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LEARNING HOW TO LEARN ENGLISH

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RESUME

Cet article décrit une expérience canadienne d'autonomisation d'adultes francophones étudiant l'anglais. Le programme d'enseignement/apprentissage comporte trois étapes principales

1. La sensibilisation des apprenants pour permettre une **prise de conscience** de leurs propres points forts et faibles et d'un éventail de ressources et de techniques.
2. L'identification de **priorités personnelles** sur la base de cette prise de conscience et de l'analyse de leurs besoins professionnels.
3. La **mise en œuvre** d'un programme d'apprentissage par la sélection de moyens appropriés à leurs priorités.

Ce processus d'autonomisation a lieu dans le cadre d'une structure pédagogique comportant des entretiens avec un "tuteur", des cours et un centre de ressources.

The following article is based on a joint presentation given at the TESL Ontario Conference in Toronto in December 1984.

Autonomy in the adult language learner has gained increasing importance over the past decade. As Malcolm Knowles states :

“One immediate reason is that there is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning (pro-active learners) learn more things, and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught (reactive learners)... They enter into learning more purposefully and with greater motivation. They also tend to retain and make use of what they learn better and longer than do the reactive learners”. (1)

The role of teachers should not be to pay lip service to self-direction in learning, but rather to facilitate its development. In this article, we will discuss how during the four-month Academic Phase the English section of the Advanced Language Training Programm (ALTP) endeavours to promote autonomy in francophone learners. (For the majority of participants this intensive four-month phase precedes a twenty-month Assignment Phase during which the learners work in a professional environment mainly in the target language). A three-step process, inherent in many of the program's components, guides the student from a relatively passive, teacher-dependent role to that of a more self-aware, confident and independent learner. The process involves :

- 1) the growth of **awareness** in the learners so that they are sensitized to their own strengths and weaknesses in the second language as well as to a range of resources and learning techniques ;
- 2) the establishing of personal **priorities** for areas of particular concentration determined on the basis of individual strengths, weaknesses and professional needs in the target language ;
- 3) taking **action** by selecting and using the most appropriate means to work on their established priorities.

We will show how this movement from learner awareness to action occurs in three of the program's components : tutorials, courses and the resource centre. (See fig. 1)

(1) **KNOWLES, Malcolm** (1975) **Self-directed Learning**, New York, Association Press, p. 14

Tutorials

Prior to the Academic Phase, each incoming student is assigned to a teacher of the ALTP who then becomes that student's individual tutor. It is the tutor's role to guide and encourage the student through the various stages of learning a second language with its ups and downs over the next two years. During the Academic Phase, weekly meetings between student and tutor are held on an individual basis for approximately one to two hours per week. These tutorials are designed to promote student autonomy by taking students through the process of awareness to action.

1) Awareness

At the beginning of the program, students complete a professional needs analysis survey and take a series of in-house diagnostic tests. The needs analysis survey (to which ALTP purchased the rights in 1982) was developed by a multinational European company to identify work-related language skills common to a wide range of business, management and executive positions. These skills are grouped according to speaking, reading and writing tasks. In addition, in-house language diagnostic tests provide students with an overview of their linguistic strengths and weaknesses in such areas as aural comprehension, pronunciation, grammar, impromptu speaking, ability to summarize, and formal and informal writing.

The results of the student's needs analysis survey and language tests then become the focus of tutorial discussions which provide students with the "big picture" of their professional needs and present level of language ability. Moreover, the tutorial meetings at this stage of the program promote student awareness of their general approach to and style of learning. Through discussions, students are asked to reflect on past individual learning experiences, language and otherwise, and to identify the conditions under which they learn best.

2) Establishing Priorities

After identifying professional needs and becoming aware of linguistic strengths and weaknesses, students work with their tutors to establish an order of priority in both these areas. The tutors ask students to rank the professional skills for their own job from the most important to the least important. In the light of this ordering and of the results of the language tests, together they decide on the language skills which most require attention.

3) Taking Action

In the tutorials, students and tutors work on three areas simultaneously. First, they draw up an individualized language training plan to reflect professional and linguistic priorities and lay out a clear plan of attack on the areas of most importance. At the same time, the students, with the guidance of their tutors, begin the preparation of a Learning Project which will be presented both orally and in writing towards the end of the Academic Phase. The goal of this project is to integrate both professional and linguistic priorities into one major learning task. Finally, on-going

discussions in tutorials encourage students to apply successful past learning strategies to the present learning situation. As well, students learn to incorporate and experiment with new techniques, ideas, and suggestions.

Courses

The English section of ALTP offers students a comprehensive program of courses during the Academic Phase that may be divided roughly into two categories : those that provide a linguistic backbone for other courses, and those that deal mainly with work-related needs.

The backbone courses include notional grammar, phonology, and idiomatic English. In notional grammar, all major structures of the language are presented with emphasis on those areas of greatest concern to advanced students. Phonology provides an overview of the sound system of the language, with special emphasis on strategies and techniques to deal with pronunciation problems faced by French speakers. Idiomatic English fills a major gap in most students' knowledge of English by exposing them to a wide range of common idioms in the spoken and written language.

Work-related courses are tailored to fairly common needs of our students. These include : a writing course based on writing tasks which managers and professionals generally perform in government departments ; and several shorter courses focussing on the spoken language, including meetings, presentations, using the telephone, conferences, discussions, social English and face-to-face dealings with colleagues, employees, superiors, and the public.

A common thread in all these courses is the integration of the process of student autonomy with the subject area. Since a detailed description of this process for each course is beyond the scope of the present article, we would like to provide instead a general outline of how the process works.

1) Awareness

In all of the classes, students undergo a sensitization to the language and to their own performance in it. They are sensitized to the language by the input provided in the courses from authentic spoken and written sources such as newspapers, radio, TV, magazines, books, government publications, taped conversations and talks, government letters and memos, and grammar and reference materials. This input allows students to compare their own performance in English with that of native speakers and writers of the language.

Through individual feedback sessions with the course teacher, students are encouraged to analyze their performance in English (whether a taped conversation or talk, or a piece of writing) by identifying their own errors, explaining difficulties, and expressing satisfaction with specific areas.

This sensitization of the students to their own performance may also take place via classroom discussion or small-group work. It is a gradual one with the teacher

giving less direction as time goes on. The main benefit in terms of learner autonomy is that students begin to see the recurring pattern of their own individual strengths and weaknesses.

2) Priorities

Once students have identified strengths and weaknesses, they must decide on the areas they would like to work on in a specific course. They may choose to concentrate on their strengths ; for example, to expand an already strong vocabulary by increasing the range of colloquial language. Conversely, they may prefer to focus on their weaknesses ; for example, to tackle errors that cause communication problems such as faulty pronunciation. The majority of students establish priorities that focus on some strengths and some weaknesses. Furthermore, students need to decide on a realistic, manageable number of items that can be dealt with in the time available.

3) Action

Through the individual feedback sessions previously mentioned, as well as group discussions and brainstorming, students are encouraged to take a multi-faceted and conscious approach to establishing new language habits. For example, some students take action by reviewing class notes, doing exercises in textbooks, or practising with language lab tapes. Others make lists and re-write or repeat new words or expressions in order to memorize them. Some consult reference books or tapes mentioned in class.

Taking action is not limited to these fairly traditional methods. Some students tape index cards with new idioms on their refrigerator door to help memorize new vocabulary or use the cassette deck in their car to improve listening comprehension while travelling back and forth to school. Others may ask a teacher to record a passage from a current book on management so that it can be used as a model for pronunciation. Newspapers or magazines can be read with an eye to finding idiomatic expressions or to discovering the uses of a specific verb tense. In general, classroom teachers encourage students to do what works for *them*, no matter how traditional or how unorthodox. Action is often a necessary and positive antidote to the helplessness and frustration that students sometimes feel when faced with the awareness of their weaknesses in the second language.

Student Resource Centre

The Resource Centre is a key component in helping students acquire knowledge and skills in learning how to learn English effectively. A facilitator is always on hand to guide the students in their selection of material suited to their needs and learning styles and to provide suggestions and feedback when requested.

1) Awareness

To ensure that students are well-acquainted with the basic tools of the independent language learner, the Resource Centre facilitator offers "Tools of the

Trade", an introductory course to the centre. The course systematically introduces students to **a)** a range of self-study materials ; **b)** basic reference works such as the thesaurus, the dictionary, and books on usage ; and **c)** hardware such as the video recorder and camera, the tape recorder and copier, and the language lab. These tools are introduced through discussion, analysis, a variety of exercises, and hands-on experimentation.

2) Priorities

Having established their language learning priorities in tutorials and coursework, students similarly draw up their priorities for self-access materials that will best meet their needs.

3) Action

Learners take action by selecting and using Resource Centre materials either during specified self-directed learning periods or after hours. They work at their own pace, according to recommended procedures or in original ways that complement their personal learning style.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, a student does not become an autonomous learner overnight. Our experience has shown that the process is not automatic even with motivated adult language learners. As students are introduced to the process, there may be surprise, resistance or confusion. Yet, once they get started, there's no stopping them ! With time, many learners develop original, innovative techniques to approach language learning on their own. The three steps - from awareness to priorities to action - enrich each individual's language learning and, consequently, the program as a whole. Learning how to learn English is not an end in itself but a beginning.

NOTE

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(fig. 1)

	AWARENESS	PRIORITIES	ACTION
TUTORIALS (individual tutor-student meetings)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Needs analysis for professional needs ● Diagnostic testing for linguistic needs ● Learning style ● Past learning experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establishing order of priority re professional and language learning needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Drawing up Language Training Plan ● Preparing a Learning Project (oral and written presentation) ● Applying past strategies to present situation ● Incorporating new strategies
COURSES (student-teacher feedback sessions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sensitization to language via authentic input to individual performance via feedback sessions ● Pattern of individual strengths and weaknesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Deciding which strengths to cultivate or weaknesses to correct ● Choosing a manageable number of priorities in time available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Using traditional or unorthodox techniques
STUDENT RESOURCE CENTRE (student-facilitator consultations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "Tools of the Trade" Course-introduction to : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - range of self-study materials - reference materials - hardware 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Choosing self-access materials to meet priorities established 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Working at own pace according to recommended procedures or in original ways