforeseen problems arose, their effect on him was paralysing. He neither knew what to say nor had the courage to try ad-libbing his way out of trouble. Communication in English then came to an end with noises in French indicative of perplexity and anguish. These were glaring problems of which Monsieur M. was only too painfully aware. He was not aware that he might, in a genuine communication situation, have left an impression of brusqueness by his failure to say or reply "Goodbye". Nor was he aware of a few grammatical errors. He decided, however, that these latter did not bother him unduly. What did matter was acquiring rapid and adequate (if somewhat approximate) reflexes in all the situations a telephone enquiry might give rise to. This he tried to do by working on two in-house productions :

a) a handout "*Asking for Information by Telephone*" which gave a number of realisations of functions appropriate to this situation and

b) a C.R.A.P.E.L. dossier with accompanying cassette designed for self-study and entitled "*How to use the telephone*" which gave a broader and richer selection of functions and realisations than did a), plus recorded examples of their use in situation. Three to four work periods were spent in the following way :

Firstly, familiarisation with the two documents by reading and/or listening.

Secondly, selection of those parts of the documents which presented functions relevant to his problems.

Thirdly, selection of the shortest and simplest realisations of the relevant functions for learning.

Fourthly, memorisation of the realisations selected by writing them out, by repeating them after the cassette and by casual listening to the cassette at home.

Lastly, writing out (without the aid of his documents) imaginary telephone enquiries using the functions and exponents he had tried to learn, followed by verification of the correctness of the latter using the documents.

Monsieur M. then announced that he felt ready for another set of simulations to see how he was getting on. These simulations (as close to the first as the teacher could make them) were duly done and recorded. Even before a point by point comparison of "before and after" recordings it was evident that considerable progress had been made. Although there were still the occasional grammatical slips, Monsieur M. coped swiftly and confidently with everything that was thrown at him. At this point he decided he would work on other telephone situations at a later date and make a change for the moment by working on his third objective which was writing business letters.

Case Study 7 : (duration of project 46 h)

Mademoiselle N. and Mademoiselle O., intermediate level learners, wished to work on oral expression but had no precise needs in this field. They just wanted to improve their spoken English "for everyday purposes". For their first work session, they joined forces with three other young ladies who had the same aim as themselves. This was not a success. Difficulty was experienced in coming to an agreement on which communicative activity to use as a diagnostic tool and although, finally, two or three were tried in succession, none of them inspired more than sporadic and embarrassed-sounding exchanges. As a result, Mesdemoiselles N. and O. decided that, henceforth, they would work as a team of two. A group of five was too large for oral expression, they declared - and promptly abandoned oral expression to work on listening comprehension. Here, their aims were less vague. They wanted to improve their global comprehension of recorded discussions on topics of current concern such as pollution, terrorism, etc... During their first work-session on a recording of this type, they had trouble understanding much at all. However, they persevered and the following week reported triumphantly that they had understood everything. This they sincerely believed, but, unfortunately, they were mistaken. They had kindly agreed to let themselves be recorded «on the job» for research purposes and this recording showed that, in fact, they had badly misunderstood at least two-thirds of what they had listened to. What had happened was that they had understood words and phrases here and there and, using them very imaginatively, had concocted a «story» which seemed so plausible that they did not bother to check it against the transcript in their possession. The teacher let them know this rapidly and gently and promised to be round the following week with advice on choice of material and on improving their working technique.

Mesdemoiselles N. and O. were, understandably, a little dismayed. Their perseverance came to an end the following weeks found them (the teacher had some difficulty in doing so) now working with a group of learners who were trying to improve their pronunciation, now sitting in on the video group. The teacher finally caught up with them when they returned to working on cassettes together (recordings of British humour this time). The promised advice was given. Indeed it was given several times over the next few weeks, but had no great effect.

By this time, the teacher had, mentally, just about written Mesdemoiselles N. and O. off as a bad job. It was becoming more and more difficult to interpret their mobility as a quest for the right road to take. Particularly as they often turned up late for class, seemed to do only half an hour or so of intense but disorganized work and then spent the rest of the two hours gossiping

The New Year came. With it came a change. Mesdemoiselles N. and O. returned to their initial objective of oral expression and began to work on it something like seriously. Whether this was due to a joint New Year's resolution, or to the low mark that the two learners obtained for their halfway-through-the-course dry run report on their activity and progress, or to the return to their original and possibly only genuine objective, or to all or none of these factors, is not known, but change there was. Mesdemoiselles N. and O. asked the teacher how they could set about improving their oral expression, so he repeated the suggestion he had made to them about three months previously, i.e. that they should go away and record themselves either chatting together in English as they might in French or, if they had nothing to say to each other, to choose a communication activity which interested them.

This time they opted to do without communication activities and each recounted to the other what she had done during the past weekend. The teacher then asked them to listen carefully to the recording and to write down what features of their performance displeased them. This was done and the verdict was that there was too much hesitating while vocabulary was sought for and that they had not managed to say very much because the effort they had expended in saying it had left them with little remaining energy or inclination to say all they might have said if they had been more fluent. The teacher was then asked to give his opinion on their recorded performance. It was, indeed, rather halting and meagre and, in addition, both learners seemed determined to replace the simple past by the present perfect at every available opportunity. This the teacher demonstrated to them on a transcript he had made of their conversation. He then gave Mesdemoiselles N. and O. a handout with information on the use of the simple present and advised them to think hard before letting a verb out of their mouths in future. They decided, themselves, that they would work on expanding their stock of active vocabulary by saying, during conversation, a word in French if neither of them knew it and then look it up, list it and learn it afterwards. The teacher suggested they might also try correcting their work themselves to see how this worked out. This they agreed to and decided to do it on their own transcripts of their conversations which the teacher would check afterwards.

When all these ideas had been put into action, Mesdemoiselles N. and O. observed that.

- a) there had been an instantaneous and marked improvement in their use of the simple past but that they had problems with irregular verbs,
- b) that they tended to use their existing stock of vocabulary and to approximate meaning with it, whereas their aim was to become more precise via expansion of this stock and,
- c) that they were capable of correcting about two-thirds of their mistakes themselves.

The problem of irregular verbs they spontaneously tackled by trying to learn ten of them each week by study and mutual testing towards the end of the work period. The vocabulary deficiency problem they decided to attack (after considering a number of the teacher's suggestion) by listening to not-too-difficult transcribed recordings of conversations on a variety of subjects, following these with the aid of a transcript and listing vocabulary they thought might be useful. This technique, they discovered, possessed an advantage they had not looked for. Their practice was to start each work period by listening to one of the above recordings. Doing so, they found, seemed to "warm them up" and give them impetus for their own conversation in English which followed. However, this impetus was not infallibly accompanied by a quantity of subject matter worthy of it. Mesdemoiselles N. and O. worked together all through the week and, being fairly loquacious, had often exhausted their supply of news on arrival at the English course. The teacher suggested several techniques for stimulating discourse, involving past action (to practice the use of the simple past) when their own resources flagged. They chose to work on a collection of photos cut more or less at random from various illustrated magazines from which they selected five or six at a time to use as a basis for story invention. They stuck with this technique until the end of the course.

Vocabulary listing was now going on apace, but Mesdemoiselles N. and O. admitted, on prodding, that much of it probably wasn't getting learned. Of a number of vocabulary acquisition techniques offered by the teacher, they chose to try an in-house computer program which provided a menu of games-type activities for the revision of the spelling and meaning of items in learners' personal vocabulary lists. The optional IN/OUT test-yourself feature of this program showed them that this technique seemed to work pretty effectively for them, but program teething troubles prevented them from using it as intensively as they would have wished.

The course now being on the point of ending, Mesdemoiselles N. and O. made a final review of their progress. First and foremost, they had - at long last - managed to settle down to a spot of purposeful work. Secondly, they had made some progress in oral expression. This was attested by the weekly recordings they had made of themselves. The end of course recordings showed much less hesitation than the first ones, were about 70 % longer and were practically innocent of simple present problems. Not all of the hundred or so new words listed had been learned, but a promising technique for learning them had at least been found and Mesdemoiselles N. and O. had also come to the conclusion that future recordings used as a source of new vocabulary should be chosen with a closer eye to the sort of lexis they needed, rather than taking pot luck, as had been the case so far. The density of errors in their recordings had not changed, but Mesdemoiselles N. and O. were pleased with the fact that they were correcting most of them themselves. What satisfied them most, though, was their discovery of a variety of techniques which they enjoyed using and which, when used in fairly rapid succession, allowed them to avoid the monotony which they had experienced during their first few months of work together.

Case Study 8 : (duration of project 6 h)

Mademoiselle P. (advanced level) was hoping to spend a month or two in England during the Summer holidays working as a programmer or analyst. She needed, then, to write a presentable job application letter with which she could circularize likely firms in the part of the country she was interested in staying in.

Following the teacher's suggestion, the first thing Mademoiselle P. did was to write an off-the-coff-letter of application which she could use later to gauge any progress she might make. She was able, with the help of a letter-writing course, to detect in this first draft some elementary faults in layout and opening and closing formulae. The teacher pointed out a number of un-English turns of phrase and either corrected them himself, or, where possible, indicated didactic material which Mademoiselle P. could use to correct them herself. The teacher also corrected certain phrasings which were a little too brusque. Mademoiselle P. then tried to write an improved version of her first effort which, in its turn, was submitted to the teacher.

Successive modifications were carried out over 6 work periods which Mademoiselle P. devoted partly to a technical reading project and partly to her letter-writing objective. During this time, further thinking on the part of both Mademoiselle P. and the teacher led to the original content of the letter being expanded and the order of its parts being revised. Eventually, a letter was produced which was judged by both parties concerned to be fit for the post. An inspection, at this point, of the first and successive corrected drafts of the letter allowed an idea to be formed of what had been learned. To this progress could be added a fair amount of technical vocabulary (not included in the letter) which Mademoiselle P. had nevertheless looked up and learned while studying her departmental prospectus in order to include a description of her current studies in her letter of application.

Our impression, based on the observation of the 70 or so cases of which the above are typical, is that the present learners in our teacher-assisted self-directed English learning scheme :

- make linguistic progress with very little teacher assistance
- are partially self-directed on arrival
- make progress in learning to learn during their stay with us

It would be useful, though, to obtain non-impressionistic answers to questions such as :

- is this kind of learning as effective as teacher-directed learning ?
- how much more self-directed as learners of English do our students become ?

We have already given a partial answer to the first question in our previous paper, where we reported that the feeling of 70 % of the well over a hundred learners investigated was that their self-directed learning of English was *more* efficient than their teacher-directed learning of that language (and more enjoyable too) and that 20 % found little difference between the two. Objective proof of our learners' claims, though, looks like being difficult to obtain. It might also be asked whether the only legitimate question here is not, in fact, the subjective one : are voluntarily self-directed *learners* (not teachers) satisfied with the efficiency and comfort of their learning ?

At the moment, only a very broad tentative answer can be given to the question of the extent to which our learners become more self-directed during their stay with us. Despite initial surprise, most of them seem to become rapidly accustomed to - and reasonably proficient at - defining their objectives, identifying a fair proportion of their linguistic problems and deciding what to do when. And most of them, although not initially equipped with much knowledge of working techniques, manage to invent effective modifications to procedures which they feel are unsuccessful. How good they are at choosing appropriate material is difficult to say, since local conditions oblige us to preselect for each learner a range of suitable material for him or her to choose from. One area, though, where the learners we have encountered are almost invariably shaky is the monitoring of progress. Although the psychological barrier ("only teachers assess progress") and the technical barrier (ignorance of self-assessment procedures) fall rapidly, the tendency to plough merrily on with work and let progress monitoring go hang is more persistent.

Future research will attempt to find more detailed and objective answers to the above questions by analysis of a range of data (students' work, worksheets and written end-of-project reports, questionnaires completed by students, recordings of counselling sessions) collected from the 70 odd students worked with over the last two years. The information yielded about the "product" side of our assisted self-directed learning of English scheme may help us to improve the "process" of helping our students to become autonomous and satisfied English learners.

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NOTE

- (1) For the benefit of new readers we should say here that the learners in the case studies were French data-processing students who, during the University year 1983-1984 had to do 30 or 46 hours of English in groups of about 16. Their English «classes» were, in fact, self-directed learning workshops where individual learners or pairs or small groups of learners were asked to work on personal learning projects in their own way. Decisions concerning objectives, programme, materials, techniques and assessment were left to the students. Teacher help took the form of closely supervised «launching» followed by individual counselling sessions of about 20 minutes every four hours or so.