A GUIDED-AUTONOMY COURSE TO PROMOTE STUDENT IMPLICATION

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Introduction

This paper is intended to describe an experimental course that was first operational in Spring 1997. The course concerns intermediate-level English at the Université de Technologie de Compiègne (UTC), which is a well-known Engineering School in France, delivering degrees in Mechanical Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Computer Engineering, etc. Entrance to the University is selective.

UTC students are required to attain (or of course surpass) what we describe as "Practical Level" in at least one or more foreign languages in order to validate their degree. Language competence is validated internally and "Practical Level" is coded as level 3 in a system which includes courses ranging from level 1 (lowest) to level 5. Students enter the system at the level of their competence.

"Intermediate Level" English - the one we are concerned with in this paper - corresponds to our level 2, which means that it is not followed by students who arrive at the UTC with a reasonably good level. A typical candidate of the course is a young person of above-average academic ability (cf. selective entry above), who has so far, for a variety of reasons, "under-performed" in English.

So that we know what sort of numbers we are dealing with, Intermediate English enrols about 80 students in the Spring semester and 150 in the Autumn. The teaching team varies from 6 to 10 members of staff.

Brief description of the previous course

When I started working at the UTC in 1986, a series of English courses had been in place for 6 years that , for that period, gave a considerable degree of autonomy to the students. (The person behind the pedagogogy was Jean-Paul Narcy) (Narcy 1994).

Students attended two 2-hour classes , in small groups of about 14, for the 16 weeks of the semester and the teachers of these classes were called "animateurs". Most of the "animateurs" were native speakers, but not necessarily with a teacher-training background.

We have to remember that in the early 80's the theories of people like Stephen Krashen and Carl Rogers were very influential, and many researchers were convinced that "teaching made no difference." The thinking was clearly that the role of the institution was to provide comprehensible input and non-threatening opportunities to use language. As well as the classes, where their regular presence was required, students were supposed to do 1 to 2 hours of homework, called "autonomous work".

The results of regular course evaluation showed that students were generally satisfied with the course, so that from the users' point of view there was no imperative to radically change things or to go beyond a regular updating of the audio, video and written texts. The one small reproach made by some of the teaching team was that, apart from attending classes, a student could, if he was so inclined, get by with minimum participation and minimum production. In other words, he or she could take a "passenger" attitude.

Now while some would argue that this is the student's problem, others would say that it indicates a weakness in the system.

Reasons for change

If the reasons for change did not stem from real dissatisfaction with the existing system, they were felt nonetheless and can be seen to be both internally and externally generated.

Externally-generated reasons

A clearly definable impetus came from the Administrative Services, who were interested in seeing the students' hours of attendance in classes reduced - particularly in non-scientific subjects of course ...

Some less easily definable sources of influence came from:
- the general educational environment, where resources were being devoted more and more to equipping self-access centres and where the buzzwords were "self-directed learning" and "autonomy".
- the weight of years of influence from ESP and Adult Education, which have accustomed us to the supply-and-demand, value-for-money approach.

Internally-generated reasons

Part of the teaching team had been interested for some time in implementing a task-based approach, which was seen as potentially more suitable on the motivational level. As a result, the persons concerned accepted the legitimacy and reality of the external incentives and decided not to fight a rear-guard action but to treat them as a challenge and go beyond the basic recommendation for cutting down hours.

When one considers the activity of language learning in an engineering school or similar institution from the administrative point of view, one inevitably thinks in terms of time-management and yield. So the question became : how to get students to use the time they "saved" by not being in class, in an efficient way.

Opening of a new Language Centre

By coincidence rather than design, as it was a question of availability of room-space, we were involved during the same period in upgrading our old self-service language laboratory in favour of a larger, better-equipped area, to be called the Resources Centre.

Little influence on the rationale

Although the possibility of being able to work in an attractive, well-equipped environment can only have a positive effect on students' motivation, I think I am justified in claiming that this development had marginal influence on the thinking behind the new course, from the teaching team's point of view. However, we are well aware that it had considerable influence on the Administrative Services' point of view, expressed as a certain impatience to see all the language courses redesigned and hordes of students thronging the Resources Centre. What one might call "a quick return on their investment".

Pilot Project

In parallel to the planning of the new course and the setting-up of the Resources Centre, an experimental autonomy course had been running since the Autumn 95 semester. The idea was for about 20 3rd-year students to enrol, on a purely voluntary basis, in this alternative system and to stay in it until they graduated, in other words for 4 semesters. Three languages were concerned, English, German and Spanish.

The students attended no classes at all but were given individual tutoring and counselling ; each also had a partner for pair-work, which consisted in recording a dialogue on a cassette.

For English, which concerned a majority of the students, no specific material was prepared for them as the texts designed for the existing courses (see "Description of previous course" above) were easily adapted to a series of guided- autonomy courses.

Relevant results

Four aspects of the results of the evaluation of this experiment (it was evaluated by both the teachers involved and the participating students) are worth mentioning here, as they had implications for the design of the new intermediate-level course :

1) the students who studied both English and another language preferred the way the English course was run, in that their work was based on a polycopy (which had not been the case for German or Spanish) In their words, it gave them the impression that they knew where they were heading, that they were accomplishing something and encouraged an idea of progression. The alternative way of organizing the courses, where the teachers planned on a week-to-week basis, was not sufficiently structured (or predictable ?) for their liking.

2) all the students much appreciated the individualized aspect of the pedagogy. (Of course we have to remember that they volunteered for this option in the first place).

3) they enjoyed the pair-work and both students and tutors noticed its effectiveness

4) the handful of highly devoted and motivated teachers involved found that they tended to spend more of their time than they were supposed to on their tutees. They felt that the complete absence of classes was too extreme and that part of the students' perceived need for teacher-time - which they were meeting by their presence on a one-to-one basis - could be replaced by a short class.

Rationale of the new course

Given the specific context - which we feel is extremely important - that is to say, a non-scientific course for scientific students whose time is in considerable demand, we felt that a self-directed study option was not a feasible solution. In fact we feared that a majority of the students would fall into the category described at the end of the report concerning the ALMS programme :(Ervola, Kjisik *et al*, 1995)

> ..."in spite of very good intentions initially, many of them have been unable to maintain the discipline to work steadily and regularly".

Another danger inherent in self-directed study programmes is the one of not using one's time effectively, as explained by Cotterall (1995)

> "...there is a tendency for some learners to occupy their time in the centre with 'busy work' which may not result in learning, or to consistently choose materials which do not challenge them".

In addition, feedback from the Pilot Project had shown us that students preferred to know where they were going.

Lastly, contributions from research in socio-linguistics suggest that opportunities to use language in social interaction are an important part of the L2 learning process.

Replace a class-only structure by an alternative arrangement

Consequently, and although it is somewhat in contradiction with the concept of autonomy, we opted for a fairly structured organization, consisting in :

- individual work based on set projects
- individual counselling
- pair work
- a one-hour class for group activities.

Individual work based on set projects

During the semester, students have to work their way through 6 "projects" (see below) chosen from a range of about 12. The term and indeed the concept of "project" are central to the pedagogy, since a project is by definition at once teleological (= having a purpose) and contained (rather than open-ended). This latter characteristic is significant in terms of attention-span.

The element of choice (albeit a limited one) is also important, as choice is essential for empowerment.

In addition to this, half-way through the semester (to break the rythmn) students do a "personal project" for which they choose the theme and to a large extent the contents. The only constraints are that their project represents approximately the same amount of work as a set project and contains both comprehension and production activities.

We can note that discussion of what they intend to do for their personal project provides a real-life negotiating task for some of the counselling interviews.

Individual Counselling

Students are "followed" by a tutor or counsellor, whom they meet every other week, either for 15 minutes individually or for 30 minutes in pairs (i.e. with their pair-work partner).

The role of the counsellor is to:
- follow and take an interest in each student individually
- discuss and assess individual needs or weaknesses
- be an audience for and evaluate written and recorded production
- nvolve students in informal self-assessment, which entails getting them to think about the learning process.

It would be useful to add a few comments about the evaluation aspect, as this is an area which clearly reflects what we see as a "constructive" approach to learning. Our thoughts on the subject are expressed briefly in the following pages (see " A constructive approach" below). At this point we will simply explain that the approach to "correcting" errors is that of using their occurence as a pretext to inviting the learner to clarify that particular point with

the help of one of the various grammar books at his disposal. The teacher's role, in our system, is not to actually *give* the appropriate explanation but to send the student off, having pointed him in the right direction, to *find* it for him or her self.

Pair Work

Each project includes one pair-work exercise, which entails recording a dialogue on a cassette. The "Pair" formed for this exercise may choose to extend their partnership into the tutorial sessions (see (2) above) and the video-watching sequences (one in each project).

The one-hour class

This class is designed for activites that can only be done with peer participation or feedback ; for example, mingles, debates, role-playing, sketches, and so on.

In conclusion of this chapter

This arrangement is intended - independently of the actual language work that students do - to make students feel less teacher-dependent and more responsible for their learning. For although the students have limited choice in *what* they do (with the exception of the personal project), they are in charge of *how* and *when* they do it. There is also the active role of the learner in the correction of his work, that we mentioned above. We feel that this framework sends the right signals about being an active participant.

Content of the projects

Common-sense principles

Some of the guiding principles behind the conception of the projects are common-sense principles that need no theoretical justification :
• the theme selected should be intrinsically motivating
• the level of difficulty of the tasks should be optimal (cf. Krashen, i + 1)
• the time needed to complete each project should be perceived as "reasonable".

But motivating for who ? Optimal or reasonable according to whose judgement ? As these are, of course, learner-generated criteria, the projects are considered as being "on trial" initially and we have no hesitation in modifying them as a result of student feedback.

Other principles deserve some explanation as they are based on selected SLA research hypotheses ; a very brief explanation will follow but anyone wishing to have a more detailed account is referred to the works and articles listed in the bibliography.

A constructive approach

We share, probably with most advocates of autonomy, a belief in a "constructivist" approach to learning, constructivist being interpreted in a neutral or etymological sense, i.e. as being derived from the verb "to construct". Little (1995) expressed this idea in the following words, during the opening session of the previous conference in this series :

> "The pedagogy of learner autonomy must ...take account of the fact that each of us cannot help but construct his or her own knowledge"

We attempted to use this belief as a guiding principle in the design of the set projects that we created. The areas where the result is most evident are:

> 1) in the grammar sections, where students are led through a series of steps, starting from the observation of examples in the text, to complete the formulation of an explanation about the use of the particular structure or choice of verb form that was the object of the section.

> 2) in the vocabulary sections, where students are in many cases invited to use a Learner's Dictionary to find out how a word or expression is used. Another type of task seeks to draw the learner's attention to a vital difference of behaviour between French and English words or expressions which display a misleading similarity on the surface.
> (for example, "information" : for the benefit of non French-speakers *information* is countable in French.)

The influence of the constructive approach is less evident in the other tasks proposed. The priority there was to provide material which would form a thematic whole susceptible to "engage" the students. In order to give an idea of what our projects contain, we have included in annex one of the Tables of Contents. This is in fact an English translation of the actual version, as we opted - bearing in mind, on the one hand the relatively low level of English of

many of the students enrolled and on the other hand the fact that the projects are intended for autonomous work - to give all the explanations and instructions in French.

We saw in a preceding section that the idea of putting the learner in the situation where he is encouraged to make the effort of building his own knowledge, rather than being in the passive position of being taught, was also that adopted during the counselling interviews.

Course evaluation

As the new system took over from the previous arrangment in the middle of the Spring semester, we had a unique opportunity of evaluating it on a comparative basis. The questionnaire shown in Annex II was completed (anonymously) by 70 out of the 77 students enrolled. (For the purposes of this paper it has been translated into English).

Although there is the probability of the results having been influenced by the novelty of the arrangement (cf. the Hawthorn effect), a first-glance impression is that a majority of the students felt more responsible and more implicated personally under the new organization. The attitude towards time-management is less clearly positive. One interpretation could be that, while believing it to be a good idea in principle, may students were somewhat "thrown" by the unfamiliarity of the experience.

As far as the evaluation of the contents of the projects was concerned, we feel that the results were rather encouraging, considering on the one hand the public concerned (8 or more years of "learning" English, with limited results), and on the other hand the limited exposure time to this "new" approach.

Conclusion

Although it might appear to some as being rather directive, we are finding that the course structure described in these pages is well adapted to our context, namely that of a French Engineering school, where attainment of a reasonable level of English is a requirement rather than an option.

The individual project work and counselling seem to be sending the right signals about constructing one's own knowledge and about being a driver rather than a passenger.

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Annex I - Example of a "Project"

JUST PRESS THE BUTTON

Table of Contents

Know-how	Following and giving explanations of how a mechanical object works
Video	"How does it work?" Three short sequences concerning recent technical innovations (The Smart Card, Smart Water, a plane propelled by an elastic band). Answer the questions.
Reading	Press article with diagram concerning a "smart" lift
Listening	Short dialogue on cassette "Waiting for the lift"
Grammar	Simple present/present be + -ing Simple past/past be + -ing (Based on the article and the listening task)
Vocabulary	Tasks for exploiting the vocabulary of the text
Oral expression	a) monologue : choose one of the 3 innovations shown in the video and make a short recording about its advantages b) dialogue : Student A is a visitor from a remote island who wants to know how an ATM works. Student B tries to help him.
Writing task	"Taboo" : choose an everyday object and describe how it works and what it is used for, <u>without naming it.</u>
Mini-research	Who invented the lift? When? What impact did this invention have?Use Internet or an Encyclopaedia.
Recreational activity (optional)	Watch the film "Speed", which begins with an exciting episode in a lift ... (available in the Language Centre)

Annex 2 - Evaluation LA 12

We would appreciate having your opinion on the new organization of LA 12

1. COURSE ORGANIZATION Comparing the current organization (project work, tutorial, 1-hour class) with the organization at the beginning of the semester	(results in pecentages)		
☞ to what extent do you consider	less	as much	more
• that the teaching is individualized	❑ 0	❑ 17,1	❑ 82,8
• that you invest yourself	❑ 2,8	❑ 12,8	❑ 84,2
• that you feel responsible for the effect of the teching on your level of English	❑ 2,8	❑ 37,1	❑ 60

2. TIME MANAGEMENT					
☞ to what extent do you consider	0	1	2	3	4
• that it is interesting to have the possibility of managing one's time	0	2,8	18,5	44,2	34,2
• that it is efficient to manage one's time	0	5,7	35,7	44,2	14,2
• that it is easy to manage one's time	7,1	20	50	29	2,8

3. PROJECT CONTENTS					
☞ to what extent do you consider that the projects	0	1	2	3	4
• bring you to think about language as an expression of culture	1,4	18,5	40	31,4	8,5
• help you to understand how English works	0	11,4	44,2	34,2	10
• help you to acquire good learning strategies	1,4	8,5	42,8	38,5	8,5

4. MISCELLANEOUS	(results in pecentages)		
☞ in your opinion	less	as much	more
• the length of the project is	❏ 2,8	❏ 47,1	❏ 50
• the length of the class is	❏ 42,8	❏ 57,1	❏ 0