

**A MOBILE RESOURCE CENTRE AND
SOME TRIALS, ERRORS AND
IMPROVEMENTS IN LEARNER
TRAINING**

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Résumé

Cet article décrit deux expériences effectuées dans le cadre d'un centre de ressources mobile. Leur but était de former des étudiants MIAGistes à "apprendre à apprendre l'anglais". Aucune de ces deux expériences n'a donné les résultats escomptés. Les raisons en sont examinées et un bref compte rendu est donné des améliorations qui ont pu être apportées par la suite.

The work described in this paper is undoubtedly relevant to the subject of resource centres since it involved efforts to improve learner training. It was carried out, however, without benefit of a resource centre in the sense in which this term is commonly understood. At the time (1987 to 1990) the author was assigned normal classrooms to do his English classes in and had, in effect, to transform each of them into a resources centre for the duration of each class. This was done by transporting a modest range of appropriate learning materials to wherever the learners happened to be. It was in this setting, then, that two forms of learner training were put to the test and found to be wanting (with the learners involved at least). The two kinds of learner training were:

1: preparatory theoretical training via paper and pencil exercises on self-directed learning methodology

2: "hands on" training via assisted self-directed learning of English in small groups.

Why these methods were used in the first place, how they were organised and what went wrong will be the principal concern of this paper. But, first of all, a brief description of the learners and the mobile resource centre will be given.

The learners:

These were 100 French students studying for the MIAGe diploma in computer methods in management. The author has always felt training in self-directed learning of English to be a more sensible option for these students than the straight English courses they get in other universities running MIAGe courses. Briefly, the students have, as individuals, very varied needs in English which most of them will be far from capable of meeting by the (fast approaching) end of their formal education period. If they wish to seriously improve in English they will have to make at least part of this progress on their own. So the aim is to try to make them as efficient and comfortable as possible in any future self-directed learning they may undertake.

The mobile resource centre:

This consisted of a small assortment of learning material in cardboard boxes and trays dumped and stacked on a sofa, for the duration of class time, just inside the (narrow) entrance hall to the C.R.A.P.E.L. This system was none too convenient for those who used it and was a great nuisance to all those who were either deprived of a seat or who had to fight their way past it and its users (and a photocopying machine) into and out of the C.R.A.P.E.L. But it was the best that could be done at the time.

On the sofa could be found (with more or less difficulty):

Audio-visual material: cassette players, headphones, extension flexes and multi-point adapters.

Learning material: dictionaries, grammar books, coursebooks with accompanying cassettes where provided, a few newspapers and periodicals, computing reviews, cassettes with recordings of radio programmes on computing subjects, recordings of a variety of other radio programmes, one or 2 items of language-learning software, binders with methodological advice and catalogues describing and giving signposts to the material available.

The material was transported, for several years, upstairs, downstairs and to more or less distant exterior campus sites (never further than a few hundred yards though) through all weathers by students and teacher with no notable accidents recorded.

Although it has been implied above that a single classroom served as site for the mobile resource centre, in practice several rooms were occupied. This was necessary in order to avoid listening and speaking activities interfering with each other and with reading and writing. A shortage of headphones, for example, often obliged some of the students working on listening to seek out a nearby empty classroom. Similarly, students wishing to practice speaking together might have to be lodged in an empty office or computer room. This meant that the teacher spent part of his learner-counselling time shuttling between a number of rooms and buildings.

Now to the main business of this paper, i.e. a brief chronicle of the methodological tribulations and triumphs experienced amid the picturesque scenery described above.

1: Preparatory theoretical training through paper and pencil exercises on self-directed learning methodology

Prior to the introduction of the above kind of training, students with no previous experience of self-directed language learning were:

either "thrown in at the deep end" of 2 hours per week of self-directed English learning in small groups (and were supposed to do all their learning-to-learn as they went along via counselling from the teacher)

or they received only 10 or so hours of preparation before being launched on teacher-counselled self-directed English learning projects carried out in small groups.

It was thought that a more thorough preparation might lead to better quality self-directed learning of English. To test this idea it was decided to see what would happen if the existing pre-project preparation were extended **into** the projects by limiting these to one hour per week and devoting the preceding hour to further theoretical training. As most students tended to run out of steam well before the end of their weekly 2 hour project slots, some hopes were also entertained that this more varied menu might stimulate them into doing more work. A stick was added to this hypothetical carrot by giving weekly marks for the training exercises and requiring the students to sit a written test at the end of the course (in addition to the end-of-course project mark.)

The exercises extended over 15 weeks, with the self-directed English-learning projects starting (under teacher guidance) at week 7. Many of the later exercises (7-15) took the form of case studies concerning fictitious learners with similar aims, problems and learning facilities as the students themselves. In general the students had to put themselves into the shoes of the imaginary learners and take learning decisions for them. The students worked on the exercises in self-constituted small groups of 3 or 4. The following week their work was returned to them marked and

accompanied by a sheet with brief model answers and comments on the more common errors. The sequence of exercises is given below.

Week 1: Reading comprehension: Guessing the meaning of words you don't know.

Week 2: Reading comprehension: Asking yourself questions to reduce your chances of misunderstanding.

Week 3: Reading comprehension: Ways of learning new vocabulary with pen and paper.

Week 4: Reading comprehension: Ways of learning new vocabulary with the in-house computer programme LA FOIRE AUX MOTS.

Week 5: Listening comprehension: Strategies for global listening comprehension.

Week 6: Choosing appropriate activities for working on listening comprehension problems.

Week 7: Assessing progress (1).

Week 8: Assessing progress (2).

Week 9: Choosing material (1).

Week 10: Choosing material (2).

Week 11: Revision of listening comprehension problems and activities for working on them.

Week 12: Suggest activities for working on reading and listening problems.

Week 13: Revision: assessing progress.

Week 14: Criticise and amend a fictitious and poorly-designed work programme.

Week 15: Write a work programme for a fictitious learner.

Two features of the above menu call for explanation.

1 There is no reference to speaking or writing English. This is because only first year students were involved in the learner training experiments described here and their English-learning projects were, at the time, limited to reading and listening comprehension.

2 The subject matter of the exercises appears to be out of phase with the running of the self-directed learning projects. For instance, the students are supposed to commence their project work at week 7. Yet, at this point,

although they have been offered a small kit of comprehension strategies and techniques for working on some comprehension problems, they are still 6 weeks away from exercises on designing a programme of work.

In fact, the students received step-by-step general guidance on working out what they were going to do during their projects. Once these were launched, they had regular project-specific counselling. The exercises, which seem to arrive too late, were actually intended to expand on, or revise, topics which had already been encountered in a practical context. The programme design work of the last 2 weeks was destined to pull together the various threads of all the previous exercises.

After 2 years, it was decided that the exercises on self-directed learning theory had not been a great success and they were discontinued. The reasons which led to this decision were the following:

1 Several observations showed that the exercises were not a very efficient means of teaching the students self-directed learning theory. Firstly, the marks obtained on the theory paper were rather disappointing for a test which - compared with those the students had to cope with in other subjects - was a relatively straightforward learn-by-heart-plus-commonsense sort of affair. Secondly, these marks were very little affected when (in the second year of this experiment) the number of problems to solve per course was reduced by two thirds. Thirdly, the lasting effects of the exercises on theoretical knowledge were meagre; informal oral quizzing of students the following year revealed that what little had been learned seemed to have been forgotten to a large extent. It seemed, at the time, that the exercises were having some beneficial effect on the thoughtfulness of small group project work, but this impression could not be confirmed since no systematic observations were made and, even if they had been, we had no hard data on small group project work previous to the introduction of the exercises.

2 Other observations suggested that the exercises themselves were not the only cause of the poor results

obtained and that the students' attitude to the course as a whole might even have been the determining factor. That most of them were only superficially involved in this part of their training is supported by several individual avowals that, in general, motivation towards English classes in any form was weak. As to the learning methodology part of the course, some students never grasped its purpose, despite an abundance of written explanation and oral discussion. Others, while appreciating its potential usefulness, felt it encroached unduly on the little time they had for actually learning English. Above all, nonchalance was the order of the day; for example, the majority of the students clearly did not bother to revise for the test.

3 The hope that the students might do more work with a theory-then-practice course format was not fulfilled. Their tendency was to work reasonably seriously on the exercises (i.e. for the first hour) and then to relax during the small group English learning project work (i.e. during the second hour). Later observations have shown that, whatever you do, you are not going to get a lot more than about 1 hour in 2 of decent work out of these students. It is easier to accept this now, having discovered that even their much more important technical courses are bedevilled by chattering and that the only teacher who has managed to impose complete silence is the one who eschews all use of photocopies and transparencies and dictates the whole course at speed.

How far the blame for the failure should be put upon the exercises and how far upon the students themselves remains an open question. Whatever the answer, by the end of two years it was felt that a dead horse was being flogged and it was decided to return to full-time, unprepared project work carried out, not in small groups as before, but individually. Why individually? Because the English-learning projects done in small groups were no roaring success either. Which brings us to the second methodological disappointment of this paper.

2: "hands on" training via (assisted) self-directed learning of English in small groups.

Time was when classes numbered no more than 12. In that blessed era, learner training was done by means of individual learning projects. As the years went by, classroom numbers gradually rose and eventually reached 25. It was reasoned that it would no longer be possible to counsel individual learners often enough and that, consequently, it would be necessary to ask them to work together in pairs or small groups of 3 or 4, which we did. Subsequent events proved that the author had not reasoned hard enough. But before embarking on a second list of trials and tribulations, a glimpse of the way operations were conducted needs to be provided. These will be treated under three headings:

- 1- pair or small group formation
- 2- project structuring
- 3- counselling interviews

1- Pair or small group formation: This took place within groups of students which had been constituted by level of attainment in English. In this way, problems of incompatibility of level were, to a certain extent, limited. Pair formation was done by the students themselves on the basis of commonality of project objective. Initially, small group formation was decided by the teacher on level criteria, but it was found later that leaving the task to the students gave more satisfactory results. The latter procedure seemed to encourage the black sheep to cluster together. In this way their naughtiness was contained, whereas before it had wreaked havoc amidst many a small group via the bad-apple effect.

2- Project structuring: A "what to do when" framework was provided for everybody. This had two functions. One was to provide inlets for guidance and for the methodological points we wished to put across. The other was to try to impose some sort of focus, the students' tendency being to pay very little attention to the appropriateness of what they were going to do, were doing or had done). The project structuring took the form of handouts of various sorts. The principal documents involved were:

- a step-by-step guide to choosing an objective
- instructions for the auto-diagnosis of linguistic problems
- a step-by-step guide to planning a programme of work: the problem to be tackled at each session with choice of materials and activities, planning of progress assessment
- worksheets to complete at each work-session
- a step-by-step guide to assessing linguistic and methodological progress at the end of a project

A further project-structuring feature was to require completion and self-assessment of 2 or even 3 projects during the course. The aim of this was to ensure that students had a chance to learn from and correct aspects of their work found to be unsatisfactory.

3- Counselling interviews: These complemented the general project structuring by providing input specific to each small group. It consisted of help with purely linguistic problems, criticism of project work and advice. Much of the advice concerned the desirability of identifying and tackling problems and of checking for progress. As a rule, each small group was seen by the teacher at least once per class.

So much for the way learner training was attempted via project work in small groups. Now for what went wrong. There were four problems:

The first one was that the students did not spend all of the available time working on English. Or even working. One reason for this (already alluded to above) was the presence of black sheep (chatterboxes) in certain groups. Another reason was that any normally well-behaved member of a small group could also temporarily occupy the role of black sheep if s/he felt more inclined to play than to work. But the main reason, undoubtedly, was that the temptation to talk was felt by all the students to a greater or lesser degree. The temptation was surely strengthened by the fact that most of the small groups were out of sight of the teacher in other rooms and, we suspect, by a feeling of diminished responsibility generated by being in a group.

The second problem was that it was not always sufficient for all the students in a small group to be

disposed to work for work to be actually done, because proceedings were often held up by long arguments about what work should be done and how. That a planned programme of work should regularly be found wanting was exactly what we had hoped for. But in the small group situation, any solution arrived at was always more or less of a compromise. And this compromise could eventually lead to chafing, exasperation, more arguments and, occasionally, the departure of a group member. Scission was even more frequent in pairwork.

The first two problems have in common the fact that both students and teacher agreed that they **were** problems. The teacher was substantially alone, though, in perceiving a third pattern of behaviour as being problematical. When asked whether small group work offered any positive features, nearly all the students said it did. Typical of their appreciative remarks were statements such as:

- you get moral support from the others
- if you yourself don't feel like working, the others may stimulate you to do so
- trying to be better than the others keeps you going

and

- you can benefit from other people's knowledge
- the others can explain things you don't understand
- problems get solved more quickly (several heads are better than one)

Now if the students were enthusiastic about the mutual stimulation and help involved in working together, the teacher, as learner trainer, was much less so. How could learning-to-learn English in a situation where you relied on co-learners to motivate you prepare you effectively for learning English on your own? After all, it seemed likely that this would be the way most of them would work in future if they ever needed to make substantial progress in English. And how could having other people on hand all the time to do some of the work for you prepare you for the day when you would have to

confront the problems alone? Mutual help might have been fine if more of it had involved methodology. But, in fact, the help the students were talking about usually meant help with English: help in understanding a text or recording, help finding the right word or the right tense or the right order of words in a phrase. "Problems get solved more quickly" meant, for example, "We have understood this recording faster than we would have done alone." Which, in turn, could mean that nobody, unaided, would have understood very much at all. If, at the end of each such task, the students had heeded the teacher's previous and repeated exhortations, they would have followed up with common or individual work exploring ways of dealing with the problems encountered. But, in general, they didn't and thus short-circuited the most important part of the project.

That most of the above problems were not foreseen at the outset is a matter for some embarrassment now. Surely it should have been obvious that getting people to work together and dealing with them as a group would hardly encourage its individual members to discover how best to work on their own problems in their own way?

Finally, there was the matter of those students whose contribution to their small group's work was slight but who nevertheless received the same mark as those whose contribution had been greater. This problem was familiar to the teachers of computing. In this subject there is a case for project work in groups, since the students need, as preparation for their future career, to learn to work as part of a team. Nevertheless, vigilance has to be exercised as weaker students often manoeuvre themselves into a group where they hope to rely on gifted or hard-working students doing most of the work. This situation was another compelling reason for a return to individual project work.

So the next year the project structuring apparatus was retained, but there was no more work in small groups and no more self directed learning theory exercises. Each student designed and carried out his or her own projects at the rate of two hours per week and received personally tailored learner training input during ten minute counselling interviews every two weeks.

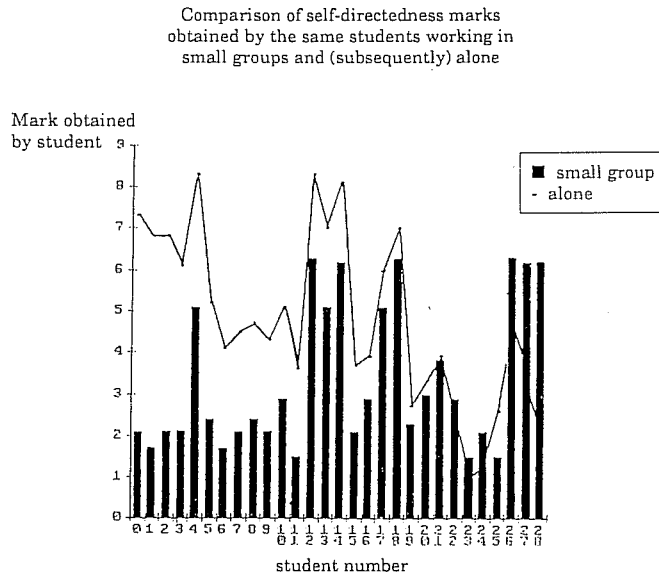
This was no miracle cure but there **were** improvements.

Chattering, of course was not eliminated. Neither did attitudes to English change noticeably. But the teacher's feel-good barometer rose and, at the end of it all, the students got the marks they deserved. (These points will be amplified in a moment.) Best of all, an appreciable proportion of them (41%) did much better work than they had done in the small group set-up, whilst relatively few did worse work.

The author felt more comfortable when counselling for two reasons. Firstly because, taking the students one by one, it was much easier to get to grips with the learner training. You could see just what a particular student had done and the problems s/he had had. The student could not sit back and let somebody else do the thinking and talking as he easily could during a small group counselling encounter. S/he had to listen and had to react as sensibly as possible and could do so without fear of being judged to be a "creep" or an idiot by their peers. Furthermore, each student was now totally accountable for the work done. So the focus on diagnosis and resolution of individual language problems which had been missing from small group work could be (given a minimum of cooperation) achieved. But the greater involvement of the students was not all due to the return of the one-to-one interviews; part of it came from their freedom to work on what they wanted to, with its potential for raising motivation. An example of this was the student who had frittered away the previous year in the company of workshy companions and who became a model of diligence and enthusiasm when he was able to indulge his passion for flying via a project on aeronautical English. So the second reason we had for feeling happier was the increase, in some quarters at least, of student satisfaction. In sum, the author felt much more in control of what was going on; he felt also that things were moving the way he wanted and, to a certain extent, he felt he was more useful.

It has been reported above that, working on their own, 41% of the students did markedly better work than they had done previously when working in small groups. How much better can be seen in the graph below, where the "self-directedness" marks (see MOULDEN 1990 for details) of individual students in both working modes are compared. 38% of the students obtained, unaided, as good

(or no worse) a mark as when helped by their classmates. Only 21% of the students received lower marks when working alone.



It has been suggested to the author that the generally better performance in individual project work could be due in part to the fact that the students had some experience of self-directed learning behind them when they embarked on this work, whereas they had none at the start of the small group project work. It is not believed, however, that this factor weighed very heavily. The disappointing evanescence of the students' (usually limited) theoretical knowledge of language learning methodology has already been referred to. Given that the small group and the individual projects were separated by 7 months of no language learning classes at all, it would seem likely that most of the the students started their individual projects with a pretty clean mental slate. Where marks improved, the author would guess that this was due to the student feeling more pressure upon him to work and think but, at the same time, being freed from those group-work constraints that had previously prevented him from realising his potential. He suspects, also, that despite their brevity, the individual counselling interviews

were more effective in putting across methodological points than the prolonged theory exercises of the previous year, not only because the students **had** to participate, but also because they felt more involved in their own real-life learning situation than in fictitious case studies.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that although self-directed learning of English was better in quantity and quality individually than in small groups, it is not known in what measure the course succeeded in its aim of making individual students **better** self-directed learners of English than they had been before. The individual project work may simply have allowed the students to demonstrate how good at self directed learning they already were, for we do not know whether the counselling input brought about any improvement in the way they organized their learning of English. This state of ignorance is something which the author is at present trying to remedy, although first results suggest that at the end of 30 hours of training only a minority (30%) of students have made substantial progress in learning to learn.