

Mélanges CRAPEL n° 21

**THE LEARNER TRAINER'S
LABOURS LOST ?**

Harvey MOULDEN

Résumé

Cet article fournit un témoignage sur le vif des difficultés que rencontrent apprenants de langue et enseignant de langue lorsque celui-ci cherche à autonomiser ceux-là. Il conclut en disant pourquoi le jeu en vaut la chandelle.

Little has declared recently (LITTLE, 1990) that "learner autonomy is not easy to achieve" and holds out the prospect of "a painful process" for those involved. When we first came across this statement in print our reaction was a heartfelt "You can say that again!".

Every year for a number of years now we have been attempting to autonomize 110 not very motivated, mixed ability, French university students of computing who are sent to us in groups of 16 to 25 for English courses lasting only 24 or 34 hours (See MOULDEN 1990 and Appendix 1 for organizational details).

What **we** personally as learner trainers have found painful is:

- keeping our cool with the students who don't seem to read any of our handouts or listen to anything we say to them.
- having to devote considerable time to assessing the relevance and genuineness of the self-directed learning projects the students do (because there are invariably those who seek soft options or submit fraudulent work)
- struggling to get across the message that haphazard, unobservant consumption of coursebooks, texts, recordings and activities is less likely to lead to progress in English than finding out where your problems are, and then trying to discover which materials, techniques and organisation allow you to tackle them best. (See Appendix 1 for a more detailed view of common shortcomings in students' project work.)
- spending 38 hours of our working week preparing for and doing individual project interviews with half of 110 students. This for 6 months.
- spending up to another 2 months completing marking of the students' projects.
- confirming, at the end of it all, what we'd been suspecting all along ... that with 20% of the students (the utterly impermeable ones) we've wasted a lot of our time and a little of theirs; a **lot** of **our** time because the course and its preparation are individualized; a little of theirs because they do little work. In general, these students are at the bottom of the marks list in all subjects, not just English.

- and then, the final indignity : having to appear once again before our technical discipline colleagues (at the annual teacher-student course review meeting) cast in the rôle of "loony English teacher". Our course, despite its low status compared with the big subjects like Computing and Management, usually provokes more hullabaloo than all the the other (traditional) courses put together. The students who moan the loudest are usually the ones with low marks who have neither worked nor taken any notice of all the printed and oral information and advice we have given them throughout the course (and attribute these failings to the unusual nature of the course).

Fortunately, the students do not escape exasperation either. What gets **them** (they say so on anonymous questionnaires) is:

- feeling disorientated in the early stages of the course. For years they've been accustomed to turning up at "light relief" classes like English to be entertained or bored or - if the teacher didn't "make them work" - to doze, snigger, chatter, do other work; but certainly not to be asked to provide their **own** entertainment, discipline and instruction. The novelty of this is, understandably, a bit overwhelming for many of those who have grasped the nature of the coming change. Others just don't seem to pay any attention to the explanations and instructions given, as though they are waiting until the "real" course begins. This category usually contains a good proportion of the students who are better at English than the others and assume that they are in for another year or two's easy ride and a bit of showing off in front of the others.

Then once the requirements of the course have sunk in:

- having to work. Having to **make yourself** work.
- having to "waste time" deciding what needs to be done and looking for the best way to do it: finding this difficult. In some (happily rare) cases, feeling that the quest is hopeless because "only the teacher can know what is good for us".
- finding assessment of progress tough.
- having to "waste time" filling in "bumf" (work programme planning sheets, weekly worksheets, personal evaluation of each project completed) and leaving written or recorded evidence of the work you've done.

- being deprived of "an atmosphere of trust". In other words, having to submit to a bit of probing if you don't provide proof of what you've done or if your proof looks fishy to the teacher. It's hard for the teacher to win. When his attitude to bluff and blather was less incisive he was taxed with laxity. Now he is reproached for being "aggressive".

- having to make one's thinking explicit and having it incessantly challenged.

- suffering the grave injustices of a "totally subjective" marking system (see Appendix 1 and MOULDEN 1990) likened to the French National Lottery by one student. Some students feel that it is a simple matter (for others) to pull the wool over the teacher's eyes by inventing false problems in English or by cramming worksheets with fulsome fairy tales. Many more do not believe the teacher can have the remotest idea of how much work has gone into a project (both quality and quantity of work are assessed). But **they** don't know how much time is spent marking each project and the range of observations, yardsticks, and checking procedures the teacher disposes of for estimating the number of hours of work effectively done.

If the reader is beginning to suspect that all the above nastiness is the richly-deserved fruit of a well-meaning but crackpot attempt to force self-direction on "unwilling and unprepared" (TUDOR, 1992) learners, the reader is not entirely wrong. For it would be surprising if a majority of these students **were** willing to organize their learning of English for themselves. Why should they be ? They have a heavy and more important workload in other subjects. English is a minor preoccupation and it has always been served up to them on a plate, just like everything else.

But preparing them for self-directed learning (admittedly by plunging them into it) is, we feel, justified in their case. All of them **could** improve in English. Some **may** need to in future. Others **must** improve if they are not to be handicapped in their future employment. All of them are arriving at the end of their formal training period in English. What kind of "straight" English course could provide every one of them - in the space of 60 hours - with all the English they might need in future ?

No doubt groups could be formed by achievement level and teacher-taught syllabi for each determined by consultation. But this would only provide a compromise solution to the problem of varying needs. And no solution at all would be provided for the problem of

how people are going to learn everything that still hasn't been learned at the end of the course.

Training in learning-to-learn-English, on the other hand gives everyone a **chance** to work "full-time" on what they need to. It also provides them with the **opportunity** to learn how to forge their own tools for possible future self-directed learning of English. And it gives those who are prepared to hunt around and experiment a way of reducing the patches of boredom they are probably going to encounter under teacher-direction. This is why we force it upon the unwilling. We think it's better for them than another two years in the "classwomb" as somebody has it. And it's certainly better for us. It lets us off the hook of feeling bad about that bored looking character in the corner or the one with shiny glasses who's always completely lost. If they're bored or lost now it's because they've ignored all the personally tailored advice we've given them ; it's **their** fault now. **Ha !**

Now all this theory is very fine, but does its implementation come up with the results it should ? Does the system produce anything useful alongside all the friction it generates?

Well, yes. We think it does.

But before saying **what**, we should, perhaps, now that we have let off steam, put our catalogue of woes into perspective. The exasperation that we have described is by no means an endless symphony of crashes and bangs. Rather, isolated mutterings of discontent and flare-ups occur against a background of reasonably good humour. As a rule, the second year of self-direction runs its course much more sweetly than the first. And, with few exceptions, the mature students we get each year take it all very calmly and work with a will. Possibly most of the overheating is on the teacher's side.

Now here are the things which encourage us to persist in our efforts:

- the great majority of the 110 odd students do relish being free to work on their own problems in their own way with material that interests them. They particularly appreciate being able to work at their own pace (something they can't do in the other courses).

- a small proportion of students (about 15%) work well on their own with minimal counselling right from the word "go". Another 65% seem to improve their learning skills in varying degrees along the

way (an ongoing research project is trying to obtain a clearer picture of what is happening here). The first category of student and part of the second are a pleasure to work with and give one that rare sensation of feeling oneself to be of some use.

- between 20% and 30% of the students claim (at the end of their first year course in self-directed learning) that they make more progress in English working this way than they do working under teacher-direction. This despite the fact that time is "lost" setting up projects, making mistakes in programme design, justifying your work to the teacher and filling in papers. Between 10% and 20% of the students feel they make as much progress working alone as under teacher direction. Between 50% and 60% of the students say they make less progress in self-directed work. But this is hardly surprising in none-too-motivated students who are doing it for the first time. What **is** surprising, surely, is the appreciable proportion of students who feel they are **not** losing out on English while learning to learn it. The sort of figures mentioned above have been obtained for 6 years now with very little variation. See Appendix 2 for a detailed example.

On balance, we feel that, in our case, the positive effects of training for self-directed learning do justify the effort demanded of its participants and the occasional discomfort which is generated.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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APPENDIX 1

The handout below is one in a series of reminders that second year students receive concerning what they are supposed to be doing and how they are supposed to be doing it. The first part ("Les projets de travail individuel en anglais") outlines the way they are supposed to carry out a self-directed learning project and how they will be marked. The second part ("quelques conseils") is a "don'ts" list which was prepared in the hope of keeping them from settling back into the comfortable ruts of aimlessness and thoughtlessness that the previous year's treatment had tried to cajole or badger them out of.

LES PROJETS DE TRAVAIL INDIVIDUEL EN ANGLAIS

Ce sont des projets de recherche méthodologique. Voici comment un tel projet devrait se passer.

1. Avec l'aide de l'enseignant :

- vous choisissez un domaine d'utilisation de l'anglais dans lequel votre performance ne vous satisfait pas.

- en vous observant "en train de faire" (c'est-à-dire en train d'utiliser la langue de cette façon qui ne vous satisfait pas), vous mettez à jour les problèmes que vous rencontrez.

- vous recensez (aussi exhaustivement que possible) les supports et les activités qui pourraient vous être utiles pour travailler sur vos difficultés.

- vous essayez les supports et les activités retenus dans le but de déterminer lesquels sont les plus utiles pour vous. Pendant ce temps, également, vous aurez l'occasion de déterminer comment mieux disposer les diverses phases de votre travail dans le temps, et de corriger ou d'affiner l'analyse de vos problèmes. Cette phase du projet implique un effort soutenu d'observation et d'évaluation dont les fruits doivent paraître clairement sur le carnet de bord que vous remplissez à chaque séance.

- en fin de projet vous résumez vos découvertes sur une fiche de bilan.

- le projet suivant devrait aborder un domaine nouveau, car l'un des buts de l'opération est de vous faire faire le tour, même rapidement, des principales zones langagières dans lesquelles vous auriez besoin de faire des progrès. Cependant, dans le cas où un projet est loin d'avoir épuisé toutes les recherches possibles, son objectif peut être reconduit.

Votre note de projet n'aura rien à voir avec votre niveau en anglais. Elle dépendra pour moitié de la quantité de travail que vous fournirez et, pour l'autre moitié, de votre capacité à bien gérer votre recherche.

La quantité de travail fournie est jugée à partir des traces qu'il laisse (carnets de bord, traductions, résumés, notes, listes de vocabulaire, exercices, transcriptions, enregistrements etc.)

Votre gestion de projet est appréciée sur les critères suivants:

- pertinence de l'objectif et finesse du diagnostic des problèmes posés par l'objectif.
- exhaustivité de la recherche (éventuellement création) de matériel, d'activités de travail, de procédés d'évaluation de progrès.
- pertinence et cohérence des choix (éventuellement création) de matériel, d'activités de travail, de procédés d'évaluation de progrès.
- fréquence et pertinence des observations sur les progrès linguistiques et l'efficacité des composants méthodologiques expérimentés (matériel, activités de travail, organisation du travail dans le temps, méthodes d'évaluation des progrès).
- capacité à "ajuster le tir" pertinemment quand cela s'avère nécessaire.

QUELQUES CONSEILS

Ne travaillez pas à deux ou à trois. Les projets doivent être conçus et réalisés individuellement. Cependant, si vous choisissez de travailler sur un problème d'expression orale et que vous avez besoin ponctuellement d'un partenaire pour réaliser des activités de diagnostic, d'entraînement ou d'évaluation, vous pourriez vous arranger avec un ou plusieurs camarades ayant eux aussi des objectifs d'apprentissage en expression orale.

Ne choisissez pas des objectifs d'apprentissage qui vous posent peu de problèmes.

Ne reconduisez pas un objectif que vous avez déjà choisi s'il est peu probable que vous puissiez faire de nouvelles découvertes méthodologiques.

Ne vous lancez pas vers un objectif sans avoir diagnostiqué le ou les problèmes qu'il vous pose.

Ne vous lancez pas vers un objectif sans avoir décidé la façon dont vous alliez essayer de mesurer vos progrès.

Ne sélectionnez pas n'importe quel matériel. N'abordez pas n'importe quelle activité d'apprentissage. Avant de commencer quelque travail que ce soit, posez-vous la question suivante : "en quoi ce que je vais faire là va-t-il m'aider à résoudre le problème que j'ai choisi de travailler ?"

N'utilisez pas le même matériel tout le long d'un projet. Le but des projets est de découvrir et de tester tout le matériel disponible qui semble approprié à vos besoins.

Ne vous contentez pas d'un seul manuel d'anglais pendant tout un projet. Explorez d'autres manuels et des supports non pédagogiques (revues, enregistrements radio/télé, transcriptions d'enregistrement, etc.).

Ne faites pas tous les exercices proposés par un manuel en commençant à la première page. Cherchez ceux qui vous paraissent susceptibles de résoudre le problème que vous avez.

Ne consacrez pas toute une séance à travailler à partir d'un support trop facile ou trop difficile. Cherchez du matériel plus adapté à votre niveau.

Ne faites pas la même activité d'apprentissage semaine après semaine. Le but des projets est d'évaluer autant d'activités que possible parmi celles qui pourraient vous aider à résoudre vos problèmes.

Ne vous limitez pas aux activités que vous avez connues lors de votre scolarité antérieure. Essayez d'élargir vos horizons.

Ne vous limitez pas non plus aux activités de "pratique" de la langue (lire, écouter, parler, écrire). Faites également (et surtout) les activités (pas forcément plus rébarbatives si on s'y prend bien) qui s'attaquent directement à vos problèmes (acquisition de nouveau vocabulaire, entraînement de l'oreille ou de la mémoire en situation d'écoute, amélioration de la prononciation, entraînement de la capacité à se faire comprendre lorsqu'on ne connaît pas le mot qu'il faut, etc.)

N'oubliez pas de vérifier vos progrès régulièrement et de faire des révisions de temps en temps.

Ne vous obstinez pas lorsqu'une activité commence à vous lasser : changez d'activité. De même pour le matériel. Changer d'activité ou de matériel permet d'éviter la saturation.

Ne restez pas complètement inactif par rapport aux petits problèmes linguistiques que vous rencontrez chaque semaine (vocabulaire inconnu, passages mal compris, réponses fausses quand vous faites un exercice à questions, mots cherchés en vain pendant une conversation etc.). Faites quelque chose.

N'oubliez pas qu'il ne suffit pas d'affirmer que l'on a effectué tel ou tel travail. Il faut laisser des traces probantes que vous l'avez effectivement réalisé.

Ne négligez pas les "paperasses" que vous avez à remplir, même si vous trouvez qu'elles empiètent indûment sur le peu de temps que vous avez pour faire de l'anglais. L'optique des projets est justement qu'il vaut mieux consacrer ce temps à une tentative d'optimisation de votre méthode de travail : cela pourra vous faire gagner du temps plus tard si vous aviez besoin de continuer à vous améliorer en anglais (ou une autre langue étrangère). Ces compte-rendus vous inciteront à réfléchir sur votre méthode de travail et rendent visibles les fruits de cette réflexion.

Lors de ces compte-rendus, n'écrivez pas n'importe quoi n'importe où. Essayez de répondre à la question qui est posée. Evitez les formules qui ne veulent rien dire. Soyez concret et précis.

APPENDIX 2

This bar diagram presents results typical of those obtained when students are asked, at the end of their first 35 hours of self-directed or teacher-directed learning, to express a quantitative preference for either self-directed or teacher-directed learning. The preferences are elicited by asking students to award (anonymously), on the basis of subjectively felt progress in learning English, between 0 and 10 points to their recent self-directed learning experience and to the last teacher-directed English course they took. A SDL/TDL preference of 1 means no perceived difference. A preference of 0.5 means half as much progress felt in the self-directed learning mode as in teacher-directed. A preference of 1.5 means half as much progress again felt in self-directed learning. And so on.

