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**ASSESSING THE SELF-DIRECTEDNESS OF FOREIGN
LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

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Résumé

Cet article décrit une grille employée pour évaluer la capacité à s'autodiriger d'étudiants participant à des ateliers de formation à l'autodirection en apprentissage de l'anglais à la Maîtrise d'Informatique Appliquée à la Gestion (MIAGe) de l'Université de Nancy II. Quelques résultats sont présentés.

ASSESSING THE SELF-DIRECTEDNESS OF LANGUAGE LEARNERS

It is clear that more and more language teachers are now encouraging their learners to become self-directed. How far their efforts are successful is less clear. Published accounts tend to be tantalisingly sketchy in their "results" sections.

We wished to have some sort of yardstick which would allow us to see what practical effect our learner training was having on its recipients. The present paper will describe our first attempts in this direction.

The work was carried out within the framework of our teaching duties at the University of Nancy II (M.I.A.Ge). These involve providing 24 or 36 hours of English language instruction for each of 6 groups of 16-25 students of Computing Applications in Management. The students have little time for English (in both senses of the expression) and present a rich variety of achievement levels. For most of them these brief English classes will be their last. So rather than giving them a last ditch, teacher-directed, batch treatment in a classroom, we prefer to organize "Learn-to-learn English" workshops in a modestly equipped resources centre. The aim of these workshops is to prepare each student for possible future self-direction in English by giving him an opportunity of finding one or two problems in English that interest him and then encouraging him to try to discover how he can best tackle them himself. The workshops are organized as follows:

- workshops 2 hours each week for 12 or 16 weeks per year. 2 years of workshops.
- teacher input on the theory of self-directed language learning for the whole class via case study exercises carried out in small groups (3 or 4 students per small group) for 30-45 minutes per workshop.
- hands-on experience of self-directed language learning via individual english-learning projects which are worked on for 75-90 minutes per workshop.
- individual help with the practical aspects of learning to learn during fortnightly student-teacher encounters (10-15 minutes). The purpose of these meetings is to raise student awareness of problems and possible solutions in learning programme design and execution, using their own work as the basis of discussion. The discussion is engaged either by the student submitting his problems to the helper or by the helper querying obscure or dubious points on the student's worksheets. These latter are completed by the student each time he works on his individual project and furnish information concerning what the student has done and why and with what degree of success.

The students are told that the marks they obtain for their individual English-learning projects will depend on the quantity and the self-directedness of their work.

Thus, we needed to have some way of gauging how self-directed each student had been during a project. Although it was chiefly this need which led us to evolve the assessment tool we are going to describe, we also wanted to have a means of comparing the effect of different pedagogical "treatments" on the self-directed learning behaviour of our students.

The only work we knew of in this field was that of GREMMO and HOLEC (1987) and of HUTTUNEN (1986). Neither of these 2 approaches suited our requirements. That of GREMMO and HOLEC (involving transcription and analysis of recordings of the encounters of one learner with his helper) was too time consuming to be of any use for monitoring over a hundred students. HUTTUNEN's grid for determining levels of autonomy **was** suitable for application on a large scale, but we felt we would prefer a slightly finer-grained analysis with an integrated marking scale.

The criteria we chose as the basis of our yardstick for assessing language-learner autonomy are, essentially, those which were used by GREMMO and HOLEC. The only difference is the addition of programme design and adjustment criteria to the existing ones of project focus, choice of materials and techniques and assessment of progress and process. The criteria were as follows:

CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING LEARNER'S SELF-DIRECTEDNESS

Project focus:

- clarity of definition of the objective ;
- extent to which the learner takes into account the linguistic problems his objective poses him.

Choice of material:

- appropriateness of material used (with respect to learner's objective, linguistic problems, level, taste, activity envisaged, self-correction and progress assessment feasibility) ;
- willingness to attempt to optimize the choice of material by exploring on-the-spot resources or finding or creating own material.

Choice of activities:

- appropriateness of activities used (with respect to learner's objective, linguistic problems, level, taste and material employed) ;
- willingness to attempt to optimize the choice of activities by exploring a range of them or by inventing one's own.

Work programme content / balance:

- presence in appropriate proportions (and at appropriate time) of following constituents: practice in situation, work on linguistic problems, revision, process and progress monitoring.

Assessment of process and progress:

- frequency of spontaneous monitoring ;
- appropriateness and validity of monitoring (with respect to objectives and linguistic problems).

Process adjustment:

- responsiveness of learner to situations he perceives as necessitating process adjustment (how often does he **do** something about some feature of his learning programme which dissatisfies him?) ;
- appropriateness of process adjustment (with respect to feature felt to be unsatisfactory).

These criteria were then used to develop the marking scheme below. The figures (left) show the number of points given for each behaviour profile.

PROJECT FOCUS :

0.0 Problem to be tackled never diagnosed or clearly defined **or** problem a spurious one.

0.5 About one third of the available time devoted to work on a vaguely defined problem

1.0 About two thirds of the available time devoted to work on a vaguely defined problem **or** about one third of the available time devoted to work on a clearly defined problem.

1.5 About two thirds of the available time devoted to a fairly clearly defined problem. Some attempt made at analysing the problem further during the project.

2.0 Careful initial diagnosis of problem. About two thirds of the available time devoted to work on the problem. Regular observation and analysis of the problem during the project.

CHOICE OF MATERIAL :

0.0 No attempt made to explore the material available. Material chosen wildly inappropriate whereas more appropriate material was available.

0.5 No attempt made to explore the material available. Material chosen not very appropriate whereas more appropriate material was available.

1.0 cursory initial review of material available made. Material selected relevant, but much better match could have been found if more trouble had been taken.

1.5 Material available reviewed fairly comprehensively from the outset. Material selected fairly appropriate but a better match was possible. Some attempt made to improve choice of material during the project.

2.0 Available material reviewed exhaustively and best possible match selected from the outset. Ongoing review of the suitability of the material. Efforts made to find more suitable material elsewhere.

CHOICE OF ACTIVITIES :

0.0 No attempt made to explore activities available. Activity or activities chosen wildly inappropriate.

0.5 No attempt made to explore activities available. Activity or activities chosen not very appropriate whereas more appropriate activities were available.

1.0 cursory initial review of activities available. Activity or activities selected relevant but a better match could have been found if more trouble had been taken.

1.5 Available activities reviewed fairly comprehensively from the outset. Activity or activities selected fairly appropriate but a better match was possible. Some attempt made to improve choice of activity during the project.

2.0 Available activities reviewed exhaustively and best possible match selected from the outset. Ongoing review of the suitability of the activities. Modifies existing activities or invents new ones if dissatisfied with those on offer.

WORK PROGRAMME CONTENT/BALANCE :

0.0 Problem not diagnosed. No revision carried out. Neither progress nor process monitored.

0.5 Problem diagnosed but activities carried out consist entirely of "rehearsing the objective" rather than getting down to work on the problems the objective poses. No revision carried out. Neither progress nor process monitored.

1.0 Sensible "mix" of work on the problem diagnosed and of practice in situation. No revision carried out. Neither progress nor process monitored.

1.5 Sensible "mix" of work on the problem diagnosed and of practice in situation. Occasional revision and process monitoring. One evaluation of progress during the project.

2.0 Sensible "mix" of work on the problem diagnosed and of practice in situation. Regular revision, process and progress monitoring.

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS AND PROCESS :

Frequency of spontaneous monitoring :

0.0 No monitoring of progress or of process.

0.1 No progress monitoring. Very occasional process monitoring.

0.2 No progress monitoring. Occasional process monitoring.

0.3 No progress monitoring. Fairly regular process monitoring. **Or** progress monitored once or twice during the project but process monitored only occasionally.

0.4 Fairly regular process monitoring. One or more assessments of progress.

0.5 Process monitoring at almost every work session. One or more assessments of progress.

Appropriateness and validity of progress and process monitoring :

0.0 None to judge.

0.1 Gut-feeling assessments only.

0.2 Gut feeling assessments supported by qualitative or semi-quantitative observations.

0.3 Attempts at quantitative evaluation of progress.

0.4 Slightly flawed good tries at quantitative assessment.

0.5 Fully appropriate and valid quantitative assessments.

PROCESS ADJUSTMENT :

Responsiveness to need for process adjustment :

0.0 Nothing done about aspects of process which are felt to be unsatisfactory.

0.2 Action taken occasionally.

0.4 Action always taken.

Appropriateness of process adjustments made :

0.0 No adjustments are made or those made are inappropriate.

0.2 Adjustments rather haphazard but success eventually achieved.

0.4 Adjustments usually a step in the right direction

0.6 Adjustments made are as appropriate as circumstances permit.

Several points need to be made concerning the design and intentions of this marking grid.

Firstly, when we use it, we seek to measure the **overall** self-directedness a student has manifested during his project-work rather than any CHANGE in self-directedness which may have occurred. (That said, it should be possible to apply the grid to several successive projects carried out by a given student and

then to examine the marks obtained to see if - and how - his self-directedness has evolved.)

Secondly, the grid awards 40% of the total points for initial work-programme design and 60% for process monitoring and adjusting. This distribution reflects our view of the importance of the latter activity.

Thirdly, although in our experience the more strongly self-directed students are the ones who **do** make significant progress in English during their projects, the grid does not incorporate this parameter explicitly since the chief aim of the course is the acquisition of methodological skills rather than of English.

Fourthly, the grid rewards learners who isolate a foreign language problem and concentrate on discovering what constitutes for them, individually, the best approach to solving it. Now there are obviously other ways of learning a language on your own than tackling one problem at a time as if it were input to a language learning laboratory experiment. But we are in a teaching situation where, in our experience, if constraints of this kind (preplanning of short term well-focussed projects) are not imposed, drift and disgruntlement follow. If we had more motivated learners who were capable of working seriously in a "random walk" type learning-style, we would have written another sort of marking grid.

The last point we wish to make is that the grid presented here is a tentative one. It's devising was more a matter of observation and incorporation of student behaviour patterns under varied teaching conditions than of armchair theorizing. On the first score alone, the grid has already had to be modified once or twice and doubtless will be again. For instance, as it stands, its behaviour profiles are indicative rather than comprehensive. It often happens that a student's behaviour in a given area (e.g choice of material) cannot be accurately matched to any of the 5 available profiles for that area. In such cases, we have to bear in mind the spirit of the grid when deciding what mark to give in that area.

Now, how was this marking scheme applied? How did we know what such and such a student had been getting up to during the time he spent on his individual project?

Much of the information came from the worksheet (see overleaf) which was filled in by each student at the end of each workshop.

NAME

Date :

- 1** *What did you do today? Say what material you used (which text(s)?, which recording(s)?, which course?, which exercise(s)?) and what you did with the material.*
- 2** *Did you encounter any problems which you were not able to solve? If so, give details below:*
- 3** *What was your aim in carrying out the work you did today?*
- 4** *How do you rate the work you did today?*
- 5** *If you are thinking of changing the way you work, explain how and why below:*
- 6** *What do you plan to do next time?*
- 7** *Will you need any special material next time? If so, what?*

A student who filled in his worksheets clearly, completely and truthfully gave us some of the information we needed in order to put the self-directedness marking scheme into action. His answer to question 3 (aim of work done) told us something about his objectives and linguistic problems. The way he answered question 1 (material used and activities carried out) allowed us to see to what extent these were appropriate to his objective and problems. Finally, what he said in reply to questions 4, 5 and 6 gave us some idea of his ability to monitor the way his learning project was going and to improve things when he was dissatisfied with his work.

Inevitably, most students did **not** always fill in their worksheets clearly and completely. Worse, some of them were not averse to claiming to have carried out work which, in fact, they had never done. Thus, the picture of a student's endeavours which was presented by his worksheets had to be clarified, completed and verified.

The clarifying and completing was done by oral questioning when the student came for his interview. At the same time, we would attempt to assess the reality of the work claimed to have been done. Two methods were used here: firstly, probing the student's knowledge of the material or language features supposedly covered and, secondly, looking to see if the written and recorded traces of his work squared with his story.

When the time to give a student a mark arrived, we collected together all his worksheets and all the proofs of work he had accumulated (summaries, translations, transcriptions, written exercises, recordings) To these we added all the notes we had taken concerning him during interviews and during interview preparation. This done, we set about deciding how many points the student in question would be awarded in each of the areas of the self-directedness marking grid.

A problem which arises at this stage is this: assuming that we have already determined what work the student has really done, how do we know which decisions taken by the student have been taken spontaneously and independently? After all, the teacher is there to give him advice all through his project. How do we distinguish between what the student did "off his own bat" and what he did on the teacher's advice? And when several students are working on similar kinds of projects, how do we know whether one or more of them have not simply copied a better student's programme design?

While not claiming to have this problem completely licked, we do take, as systematically as possible, several precautions to minimize interference from it:

- we quiz students on the thinking behind the plans and the changes of plan they make (and take note of their thinking) ;
- we record all methodological difficulties students mention ;
- when a student submits a methodological problem we endeavour to get him to go as far as he can towards solving it himself before giving him any advice (and take note of how far he does get) ;
- when we give advice we always try to offer a choice of solutions to the problem so that the student still has to take a decision himself (and we take note of the advice we have given him).

So after consideration of all the evidence the student is awarded a mark for self-directedness during his project. This mark only accounts for half of the total possible marks however. The other half of the marks are given for the quantity of work accomplished. This avoids having to give poor marks to hard-working but weakly self-directed students. It also avoids giving good marks to students who have grasped what is required of them and who turn in plausible scenarios accompanied by little evidence of work.

Now what use to us are these self-directedness marks? The grid only went into action last year so we cannot say much yet, but we can at least say this:

First of all, they show us how many of our students leave us with a reasonable level of self-directedness.

If we take as criterion of "reasonable self-directedness" that a student should obtain 2/3 of possible marks right across the board then we can say that, last year, 14% of second year students had demonstrated this kind of self-

directedness during their second year project and that an additional 10% had come very close (with 2/3 of possible marks but with only half marks in one of the 4 areas judged). Exactly how much (and what sort of) **progress** all the students had made in self-directedness during their time with us we do not know. But from this year on, we may be able to look for an answer to these questions, since we are replacing the "2 years/2 projects/2 marks" system with one where the students tackle 5 shorter projects over two years and receive a mark for each project. This should allow us to study evolution in self-directedness more closely than would have been possible so far. Evolution there certainly is, but it seems to us that a small proportion of our students already **are** pretty self-directed in the sense that they take to our system like ducks to water and need very little help other than being pointed at the available facilities. Indeed, it is possible that we made only a small contribution to the results obtained by the 14% of top scorers. At the other end of the scale, a minority of students remain impervious to our efforts chiefly because their minds (and often bodies) are elsewhere. The bulk of progress in self-directedness is probably made by the students in between these two extremes.

Secondly, it may be that the self-directedness marks give us some indication of how far we can expect to improve our results. On the face of it, 24% of students at 2/3 or more of the total possible marks does not seem a very impressive score. But when we look at the marks obtained by the same students over the same period in their technical studies (Table 1 below) and see that the proportion of students at or above 2/3 of the possible marks there is similar or worse, it may be wondered if much more can be done. There again, perhaps we ask much less of the students than do the other teachers. Whatever the case, at least we have a figure to try and beat in the coming years.

English	Maths	Computing	Management
24 %	2 %	22 %	14 %

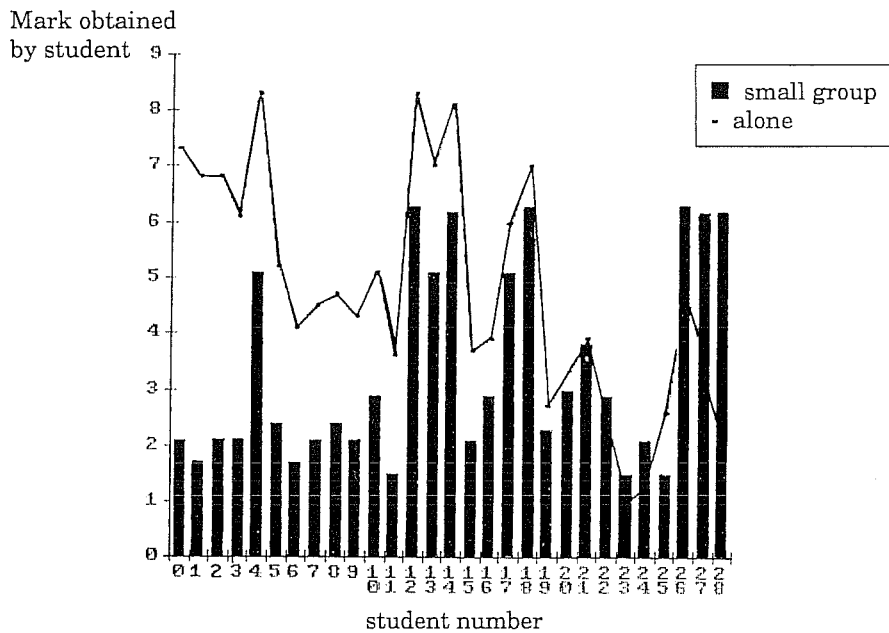
Table 1: Proportion of students obtaining two thirds or more of total possible marks in English and in their main subjects.

Thirdly, the self-directedness marks we obtained last year have allowed us to confirm our growing impression that asking our kind of students to carry out self-directed English-learning projects in small, relatively homogeneous groups (in the less than brilliant way we organized things at least) was largely a waste of time. Comparison of marks obtained for individual projects last year with marks awarded "post-hoc" for small group projects carried out a year

before by the same students⁽¹⁾ (see figure 1) shows a marked upward swing out of the doldrums in 41% of cases. We believe these upward swings are due largely to the change from groupwork to individual work rather than to a shove from the previous year's experience, but we reserve discussion of this for a forthcoming paper. Suffice it to say here that the marking system we have described can also be useful for comparing the effectiveness of different kinds of learner training.

FIGURE 1

Comparison of self-directedness marks obtained by the same students working in small groups and (subsequently) alone



(1) Normally, there should have been 45 or so second year students on this graph. The "missing ones" either failed first year or, having done badly in professional reading comprehension, worked on it during their second year in a self-directed mode where the scope for self-directedness was more restricted and where a tendency to work together gradually emerged. These latter students were omitted from the graph.

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