INSTITUTIONAL SELF-DIRECTION : TEN YEARS ON

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ABSTRACT

L'auto-direction institutionnelle à l'Ecole des Mines de Nancy s'est développée quantitativement de façon considérable depuis deux ans et cet article se propose de décrire le système tel qu'il fonctionne actuellement. Une tentative de modelisation de la procédure adoptée pendant les entretiens est proposée, lorsque l'objectif poursuivi est la compréhension orale. La compatibilité d'objectifs institutionnels externes avec le système est envisagée.

The experimental introduction of a self-directed scheme in English at the School of Mines in Nancy has been widely documented (Abé et al. 1975, Duda, 1978, Moulden, 1978, 1980, 1982, 1983). Recent developments, however, require a fresh appraisal of the philosophy of the scheme, of the way it operates and of the constraints imposed on it by host Institution of Higher Education. Until 1983 a maximum of 60 students out of the average total of 180 students attending the School's three year course adopted the self-directed approach to learning. This corresponded to five groups of 12 students out of a total of 15 groups. In the academic year 1985-86, 14 groups of students will be operating partly or entirely in the self-directed mode. This dramatic expansion is due to increasing interest in the scheme among students and teachers (1) alike and has been helped by the unfailing assistance of the Administration of the School.

This paper will

a) describe the resources of the self-access system now in operation at the School ;

b) describe the theory behind the organisation of the interviews ;

c) describe the procedure followed during the interviews ;

d) present some actual case studies ;

e) assess the scheme in relation to the constraints imposed upon it by the Institution and discuss some of the difficulties encountered by teachers and students.

RESOURCES

The self-directed students at the School of Mines have access to a wide variety of media. They can choose among video cassettes, audio cassettes and various written materials. Office hours are posted and the students can always get into the rooms in which the resources are found during those times. Should certain students find the hours unsatisfactory, they can sign for a key to use the equipment later in the evening.

The school has an excellent video set up and is equiped with all nine possible combinations of cassette size (U-matic, Betamax, VHS) and standard (Pal, Secam, NTSC). There are about 200 cassettes available for students' use. Several cassettes have supplementary material for the students to study. These include vocabulary lists, transcriptions and comprehension questions. All students are given a catalogue which divides the cassettes into over sixty different subjects and provides useful information such as cassette numbers, length of programme, counter numbers, which standard and which system should be used. Once a student dcides what s/he would like to watch, s/he can reserve a time in which s/he can have the necessary

(1) During the academic year 1985-86 the teaching staff of the English Department was as follows :
J. Bowden, R. Duda, M. Dupré, D. Eckersley, E. Isley, C. Peek, M. Rees, A. Saunders, I. Woodcock.

machines at his/her disposal. Not only can the students watch pre-recorded videos, they can also record themselves on video cassettes, if they so wish. Cameras and microphones are made available for those students.

Videos are, of course, only one of many media which the students have at hand. The School has a large audio cassette library, which includes both authentic material and a number of commercially produced courses. All the students are given a cassette catalogue which is similar to the video one. Many of the cassettes have transcriptions and supplementary exercices. The students can use the cassette eraser and the rapid dubbing machines to make their own copy of the cassettes. The students have access to the audio sound laboratory, should they wish to study the cassettes at the School. They are given cards with which they can evaluate the cassettes to which they listened in terms of difficulty, content, accent, etc...

Although the school places emphasis on listening comprehension, the students have a vast amount of written materials with which to work. Contemporary magazines, books and newspapers are always in reach of the students' hands. They can also study prepared activities with which they can work in small groups or by themselves. These activities range from cross-word puzzles to the proper way to prepare oneself for a job interview. Photocopying facilities are available.

The students are given all these resources to study. However, the School does not believe that they should feel limited strictly to the resources that the School provides. They are encouraged to find other resources as well - whether it be their own materials or their imaginations.

ORGANISATION OF INTERVIEWS

The number of students attending an interview should, ideally, be determined by the students themselves, although in practice it is often determined by negotiation between students and teachers. There are students who work individually, in pairs or in groups of three. Up to now we have had no incidence of groups larger than three, but there is no particular reason why there should not be if the students find it beneficial. Some feel that working in pairs is more effective because a) discussion time can be maximised if both students have prepared the same or similar work, b) the students can help each other with their work and c) three or more students together leads to generalisation rather than precise concentration on specific learning needs. Others find that individual interviews help the student concentrate much more on his/her own specific needs. The question of group size is also linked to that of the frequency of the interviews, which is established by both students and teachers. At the School, English is timetabled in two hour slots, which allows several possibilities. Taking, for example, a group of fourteen students, the *theory* behind calculating interview length is that each student will have approximately nine minutes per week per two hour slot. Using this as a basis for calculating interview length, a wide range of possible frequencies is available. For example,

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Minutes/Interview/Week

Number of students	9	18	27
1	X		
2		X	
3			X

Minutes/Interview/Fortnight

Number of students	18	36	52
1	X		
2		X	
3			X

It is also possible, for example that a group of two might wish to come 27 minutes and 45 minutes in one month, but this can pose problems when organising the group as a whole if the timetabled two hours are strictly adhered to, which in the majority of cases they are not In the past some teachers have tried not to constrict interview times to the hours timetabled for English, but this was found to place a much greater workload on them.

However, the system in practice is not as rigid as it may seem, for example som teachers organise half-hour interviews irrespective of the number of students. Also, as the majority of students have four hours of English per week, individuals will usually have a twenty-minute interview with one of his/her teachers per week, or alternatively forty minutes per fortnight

The problems of group size and interview frequency are interlinked in cases where students choose to work in pairs because, although they would prefer to work individually, they feel that an individual's contact time with the teacher is not enough. Some prefer fortnightly interviews for the same reason, whereas others feel that they need the regular contact of a weekly interview. At present no one has opted for three weekly or monthly interviews.

PROCEDURE

There are four main areas of discussion during the interviews : objectives, techniques, evaluation and problems as the teacher's task is to help students have a clearer understanding of how to proceed in their work.

It is very often the case that students have difficulty in defining their objectives and need the teacher's help in defining these precisely. For example, from the statement "I want to improve my listening comprehension", the exchange charted in diagram 1 could take place.

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                              | WHY ? |
                                 ↓
| SPECIFIC LINGUISTIC |      | INTEREST |      | "PROFESSIONAL" NEEDS, TRIPS, |
| NEEDS               |                        |   TRAINING PERIODS          |
                                 ↓
                           | WHAT ? |
                                 ↓
        | ACCENT |          | SUBJECT/GENRE |              | TYPE |
   |U.S.| |G.B.| |OTHER|   | GENERAL |  | SPECIFIC |   | AUTHENTIC |    | COURSES |
                                                        | MATERIALS |
                                                        | MONOLOGUE |  | INTERACTION |
                         | VIDEO OR SOUND ? |
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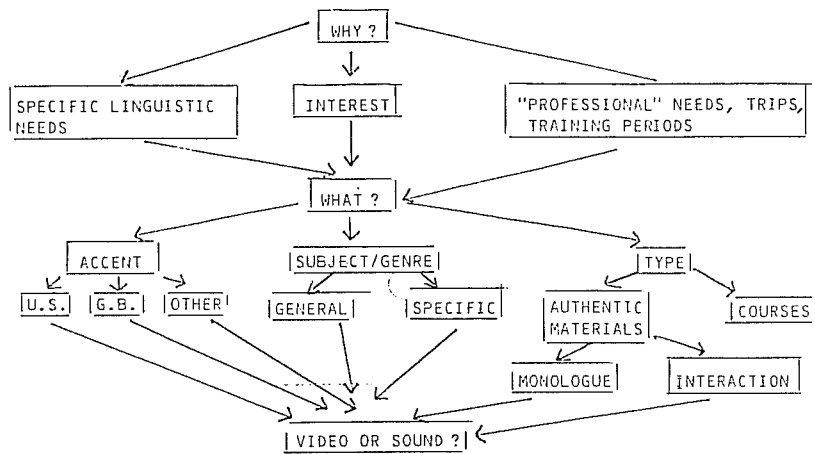
Diagram 1

In general an attempt is made to sensitize the student to his/her own needs, to what s/he can and cannot do in the language, and from this to form specific limited objectives. Having determined the objective, procedure and techniques are discussed as charted in diagram 2.


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                              | H O W ? |

      | GLOBAL |         | DETAILED |        | WORK SHEETS |   | OTHER            |
                                             | (comprehen- |   | (split liste-   |
                                             | sion, ques- |   | ning,predic-    |
                                             | tions, etc.)|   | tion,student's  |
                                             |             |   | own invention)  |
| NOTE  | | NOTHING |  | TRANS-  | | NOTE  | | NOTHING |
| TAKING| | WRITTEN |  |CRIPTION | |TAKING | | WRITTEN |

         | REFERENCE TO PREPARED      |
         | TRANSCRIPTION AVAILABLE    |
         | FOR SOME CASSETTES         |
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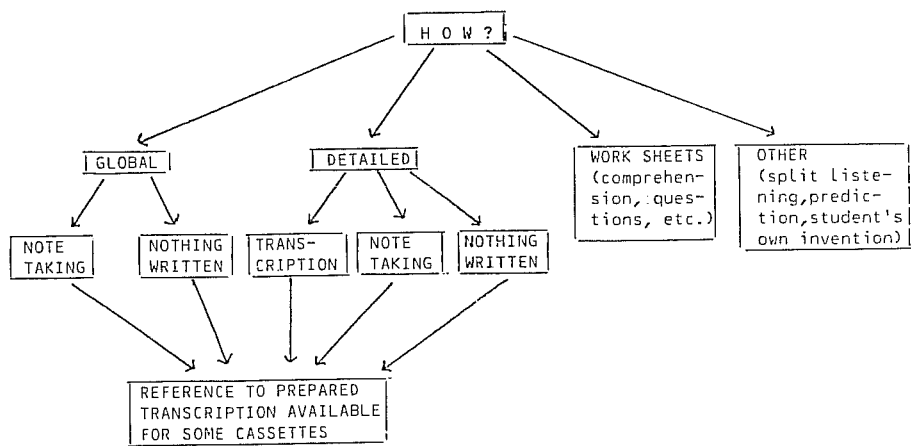
Diagram 2

In a subsequent interview, the work done by the student is evaluated in terms of whether the choice of material and the techniques used to process it were appropriate or not, and whether the objective was achieved. Procedural features as well as problems can also be discussed (see diagram 3).
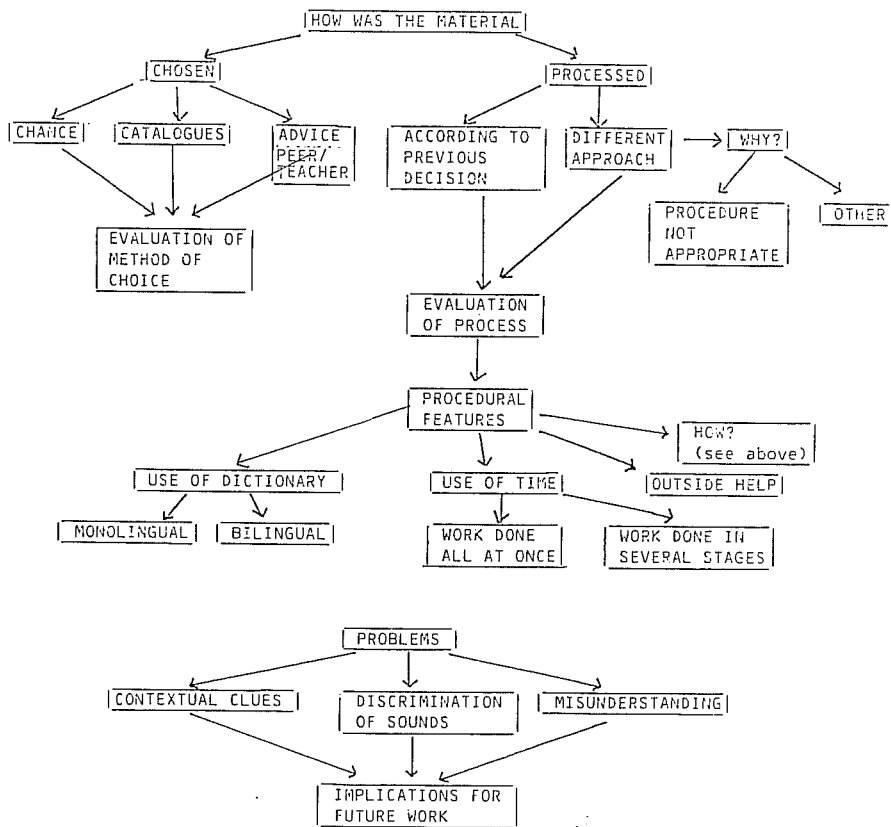
HOW WAS THE MATERIAL

CHOSEN   PROCESSED

CHANCE   CATALOGUES   ADVICE PEER/ TEACHER   ACCORDING TO PREVIOUS DECISION   DIFFERENT APPROACH → WHY?

EVALUATION OF METHOD OF CHOICE

PROCEDURE NOT APPROPRIATE   OTHER

EVALUATION OF PROCESS

PROCEDURAL FEATURES → HOW? (see above)

USE OF DICTIONARY   USE OF TIME   OUTSIDE HELP

MONOLINGUAL   BILINGUAL   WORK DONE ALL AT ONCE   WORK DONE IN SEVERAL STAGES

PROBLEMS

CONTEXTUAL CLUES   DISCRIMINATION OF SOUNDS   MISUNDERSTANDING

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

Diagram 3

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The above diagrams are by no means exhaustive as the content of the interview is exploratory by nature and therefore somewhat unpredictable.

The interviews can also be used as simple conversation classes where a topic is prepared for discussion, the pros and cons of which will be discussed later. Finally, as teachers have to give a termly evaluation of each student, the interviews provide a basis for checking the students' work and progress.

CASE STUDIES

Over a seven week period (including a week's holiday), two students, G. and O. attended 6 interviews together, five of which lasted 30 minutes and one 40 minutes. The time credit allotted to the group of eleven students to which they belonged was 24 hours for that period. Initial objectives were as follows :
    G : "speaking fluently, minimising mistakes made per minute" ;
    O : "making progress in listening comprehension, writing (C.Vs, letters) improving fluency, developing idiolect (sic)".

These students started by reading an article from "Time Magazine" which they subsequently discussed in their first interview. They then moved on to a sound cassette about the Russian revolution of which they made a very good transcript which was added to the collection at the students' disposal. The third interview was based on a cassette they had recorded of themselves discussing cultural quirks of businessmen around the world, taken from an article in "International Management". This cassette provided the teacher with the opportunity of assessing their performances in English at leisure, as the cassette had been given to him some time before the interview. The subsequent interviews concerned work they did on sound and video cassettes of speakers of American English. These were their first attempts at tackling American English without the help of a teacher.

Their work as we may see, was a compromise between O's concern for listening comprehension and G's interest in expression. O's interest in writing was not "encouraged" by the teacher as 2 or 3 group sessions were scheduled to cope with so-called "external objectives", as defined below.

CONSTRAINTS AND DIFFICULTIES

Four kinds of constraints are imposed on the scheme by the Institution, including the English Department itself :

a) Continuous assessment of the students by the teachers. This is done on the basis of objectives set, work done, progress accomplished. A grade is awarded relative to these criteria. Students therefore are not assessed on the basis of their knowledge of English. Teachers, however, are required to provide individual comments of the student's ability, cooperativeness and initiative and this may

encompass an appreciation of his/her overall linguistic and/or communicative competences. Assessment in the scheme therefore requires students to provide evidence of work done.

b) The need to ensure that the students are trained in basic business skills such as telephoning, speaking in public and writing telexes and C.V.s, which very few of them would define as personal objectives. This requires organizing group sessions where these skills may be practised with the assistance of the teacher. During the year 1985-6 an average of three two-hour long sessions out of a total of 35 for final third year students will be devoted to these "external objectives", the remainder being devoted to interviews.

c) Attendance at the interviews is compulsory, as is the case for standard language classes. Students, therefore, are required to compensate for any absences by providing evidence of extra work.

d) In accordance with a general trend among top Engineering Colleges in France, the School is planning to introduce a form of external certification. The Cambridge First Certificate and Proficiency Examinations are under consideration and measures are being taken to help students train themselves towards these exams. This, we believe, will not run counter to our own philosophy regarding communicative language learning, as the new Cambridge curriculum corresponds to a number of our own concerns. The question remains, however, of how much time will be devoted in the interviews to helping the students in their self-training toward the Examinations at the expense of more individual objectives.

Contrary to S A A S (Abé, Gremmo 1981), where a very clear-cut distinction has been made between the "helper" (who operates in the learner's mother tongue) and the "native-speaker" whose role it is to provide the learner with the opportunity to use and assess her/his acquisition of the target language in a non-teaching context, the self-directed scheme at the School presents what may appear to be a disadvantage. The teachers are native-speakers, therefore the boundary between the helper's role and that of the native "conversationalist" can be crossed very rapidly, usually at the expense of the technical helper's role.

CONCLUSION

Despite the constraints imposed upon the English Department at the School of Mines in Nancy, and thanks to the resources at its disposal, a unique yet certainly viable form of institutional self-direction has developed at the School. Admittedly, the system relies heavily on the considerable ressources of the self-access system which has built up over the last decade. However, we are confident that the alternative that we have developed to "traditional" language classes at the School is of a sufficiently flexible nature to be adaptable to a variety of educational institutions.

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