

# Thematic Network Project in the area of Languages

## Sub-project 3: New Technologies and Language Learning

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### Autonomy and self-instruction in language learning: the current situation in European institutions of higher education

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Appendix to the Final Report for Year One

# Autonomy and self-instruction in language learning: the current situation in European institutions of higher education

## Introduction: A definition of learner autonomy and self-directed learning and their relationship with new technologies for language learning

A central goal of current approaches to language teaching including communicative language teaching, task based learning and learning strategy training is to enhance student autonomy and control over the language learning process. This has been particularly true of language teaching in Higher Education (HE). Two notions which have thus become dominant topics in language teaching are "learner autonomy" and "self-directed learning". The rapid evolution of this area of research means that the definitions of autonomy change as new theories are put forward and new practices are piloted. Although the meaning and implications of autonomy have been becoming clearer over the last twenty years, there is still some confusion about the whole issue. We feel it is important to establish exactly what is meant by the terms "learner autonomy" and "self directed learning" in this report.

### Learner autonomy

To begin with, it is important to state what learner autonomy is *not*. As Little (1991) points out, where there is hostility towards the idea of learner autonomy it is often based on a false assumption about what autonomy is and what it entails. He outlines five common misconceptions about autonomy:

- A first misconception is that autonomy is synonymous with self-instruction, that it means simply working without a teacher. It is certainly true that some learners who follow the path of self-instruction achieve some degree of learner autonomy, but many do not.
- A second misconception is that in order to encourage autonomy in the students, the teacher must relinquish all control in the classroom, as any intervention on the part of the teacher may destroy whatever autonomy the learners have managed to attain. This is simply not true; autonomy is still possible in a class where the teacher remains in control.
- A third misconception is that "learner autonomy" is a new methodology, that it is something which can be programmed into a series of lesson plans. Unfortunately the concept of autonomy is not this simple.
- A fourth misconception is that autonomy is a single, easily described behaviour. This is also not true. Autonomy can, according to Little, take many different forms, depending on the age of the learners, their stage of learning and their learning goals etc.
- A fifth misconception is that autonomy is a steady state achieved by certain learners. In reality, the permanence of autonomy cannot be guaranteed, and a learner who displays a high degree of autonomy in one area may not be autonomous in another.

Little goes on to give a provisional definition of autonomy in which he states that:

"Essentially, autonomy is a capacity - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. " (ibid.; 4)

### Self-directed learning

Holec (1988) discusses the relationship between the concepts of learner autonomy and self-directed learning. He describes autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". This ability is, according to Holec, not something we are born with; it has to be learnt either consciously or unconsciously. When a learner has acquired this ability he/she must

- have the chance to use it
- be willing to use it.

The learner who has this ability and makes full use of it can be said to be engaged in *self-directed* learning. Holec points out that "self-directed learning implies an autonomous learner" (ibid.; 9). On the other hand, an autonomous learner need not use his/her ability completely and may be only partially involved in self-directed learning. Holec explains the terminology in the following way: Autonomy refers to an ability, thus the adjective autonomous should only be applied to a person, not a process. This is why he suggests the expression "self-directed learning" to describe the learning process in which an autonomous learner is involved.

He maintains that there are varying degrees of self-direction in learning which may be connected to varying degrees of autonomy. According to Holec, the components of an entirely self-directed process of learning are the following:

- fixing the objectives
- defining the contents and progressions
- selecting the methods and techniques to be used
- monitoring the acquisition procedure
- evaluating what has been acquired

In this report we use the terms learner autonomy and self directed learning in a way which incorporates the views of both Little and Holec.

### The relationship between learner autonomy, self-directed learning and new technologies

It has been argued that new technologies, in particular computer networks, have the potential to increase learner autonomy when they are used appropriately.

Warschauer et. al. (1996) claim that "the mechanics alone of computer-mediated communication provide students with a much better opportunity for control and initiative in language learning" (ibid.; 3). They give a number of examples including the following;

- The "asynchronicity" of e-mail frees students from time and distance limitations, enabling them to initiate discussions with their teachers or with other students at any time of day and at a number of places rather than only during class or office hours.
- In contrast to classroom verbal discussion, a student using e-mail does not need to wait for an instructor's permission to talk.
- Writing instructors report that the use of computer conferencing can prompt more discussion that is student-centred.

- When long distance communication is available students have the independent opportunity to use the foreign or second language for authentic communication with native speakers.
- Many teachers suggest that linking cross-cultural communication through e-mail with task-based learning provides the most fruitful combination for fostering student autonomy.

In relation to learner autonomy, Warschauer et. al. claim that computer networking can develop students' learning skills and critical learning perspective. One of the main supporting arguments for this claim is that, with the "information explosion", knowing how to find and interpret facts is more important than memorising them.

The aim of this report is to provide the most accurate picture possible of the present situation of learner autonomy and new technologies in HE language teaching institutions across Europe. We assess the extent to which teachers' understandings of the terms learner autonomy and self-directed learning correspond to those outlined by theorists. We also hope to find out how new technologies are being used in language teaching and whether they are promoting learner autonomy in ways such as those suggested by Warschauer et al. Furthermore, we hope that language teachers reading this report will be able to use it to assess their own situation compared with other language teaching departments across Europe.

The findings in the report come from two sources: results from a questionnaire, and interviews with HE language teaching institutions.

The findings from the questionnaire have enabled us to gain an initial insight into the prevalent attitudes towards learner autonomy and new technologies in European HE language teaching departments. They elicited diverse responses, and pointed to areas which seemed worthy of further investigation.

The interviews provided more detailed information on the circumstances within five HE institutions. As well as learning about the kinds of equipment available we aimed to find out about the people working with it, to get to know the conditions in which they work, the kinds of problems they have encountered, the aspects of the job about which they are enthusiastic as well as aspects which they find discouraging and so on.

In the first part of this report we present a description, based on findings from our questionnaires, of the various attitudes existing within European institutions of higher education towards learner autonomy, self study and new technologies for language learning. In this part of the report we hope to go some way towards categorising the wide variety of practical situations and ways of organising teaching that exist across Europe.

In the second part of the report we present reports of three interviews with typical representatives of three types of institution that emerged from our questionnaire responses. The aim of this part is to provide in-depth examples of the categories established in part 1. This should highlight the considerable differences of attitude existent in European higher education.

In the third part of the report we present reports of two interviews with distance learning institutions. These interviews examine the implications of learner autonomy for the provision of self access materials and for the respective roles of the teachers and learners.

In the conclusion we outline several avenues which might be explored in the near future in order to improve and extend both knowledge and use of learner autonomy, self-directed learning and new technologies.

## Part 1

### **A description of the various attitudes existing within European higher education institutions towards learner autonomy, self study and new technologies**

Questionnaires were sent out to just over a hundred language centres in universities and colleges of higher education across Europe and replies were received from thirty four. We asked the directors of language centres to tell us about their experiences with learner autonomy using the following three questions as guidelines:

1. What is the present role of learner autonomy and self instruction in your institution?
2. Please specify the types of support that are available to your students (self-access centres, language laboratories, workstations, multimedia etc. as well as human support).
3. How has the role of the teacher been changed by increased learner autonomy and self-instruction in your institution? In your opinion, what changes should be taking place?

In this first part of our report the replies received to the three questions are described and analysed. This should provide some idea as to the various attitudes, hopes and concerns vis-à-vis learner autonomy existing across Europe. The description is organised along the same lines as the questionnaire looking firstly at attitudes towards the notion of learner autonomy, then at means of support provided for it and finally at the changing role of the teacher. In a number of cases responses have been classified into three types each reflecting differing degrees of commitment to learner autonomy. These types should help readers of this report who are involved in learner autonomy to compare their own activities with those of other European institutions.

#### **A description of the main findings in the replies to the questionnaire**

##### **Question 1**

##### **How do you view the role of learner autonomy and self instruction within your institution?**

The aim of this question was to try to identify the extent to which the various departments differentiate between learner autonomy and self instruction, and the degree to which these are relevant to their own teaching situations. The answers to this question have been classified into three broad types. These should enable readers to consider their own institution's attitudes towards learner autonomy with those of their European counterparts.

##### **Question 1: "Type 1" Responses**

These institutions see a limited role for learner autonomy, self study and the new technologies within their language departments. They may not feel that these notions are particularly relevant to their own particular situations. Here are some representative examples:

Some departments equate learner autonomy with self instruction. For example in the report from Klagenfurt University it is observed that:

"students can easily contact their lecturers when in need of support, and hence they are often not as determined in self instruction as they could be".

At Graz university there is almost a feeling of opposition to the notion of learner autonomy:

"(learner autonomy and self instruction) run partly counter to the present view of efficient language learning and the communicative curriculum, except in specific areas, e.g. vocabulary learning. Self instruction seems possible in other fields of English studies, e.g. specific areas in linguistics, literature where facts have to be learned".

According to Graz, self instruction is only relevant where facts have to be learned. Any other kind of learning requires a teacher.

Interestingly, it is often in these universities (for example at the Vienna University of Economics and Klagenfurt University) where learner autonomy is seen as a good way of cutting costs and teaching time. They quote reasons such as large class sizes and limited time allocated to language teaching as good reasons for promoting learner autonomy. These may be very practical reasons but they do not seem to take into account learner autonomy as anything other than students learning on their own.

Some departments (for example at Vienna University) see learner autonomy as something very practical, and unrelated to their research interests. They say that increased time spent creating materials for self access would take away precious research time.

Some institutions such as the Catholic University of Brabant "offer" self instruction but prefer to "sell it as supportive of instruction". It is not integrated into the main teaching schedule.

### **Question 1: "Type 2" Responses**

Some institutions have self study facilities and use new technologies, but do not have a vision of how their language teaching provision might evolve in the light of increased learner autonomy. Self study facilities are available but they are not well incorporated into the general curriculum, and in some cases difficulties have been encountered in motivating students to use the facilities. Here are some representative examples:

Some universities have self study facilities and use new technologies, but do not have a vision of the long term effects that these will have on their language teaching provision. This group includes universities such as Vienna University which sees learner autonomy as something which is very important but which has received a very low level of managerial support. Tampere University sees learner autonomy primarily as a way of saving money and secondly for its pedagogical importance.

In this group we have also included those universities who are very much in favour of learner autonomy, but who find it difficult to motivate their students into being autonomous, even when the materials are highly relevant to their needs. The Autonomous University of Madrid complains that their self study centre set up for students revising for end of year exams has only been used by nine students. La Sainte Union College of Higher Education claims that students still seem to need teachers present, and are not willing to explore reasons for their errors independently, turning instead to the teacher for an explanation. The teacher constantly needs to act as "a motivator and facilitator, spurring students to make full use of all that is on offer within a

piece of software". Perhaps these institutions should use approaches such as those used at Aalborg and Hull universities where learners have successfully been trained to be autonomous (see below).

The approach of some universities to learner autonomy is very much technology driven. New computers arrive and departments are faced with the big question of what to do with them. This approach seems to have been adopted by Bath University where it has engendered a degree of staff scepticism which is difficult to overcome.

At Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration learner autonomy is supported by the management as it is seen as both a cost-cutting device and a natural result of developments in computing technology. However, the teaching staff believe that the main reason for increasing self instruction and learner autonomy can be found in new ideas about learner responsibility. It seems as if they have managed to put a financially motivated decision to practical pedagogical use. The promotion of learner-centredness features prominently in the department's "mission statement".

### **Question 1: "Type 3" Responses**

Some institutions have a very clear idea of what learner autonomy is. They have clearly defined objectives in this area. Learner autonomy is strongly encouraged and self access is fully integrated into the main curriculum. Here are some representative examples of "type 3" responses:

The Institute for Applied Language Studies, University of Edinburgh says that "better learners (i.e. those who seem most often - though not always - to progress) are those who are aware of their own learning behaviour and are able to make independent choices about and evaluation of their learning"

According to Hull University, there is a need to teach language students "a way of continuing to learn". Hull University places great emphasis on the

"creation of individuals who have acquired the tools to become autonomous learners"

and has a number of staff engaged in research into learner autonomy. They do not assume that learners are going to become autonomous by themselves. They perceive a need for preliminary orientation and further monitoring stressing the importance of the person involved in helping the learner become autonomous.

Jvväskylän Yliopisto University stresses the importance of continuous self-assessment amongst its learners.

At Oulu university the curriculum is "designed in a way that allows freedom in the realisation of courses". Portfolios are compiled of the student's work and are used as tools of development. Reflective practices are an essential part of all language studies:

"The department seems to have had the will to design the material and structural frameworks of the studies so that it is possible for teachers to embed in their courses enhancement of learner autonomy and give the students a real possibility to build their own curricula throughout their studies."

A good example of how theories of learner autonomy are put into practice is provided by the English department at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Arts et Métiers at Angers which follows a schema founded by the CRAPEL at Nancy. After being given a brief introduction to how the system works the students are encouraged to work towards a personalised final goal according to the following procedure:



- i. Together with their teacher they decide upon a suitable overall learning goal.
- ii. They then decide upon smaller short term learning goals that will go towards making up the overall learning goal.
- iii. They choose the material that they will require (books, cassettes, multimedia and so on) and the kinds of human support that they might require.
- iv. They choose the kind of activity which will form the first learning goal.
- v. They evaluate what they have learned.
- vi. They revise what they have learned.

The time spent reaching each short term learning goal is decided by each individual student.

However the implementation of learner autonomy at Angers has faced a number of teething problems, the main one being that the English department is the only department within the Ecole Nationale Supérieure which tries to foster a spirit of learner autonomy. All other subjects are taught in a very traditional way and thus the students are used to a highly structured "top down" learning culture. The department therefore has great difficulty in encouraging its students to learn autonomously. The fact that learner autonomy does not correspond to the general learning culture of an institution, or indeed of a country, would seem to be a problem encountered by many language departments which have themselves embraced the idea of learner autonomy and would like to implement it.

Many universities believe that in order to work, self-directed learning must to some extent be encouraged by the language learning programme. At Aalborg University approximately 50 percent of the language study time is spent in student-governed, group-based studies. This means that the students work together in groups of 3-6, preparing a written report of 80-100 pages (22,000-40,000 words). During the preparation of the report, the students have to collect and analyse a large amount of data for which they use various computer facilities. In co-operation with a supervisor the students define the framework of the topic/problem they wish to examine, but apart from that the groups are to a large extent autonomous and are expected to be able to work independently and collect relevant data from various sources without assistance. A similar approach is taken at Potsdam, Bath and Durham universities. At the Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration most of the studying that takes place in the self-study centre is for obligatory assignments integrated into the language learning programmes.

At many universities (for example Le Havre and Strasbourg) learner autonomy is viewed as a practical way of accommodating individual differences amongst students. After an initial entry test the teacher and student work together to produce an individualised work plan based on the student's level in the target language, his/her immediate needs and preferred style of learning. The student then chooses the types of equipment and human support required to carry out this work plan.

Some universities have turned to learner autonomy for very practical reasons. These include universities such as Reims where much of the learning is distance learning. Thames Valley University claims that many of its students are learning "with rather than at" the university as many of them live abroad or study part time and have to fit their education around their jobs. This is learner autonomy born of necessity, as well as responding to recent thinking in ELT research.

### **Summary of findings from question 1**

We can see that there are many different attitudes existing towards learner autonomy across Europe and many different ways of implementing it. Universities at which it is not very well developed or supported tend to be those in which it is seen as a cost-cutting

opportunity. Universities which support the idea but where it does not seem to be working should perhaps consider introducing compulsory self-study elements into their courses or offering students more guidance in self-study techniques and strategies. Where experiments in learner autonomy have worked this has happened because a great deal of effort has gone into helping the students set up their own work agendas and assistance and advice have always been available throughout the learning process. Learner autonomy does not mean "leaving learners on their own to get on with it".

### Question 2

**Please specify the types of support that are available to your students (self access centres, language laboratories, workstations, multimedia etc. as well as human support)**

This question was intended to establish the extent to which universities are able to provide the kinds of support (both material and human) required by their students in order to become autonomous. As far as material support is concerned, we were interested in finding out whether the institutions feel that the commercially available material is appropriate to their needs, or whether they prefer to develop their own in-house material. We were also keen to find out about the various forms that human support can take.

#### Material support - non-computerised.

Many centres have a range of non-computerised support such as self-study grammar and vocabulary books, cable and satellite television, up-to-date off-air and commercial videos, audio materials, pronunciation materials and recorded simplified readers (tapes and texts). A popular idea is to have a satellite corner where students can view foreign language television programmes. Former language laboratories often form the basis for the new self-access centres as they provide good, isolated listening equipment. They do, however, have to be adapted in order that other self-access materials can be kept there. A smaller number of institutions have facilities such as video disks and interpreting suites. Only Hull university mentions the presence of "learning to learn" materials.

#### Material support - computerised.

Most study centres have multimedia computers with word-processing, printers, (sometimes) scanners, CALL programmes, CD Roms containing, for example, dictionaries, thesauri, encyclopaedias, language packages, grammar teaching programmes, spelling checkers and newspapers. Most computerised study centres have access to the Internet, international libraries and e-mail. Multimedia computers are generally thought to be of great benefit to the students as they :

"allow for a better and more personalised integration of listening, speaking, reading and writing language materials."

"Automatic feedback linked to the learning materials allows for more learner-directed language learning. The computer software allows the learner as well as the teacher to keep track of the progress that is made. "

"Multimedia can offer the learner suggestions for future language work and seriously cut down on the teacher's correction and scoring work"

The only complaint voiced about computerised assistance for language learning is that links with the Internet are often too slow and can cause students to waste a lot of time.

Three of the universities questionned appeared to have particularly well-equipped study centres:

Aalborg university offers a range of multimedia tool programmes (Director, Stratasstudio, Photoshop etc.), and the students can be taught how to edit audio and video recordings. The centre has video cameras for the students to borrow if needed for their project work. These are often used by students when writing linguistics projects where they make recordings of real-life conversation and use them as a basis for their written work.

The Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration has video disc drives for interactive video programmes as well as videoconferencing equipment. They also have a professional T.V. studio for filming video tapes, though at present the use of this is limited to the teachers.

At Muenster University the self-study centre also serves as a computer based information centre allowing students to find out about current political and social affairs through databases such as "Domesday" (the largest collection of statistical and encyclopaedic data on Great Britain) and information about the state-of-the-art in CALL. This is also one of the few universities to list concordancing programmes among its material.

These are universities at which self study is already a fairly long-standing tradition, and in which the students are used to the idea learner autonomy.

#### In-house materials

The universities consulted seem to be reasonably happy with the commercially available CALL material. However some have preferred to design their own, more individually oriented material. The most popular authoring systems seem to be Gapmaster, Choicemaster, Storyboard, Question Designer, Toolbook and Sam.

Klagenfurt University has used a combination of these to produce a selection of language teaching programmes partially tailored to the needs of the Business and Computer Science students.

Ghent university has had success developing its own courseware using a self-designed authoring system IRIS as well as the multimedia authoring systems Question Designer, Toolbook and LAVC. Thanks to these systems much of the material in the self access centre is tailored to the needs of the students and is designed principally by their own teachers.

The university of Le Havre has developed an authoring system entitled "Learning Space" which can be used by teachers who have little knowledge of computing and offers a wide range of pedagogical activities. Using Learning Space Le Havre has developed the following exercises:

- An exercise designed to offer remedial tuition in grammar.
- An exercise which introduces users to specialised vocabulary.
- Exercises that are designed to improve oral competence (intonation, rhythm and stress).
- Listening and reading comprehension exercises based on multimedia documents.

In general, these authoring systems seem to be being found useful by the various institutions. However, the duplication of exercises which are being designed in isolation seems wasteful. For example many departments seem to have designed their own remedial grammar exercises. It seems a pity that those exercises which are not aimed specifically at in-house students are not made more readily available for teachers at other universities. Admittedly it is possible for teachers to gain access to some of this language learning material on the Internet, but this often seems to be randomly organised and difficult to find. A partial solution might lie in the creation of a web site containing exercises for language learning which have been produced by various

universities. If this web site were well-managed the various exercises could be classified according to type, target students, difficulty and so on.

#### The layout of the centres.

Where institutions have mentioned the layout of the centres (and these are presumably the institutions where enough money has been available to spend on a good layout) the favoured design is a welcoming open-plan space with built-in perimeter tables for work with equipment and large moveable central tables for group work. Most of the language learning materials are set out on open shelves, organised according to language and type and occasionally colour-coded. Small sound-proofed rooms are often available for students who want to work in groups or feel too shy to speak into their tape recorder in the open room. Catalogues of the holdings are usually to be found on computer and on cards. The Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration has spent ten years coding and computing information about all the language learning materials available in its self-study centre (including information about the level of difficulty) thus providing easy access for students.

#### Human support

An examination of our responses has enabled us to identify three kinds of human support:

- i. support for the students helping them to become autonomous.
- ii. support for the teachers who may not be familiar with the new possibilities and limitations of the new technologies.
- iii. technical support to ensure maintenance.

Again the responses fell into three types. These are as follows:

#### **Question 2: "Type 1" responses**

Some institutions have little or no human support for learner autonomy, this is usually for financial reasons or because self-study facilities are so undeveloped that they have not been deemed worthy of support personnel. Here are some representative examples:

At some universities, lack of human support may threaten the future of the self study centre. For example La Sainte Union College of Higher Education does not have a high enough level of technical support within the language centre and most of the repair work falls on the one teacher who is the most computer literate in the department. He is not a computer expert and the department is entirely dependent on his goodwill.

In this group we also include responses from universities such as Tampere which for financial reasons only has a very small self study centre and cannot afford to have a member of staff permanently manning it.

At Jyväskylä Yliopisto there is an urgent need for full-time personnel to maintain the self access facilities and to advise the students. At the moment this task falls upon the shoulders of the office staff who have to do it on top of their own work. This is not a satisfactory situation.

At Aalborg university it seems that once the students have established the framework of their particular project with the help of a supervisor they are left virtually alone with the study centre materials with the only assistance available being help with the hardware and software. Lack of funding for study centre personnel is a serious problem for a number of universities.

### **Question 2: "Type 2" responses**

Many universities do have some form of technical human support but often the students remain unsure as to the best ways of using the facilities for their independent learning and the teachers are left in the dark as to possibilities and limitations the new materials. Here are some representative examples:

Graz university tells us that the self-access centre is staffed by one full time person and several part time helpers but they do not say whether these members of staff are language teachers, language advisers or technicians. The role of the person manning the self access centre must be made clear and there should ideally be at least one person working there as a student adviser.

At Bath university technical assistance is always available but the advisers are not people with specific CALL expertise. This is mainly due to financial constraints.

At the university of Urbino two technicians double-up as tutors. This is going some way to recognising the need for self study tutors, however it is unlikely that the technicians are trained language teachers and as such will not be able to give advice on matters such as appropriate learning strategies for learner autonomy.

### **Question 2: "Type 3" responses**

About half the universities questioned appear to attach a great deal of importance to the issue of human support, and see it as central to the successful running of their self-study centres. Their language teachers are confident with the technologies available, technicians ensure maintenance and the institution trains the teachers or employs full time "language advisers" to help the students gain true autonomy.

At the university of Hull, a strong belief in learner autonomy has led to the creation of the post of "language adviser" to work at the university's language centre. The role of the language adviser is to act as a "bridging figure" between the teacher, the learner and the new resources. At a workshop in Cambridge where the primary focus was on language advising, the following list of tasks and responsibilities of a language adviser was compiled. The language adviser is there to:

- listen to the learners' needs and elicit further conversation
- obtain relevant information for the design of a study plan (e.g. educational background, learning styles and perceptions, time management, aims etc.)"
- provide adequate and clear guidance and support for learners to work autonomously
- monitor the learning patterns of the users of the service and provide relevant and effective feedback
- help the institution provide appropriate language learning opportunities
- monitor resources in relation to users' needs
- train users to become proficient learners through better understanding of their learning processes
- act as 'mirrors' and keep on reminding learners of their original aims and objectives
- help them find and keep their motivation

Users of the self-access centre (who include undergraduates, postgraduates, members of staff, and members of the local community) contact an adviser to start an individual, personalised programme in which they decide the pace, sequence and mode of learning as well as content and assessment criteria. The learner may need a preliminary orientation and further monitoring.

The university has found both e-mail and face-to-face advising to be effective approaches. E-mail can be a very effective way to keep open a dialogue which started through face-to-face contact. It offers a valuable reserve of retrievable data about the learners and it assists in the monitoring of progress. In Hull advising via e-mail has increased by about 20% in the last year. Indeed demand for the self access facilities at Hull has grown rapidly, and the fact that students had to be turned away because the language centre was full led to a major extension project. Much of this success could well be attributed to the amount of time that the university spends advising its students in learner autonomy. An academic member of staff is charged solely with developing service courses in languages, including English as a foreign language.

Hull university has identified a national need for training in advising skills. In order to meet the future demand for language advisers, and to link the advisers currently in place it has set up an organisation called PLAN. PLAN stands for "Professional Language Advisers' Network" and its stated aims are to:

- raise awareness of the role of language advisers in self access centres,
- set up an organisation which could have a transnational identity,
- define the characteristics of this profession,
- create an infrastructure to support staff training and development for anybody who is interested in this career,
- spread good practice in language advising,
- provide a rich bibliography of materials on issues related to language advising.

(PLAN can currently be accessed by joining the electronic network at [plan@hull.ac.uk](mailto:plan@hull.ac.uk))

At the Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration , advice is currently provided by the staff in the language centre who are mainly involved in helping both teachers and students to find suitable material. However they plan to create the post of a language adviser and one of their English teachers will participate in the Cambridge University language adviser training course in Summer 1997. At Angers too although they already have a teacher in charge of the study centre, a secretary and two assistants they bemoan the absence of a trained, computer literate language adviser.

At Edinburgh University, EFL students have a 90 minute session in the self-study centre once a week with their class teacher, who is responsible for giving students individual tutorials on their language and study skills. At open access times, the staff are language teachers who have been trained specifically to act as tutors to any student requiring help or advice. The language department also runs a weekly 1 hour pronunciation clinic in its self-study centre "for selected EFL students".

At Strasbourg University, students are trained in the use of the resource centre. They are helped by their teacher to establish a learning route which takes into account their working rhythms and their preferred learning styles. They are then given intensive training in strategies for learner autonomy. During this training they are taught to choose appropriate objectives, select suitable learning tools, reflect on the various ways of learning open to them, analyse their own motivations, calculate the amount of time necessary for learning and evaluate their own progress. During their learning programme they meet occasionally with their teacher who gives advice on study skills and reminds the students of the various learning options open to them.

At Muenster University the human support in the self-study centre comes from the students themselves. The university has taken the principles of learner independence and learner responsibility to their natural conclusions involving its students in the building up of the self-study facilities not only in the early planning stage, but also later on when choosing the equipment and negotiating with computer firms. The students were involved

in all decisions about what kinds of materials were needed and how the centre should best be organised. A student support team is in charge of running the self-study centre. This team makes decisions to purchase materials, conducts software training courses and organises department events. Individual students even offer workshops (poetry workshop, film workshop) or tutorials (essay writing tutorial), and develop materials for their peers (CALL exercises, program documentation and customised manuals). Furthermore, a large number of student volunteers supervise the centre during opening hours as the university cannot afford to pay for the permanent staffing of the centre.

Support is also needed for the teachers if they are to make good use of new technologies. At the university of Ghent a CALL and multimedia manager co-ordinates and supports the development of materials by teachers, attuning teacher expectations and computer possibilities and limitations.

### **Summary of findings from question 2**

As far as material support is concerned, the most popular products amongst students and teachers are multimedia facilities, email and word processing packages. Many institutions are involved in designing their own "in-house" materials.

As for human support, the most successful institutions are those that have recognised the need for a substantial amount of support for both the learners (learning strategy training, introduction to new technologies and so on) and the teachers (training in how to use the new technologies, how to advise students and so on).

The amount of student support and advice seems to be one of the key determiners of a language department's success in encouraging learner autonomy. Several options are open when choosing what form this support should take. Teachers can be trained to act as advisers and consultants, special "language advisers" can be appointed whose job is purely to advise, or the students themselves can assume the role of support staff.

### **Question 3**

#### **How has the role of the teacher been changed by increased learner autonomy and self-instruction in your institution? In your opinion, what changes should be taking place?**

It is evident from the previous section that in many language departments the role of the teacher is changing. However the extent of this change varies from department to department. Again we have identified three types of responses: Those which consider the role of the teacher not to have changed significantly ("type 1" responses), those which see the type of work changing slightly but still see a central position for classroom based learning ("type 2" responses) and those which see a whole new role for the teacher acting more as a kind of "language consultant" ("type 3" responses).

One common factor that we have observed in all those institutions which say that the role of the teacher has changed is that the predominant trend is for the teachers' workload to increase.

#### **Question 3: "Type 1" Responses**

Some universities (for example Vienna University) claim that the role of the teacher has not changed at all. These universities say that their teachers already have very heavy teaching loads and simply haven't got the time to create materials for self access centres.

At Klagenfurt University, language teachers seem to be generally unenthusiastic about self study and learner autonomy. They are already prepared to give students encouragement and a great deal of individual feedback. They feel that this is enough and do not see a need for further learner autonomy.

The Institut für Englische Sprache in Vienna, which is very conscious of its staff shortages and its lack of financial resources is concerned about the amount of staff time that would have to be spent designing self study materials. It also feels that this activity would take up valuable research time.

As self instruction is seen as a separate product from language teaching at the Universitair Talencentrum at Nijmegen there has been no change in the role of the language teachers.

At the Università Degli Studi di Urbino very few language teachers have shown any interest in the use of new technologies. The root of the problem seems to be the lack of contact and co-operation between linguists and computer science experts.

It seems that this arts/science divide is something which will have to be overcome if the opportunities offered by new technologies are to be integrated into language learning. One solution proposed by Urbino is the provision of specific funds and career opportunities for those willing to bridge this gap.

### **Question 3: "Type 2" Responses**

In some universities (such as the University of Graz and the University of Ghent) the role of the teacher is expected to remain one of an imparter of information, but he/she will increasingly need to play a much more active and participatory role providing guidance as to where to look up additional information and in some cases he/she will have to prepare self-study materials for the students. The teachers will have to spend more time designing, implementing and administering self-instruction schemes, but their central duty will still be teaching.

At Ghent the role of the teachers is expected to change in three ways:

- i. They will need to know what independent learning is, to master the knowledge and skills that they will have to pass on to the learners, as well as being competent in setting up learner training activities.
- ii. They will need to have knowledge of the types and characteristics of the tools available to the learner, and must have specific technical knowledge and skills in the use of different media, information technology and so on.
- iii. They will not only need a passive knowledge of this type of information, but will also have to be competent cataloguers and good at helping learners to find the materials they are looking for.

However these activities are expected to supplement normal teaching activities not replace them entirely; the main part of the teaching will continue to take place in the classroom.

This approach is reflected at Edinburgh University where the central role of teachers is still classroom based teaching. However, EFL teachers are required to make use of the resource centre on a weekly basis and its availability at other times as a teaching resource discourages too strong a teacher-centred approach to teaching. In the future, Edinburgh envisages a closer integration of the centre as a teaching resource in the core of the EFL programme. This should further encourage teachers and students in the direction of increased autonomy.

At La Sainte Union College of Higher Education teachers are required to spend time with the students in the self study centre, as students lack the confidence to work on their own with the computers. They say that the most efficient learning can take place while



staff "rove" within the centre dealing with issues which the computers have not been programmed to tackle. Unfortunately at this institution, even though many members of staff are interested in developing computer based language learning materials, they do not have the time to pursue this interest.

The University of Plymouth is the only institution to have quantified the change in teachers' work load brought about by learner autonomy. It is estimated to have increased by about 20%.

At Bath University most of the teachers are researchers with specialist interests outside the sphere of language teaching. They will need to acquire a large amount of expertise in a relatively short time in order to get optimum use from the multimedia facilities. The need to do so is aggravated by the fact that, due to increasing financial pressures, the number of contact hours for language teaching has decreased.

At Muenster University a few members of the language teaching staff have modified their teaching in order to increase learner autonomy. They have started to provide counselling and rely less on traditional teaching in their seminars. However this only applies to the minority of department staff. The syllabi and curricula used by the institution are, according their report, still too rigid to allow any real learner autonomy. Furthermore, learner autonomy is "mistakenly thought of as being some being sort of 'laissez faire' policy by a number of teachers", and there is, according to their report, a need for further research and discussion of the topic, for example by means of staff symposia.

At the Catholic University of Brabant, the language department feels that the classroom and its teacher should still be at the centre of the learning process. The teacher's way of integrating self-instruction in the learning process determines its use. They feel that more enthusiasm for learner autonomy would be brought about if teachers were given the opportunity to see successful working examples in other language teaching institutions.

Many of the departments whose answers are in the "type 2" category are happy for their staff to remain essentially classroom teachers and see self-study as one part of the syllabus. However in some of the universities in this category there is a lack of awareness among the teachers as to what exactly would be required of them by an increase in learner autonomy.

### **Question 3: "Type 3" Responses**

The most radical departments claim that the role of the teacher will change beyond recognition over the next few years. A wide variety of words is used to describe the new role of the teacher including "guide", "facilitator", "adviser", "enabler", "consultant", "organiser", "co-operator" and "creator" (of new materials).

Many of the types of human support described in answer to the second question of this report (what kinds of support are provided?) are of course provided by the teacher. A few departments however stand out as particularly forward-thinking in their expectations for the role of the teacher both now and in the future.

At Thames Valley University lecturers are considered to be working as part of an integrated learning support team (other areas of support being computer assisted language learning, the Internet and so on). They have become curriculum designers and producers of multimedia module study materials. They are strongly encouraged to harness new technologies and add variety and flexibility to the learning process.

At the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Arts et Métiers at Angers, apart from a few hours of face-to-face communication with the students and duties such as materials-writing, the

teachers now work principally as "advisers" and meet with students individually or in pairs in order to:

- i. Give them advice about various aspects of their learning.
- ii. Help them to evaluate what they have learned.
- iii. Serve as a partner for various oral expression exercises.
- iv. Go over their progress at the end of the year.

The author of the report from Oulu University is worried about the apparent trend for students to see study through "alternative ways" such as distance learning and multimedia as distinct and separate from their day-to-day teaching. She declares her intention to redesign her own teaching in order to allow greater integration of the different types of learning. She will try to design her courses so that even the students she sees every week will have a chance to choose whatever method of study suits them best, be it contact or self study. She describes a need for:

"a continuously re-shaping process which consciously tries to build the curriculum and the material surroundings so that learner autonomy (will) be enhanced".

(It must be noted there that she is describing her own personal attitudes towards the role of the teacher and does not necessarily represent the official policy of her institution.)

At Hull university the language department has perceived

"a need to rethink the division of labour between teacher, learner and resources in quite a rigorous way".

The teacher will be expected to become a "facilitator of learning" rather than content deliverer and subject expert. He/she will be expected to work closely with the language adviser (see above) and learn to develop learner training and counselling skills. Workshops have already been organised to do this. Language advising is, according to Hull, "an emerging profession".

The Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration makes the point that changes are needed in recruiting criteria; there is a need for continuous teacher and learner training and for new definitions of basic concepts like 'teaching', 'classroom' and so on. At this school the number of teaching hours for the language staff has decreased by about 20% since 1990, but the teachers' workload has increased.

### **Summary of findings from question 3**

It seems that a variety of expectations abound for the future role of the teacher (and indeed for the role played by learner autonomy and self study). Some institutions expect classroom learning to continue to form the core of language learning for years to come, while others expect a more radical change in type of learning and the role of teacher. There is of course room for all the possibilities given the heterogeneous nature of university language departments across Europe but it may be useful for a university to know where it stands in relation to others.

## Part 2

In this second part of our report we present three interviews which were carried out with resource centres or departments deemed to be typical of the three types of self-study centre identified in the responses to questions 1, 2 and 3 discussed the first part of the report. These interviews are designed to examine in depth the kinds of things which determine the growth of learner autonomy. The three types of institutions interviewed are:

1. An institution which shows little interest in the concepts of learner autonomy, self-study and the new technologies. The report of this interview considers reasons for this attitude, and explores ways in which learner autonomy might be made more relevant within the institution.
2. An institution which has self access facilities and which uses new technologies, but which does not have a vision of how its language teaching provision might evolve in the light of increased learner autonomy. Self access facilities are available but they are not generally incorporated into the curriculum, and difficulties have been encountered in motivating students to use the facilities. This interview attempts to identify causes for the difficulties faced and to suggest solutions.
3. An institution which employs self access and/or new technologies, and which seems to have reflected carefully on the notions of learner autonomy and the changing roles of learners and teachers. This is an institution which has clearly defined its objectives in this area. Learner autonomy is strongly encouraged and self access is fully integrated into the main curriculum. The interview explores the institution's rationale for adopting such an approach, and attempts to discover reasons for its success as well as isolating techniques which can be applied elsewhere.

### **Interview 1: Interview with representatives of Vienna University.**

This institution teaches German as a foreign language. The courses are open to everyone over 16. There is no use made of modern technologies at all. Learner autonomy is perceived to be of minor importance in the language learning curriculum and potential opportunities provided by new technologies have not yet been exploited. In the three interviews carried out with staff from this institution, we explore reasons why this is the case.

#### **1.1. Ingmann-Proyer, Secretary of the Vienna International Courses for Higher Education**

**Question: Are there any self access facilities available for your language students?**

We do have a language lab, which is partly run as a "phonotheke". That means if there is no class teaching taking place in the lab, the students can come and sit down in the lab and work on their own.

**Question: What do you think are the reasons why there are no other facilities available?**

In my opinion it is certainly useful to work and learn with a computer but computer aided learning and learner autonomy are for "*autodidactical*" learning where the teacher is no longer necessary. I think that with those computer combined learning methods students are obliged to learn at home, on their own, in their own little rooms. The problem is

similar in many ways to that which we faced with the language labs. In the beginning they were very useful when nobody had a cassette player at home, when people started getting their own cassette players, the language labs became redundant.

These days nearly everybody has a computer at home and I think that people will resent paying for an expensive language course when it involves sitting behind a computer screen if they can do the same thing on their own at home.

What computers could offer, is a kind of information and question and answer service. A CD-Rom, with the possibility that the user can ask questions or get information and help with specific problems via e-mail. Such a programme could be useful for independent learning.

Right now we are busy rebuilding our rooms and within the framework of the rebuilding we were thinking of including a computer room for our students. But there is a financial question and then I think this would be a very expensive investment and would only be useful in the short term. I feel, there is a trend amongst the students not to come to the university anymore to use the self access centers and computer rooms; they would rather work from home at least if they are connected to the Internet and we do have a number of students with access to the WWW at home.

**Question: Do you have any idea about what the students think of learner autonomy? Do they want to have the opportunity to use computer aided learning and self access centers?**

The courses in our institution are conceived for groups. Students want to come together, they want to have social contact. They do not only want to learn German properly, they want to meet other students. And computers do not really serve this purpose. What the students really want to have is access to the internet and that possibility is already offered by the computer centre of the university. But I think, if somebody enrolls for a language course he/she wants to have contact with the other students and the teacher, because language is basically about communication. Although tapes and videos have been used as supplement for a long time, we see no central role for computer aided learning.

**Question: But as supplement it is useful?**

As supplement everything is useful. But to me computer aided learning and learner autonomy are things which take place without a teacher and that is not useful for schools or universities. Furthermore, language teaching methods are constantly changing. When the language lab was a new method, not every institution got one and they still taught their students foreign languages well enough.

**Question: What about access to information? Do you know about the possibilities in this field?**

I'm not exactly well-informed. I know that there are CD-Roms with learning programmes.

**Question: So even if computer assisted language learning was only used as supplement, why are there no such possibilities at the university of Vienna?**

At first this is a financial question. The hardware has to be purchased and usually has to be replaced very soon. Right now the hardware is changing day by day, every moment there is something new on the market and the computers get out of date very quickly. Then there is the software, the costs for the access to the internet, and the running costs and the service. The appliances have to be renewed over and over again.

And then of course there is lack of a qualified teaching staff.

**Question: So you think there is a need for special training for the teachers?**

Of course such extra training is necessary. But that is not only the case with teachers or in connection with computer assisted learning.

**Question: How do you think the role of the teacher might change?**

The model of "lecture-style" teaching, where the teacher stands in front of the class and talks while the students are listening, fortunately, is not in use anymore. Nowadays the teacher has a more advisory function. There are more projects and tasks for teamwork.

**Question: Who should be responsible for the introduction of new technologies?**

It should be superinstitutional but with different policies for different departments. Naturally the different faculties have different needs.

**1.2. Dr. Richard Schrodtt and Mag. Renate Faistauer of the University of Vienna made some interesting comments. They have a slightly different view. Faistauer teaches methodics in the framework of German as a foreign language.**

**Question: Why are there no computer assisted language learning facilities provided? Is this a lack of interest?**

No, I don't think so. But we are here just a small group of staff members and we just don't have the necessary Know-How.

**Question: So it is more a lack of information?**

Yes, but I think that it will come and it has to come because it is really necessary. Our institution is working on it but only at a theoretical level.

**Question: Do the students show any interest in modern technologies?**

Yes, they do. It is also very important that the students familiarise themselves with such technologies and language programmes and that they are confronted with the positive and negative sides of the matter.

**Question: What about the language lab at Vienna University?**

I think the old version of a language lab is really out of date.

**Question: How should the role of teacher change?**

I don't think that teachers could ever be replaced by computers. For me it is important that the teachers become familiar with the new technologies, that they know how to work with computers and can handle language learning programmes. This should form part of a good teacher training. Their role would be more as a kind of guide, an animator, who helps the students to find the right learning method and retain their motivation.

**Question: Are there any possibilities for extra training in this field for teachers in Vienna?**

I know that the "Volksbildung" (Institution for national education) is very active. There are many courses for their staff members and teachers in connection with computers. I don't know if those courses are also open to teachers of the university but I am sure that it would be possible to organize that. Of course the university teachers are waiting for someone to approach them and offer them the chance to enrol on such a course. It is the task of the university or the higher officials to provide these opportunities. And the participation should at least be free of charge. I don't see, why I should have to spend my free time doing that sort of thing, especially if I have to pay for it.

**1.3. Dr. Richard Schrodtr is Professor of literature on the Department for German Philology of the University of Vienna. He is very interested in this field.**

**Question: What do you think is necessary to establish modern technologies in your institution?**

First of all every student must have access to those facilities. The material requirements are very important. Further more, the diffusion of information is the most important thing to focus on now. I feel that neither the teaching staff nor the students have any idea about the possibilities in this field.

**Question: Why are there no such facilities at present?**

That's very simple. Because until now no one has organised it.

**Question: Why do you think that there is no one in your institution who is interested?**

Because in our institution most of the teachers come from Historical Linguistics or are Medievalists. And if you teach Gothic or Old High German then those methods are not so important. But I feel that the things have changed a lot lately, also because of the new professorships of German as Foreign Language and Dutch Philology.

**Question: What would have to change if learner autonomy became more important?**

We would have to create very small groups. Especially for introduction courses, so that the training would be very intensive and the students could learn how to use those modern facilities in their first semester. Of course one of our teachers would have to be trained properly in order to pass this knowledge on to the rest of us.

**Question: Are there any structural obstacles within the university, which have led to the present situation?**

Of course. At first there is the absence of a self-study centre and then there is the question of who is going to teach him/herself about all those new technologies. We don't have anyone who could really fulfill this function. And to do this on your own means a reduction in the research work because of the sacrifice of time. I think that this is one reason why there are so few people willing to participate in this project, until now at least.

Another problem is the administration of such a centre. If it was a centre for only our faculty, our staff would have to be responsible for the whole administration, the regulation of the opening hours and so on. This would involve a lot of work.

**Question: Haven't the students expressed a desire for such facilities?**

No. But I think the reason for this is that they don't really know about the availability of these facilities. I suppose that fault could lie with the secondary schools. Only very few of our secondary schools have access to the Internet. In many schools, the technical equipment is out of date. The pupils work with computers and instruments which really belong in a museum. Therefore it is difficult to work with new programmes. Furthermore there are also no specialised staff, they are in a similar situation to us. The teachers have to voluntarily invest a lot time and work.

**Question: Could anything be done on European or international level? Would more intensive contact with other institutes be stimulating for your institution?**

I am not so sure about that, but it would certainly be interesting to see how things work in other universities so that we could maybe adapt other universities' ideas for our own institution.

### **Main problems identified in the interview with Vienna University**

The main problem in Vienna seems to be a lack of information and a very one-sided view of what learner autonomy is about. In addition they feel that the time needed to become informed and to gain the knowledge needed to work with such facilities would take away too much research time. Furthermore the financial resources seem to be another problem. There is obviously not enough money for these kinds of new technologies.

### **Interview 2: Interview with a representative of the language centre of the FCEP, Lille.**

The language centre at the FCEP is designed to serve as a centre for continuous training. Besides its traditional methods of language teaching through which sixteen languages are taught in small groups, the language centre offers opportunities for self study in five languages (English, German, French, Spanish and Hungarian). It is the juxtaposition of these two approaches that aroused our interest in the centre and we therefore decided to interview Judith Barna, head of the centre. The report of the interview follows:

**Question: Could you tell us about the role played by new technologies in your language study centre?**

New technologies make up only a part of the equipment and methods used by the teachers in the centre. Each learner has his/her own individualised learning path and, according to the demands of this path, perceived needs and personal preferences determine which materials the learner will use. Multimedia equipment is just one of the types of material available.

**Question: What kind of students use your centre?**

The majority of our students come here because, for one reason or another, they cannot follow official language courses. Very few of our students, with the exception of a few "enthusiasts" are attracted by the up-to-date approach of the centre and its technologies. Most of our students come here for very practical reasons: lack of time, irregular working hours, limited financial means (our fees are more affordable than those charged by other language centres) and because they hope to find solutions to specific language problems encountered in their workplaces.

**Question: How would you describe the "learning path" of your students?**

First of all, all our students are interviewed in order for us to be able to determine their language learning needs. During the interview, the interviewer fills in a chart with what

he/she perceives the learner's weaknesses to be. The focus here is on weaknesses in grammar and vocabulary.

After the interview the student is shown around the centre and told how to use all the available equipment. Various techniques for independent learning are explained and the importance of applying these techniques throughout the learning programme is stressed. Multimedia computers are presented as just another learning tool. Few students who arrive here are already computer-literate.

Whilst being shown around the centre the student is also informed that self-evaluation will play an extremely important role.

An individualised study programme is devised for each student based on the outcome of the initial interview. The material that the student will use for this programme is found in a general data base. The study programme is divided into stages. Each stage has its own objectives, methods (strategies) and means of self-evaluation. The students are rarely immediately autonomous, requiring a teacher to be on hand while they work. This level of dependence is striking.

**Question: What kinds of learning strategies are employed by the learners in your study centre?**

The learning strategies used in the language centre are very specific. They tend to move away from traditional teacher-centred learning methods and towards strategies that involve autonomy, self-evaluation, personal motivation and the development of individual learning programmes. This is language training "à la carte".

This is why the trainer is not encouraged to exert a great deal of control over the work carried out by the learner. The trainer is not familiar with the exact nature of the learner's progress; he/she knows what the student's official programme is, but no more than that. There is no overlap between the material studied during the autonomous language learning sessions and the material studied during the contact time with the teacher (for example during conversation classes and progress report sessions).

**Question: What kinds of problems have you faced in the language centre?**

We often have the case of a student who spends a great deal of time working only with a CD Rom and who is delighted with this study tool. As the use of a single learning tool is not the most effective way of learning the instructors feel that they should discourage this tendency.

We really don't know what to do in this kind of situation. If left alone, the student is happy but probably not learning very efficiently. If we interfere then this is going against the principle of learner autonomy.

**Question: What role is played by learner autonomy within your study centre?**

Putting the students together in groups would seem to go against the spirit of individualised training. The students do not ask to be put in groups. The conversation classes which permit the students to speak with each other in the target language cannot be called groups. In Strasbourg, the students are put in groups with the hope that they will eventually come to prefer group work. This is not the case at Lille. The students have needs which are so specific that dealing with these needs groups is simply not practical.

The head of a language centre for continued training, where the students are seen as clients who are paying for their training, is faced with a dilemma: He/she knows that



the preferred methods of the "clients" are not necessarily those which favour autonomy and efficiency. They are not paying money in order to be able to learn autonomously, they are paying for lessons in English, Russian, Japanese etc. The head of the centre and the teachers therefore attempt to "slip in" ways of promoting self-directed learning surreptitiously.

The majority of our students come to us with the false idea that learning on your own is easy, provided that you are given the right tools. They don't really have much of an idea of what autonomy is.

A real revolution in approach to learning can only be brought about by changing the roles of the teachers and the learners. Simply changing the learning tools will not suffice.

The best adviser in a language centre will have a strong empathy with the student. He/she must also have a thorough understanding not only of the tools within the centre, but also of those which are on the market. Even if the training is individualised, fundamental teaching skills are still necessary. Most importantly, the adviser must believe in autonomy.

### **Question: Would you like to say anything in conclusion?**

There are four points:

- The language centre is still at an experimental stage.
- There are projects planned for the coming months, these include the employment of tutors and students who could act as native speaker stimulators of conversation.
- The computers in the language centre are already obsolete, they need to be replaced and linked to a network.
- The greatest changes need to take place in our evaluation techniques. Self-study centres need to develop their own criteria for evaluation of students who are arriving and students who are leaving, based on the work that they have done, and not on the classic grammatical and lexical criteria.

### **Problems identified in the interview with the FCEP and possible solutions**

The main problems faced by this study centre would seem to be the following:

1. Very few students are attracted to self-study by the new technologies. They go there because they have to fit their language learning around very busy schedules.
2. Few students are attracted by the idea of learner autonomy, especially if they are paying to learn the language.
3. Most students are not naturally autonomous learners and are not familiar with the concept of learner autonomy.
4. Language centres can be faced with the paradox of the student who has a strong preference for one particular learning tool. To leave the student alone with this tool might impede his/her learning, while to suggest the use of other tools might be detracting from his/her autonomy.

A solution to the first two problems might be to redesign the criteria for examination upon entry to and exit from the self study centre. If students had learning goals that were linked to the pedagogical approaches of the various learning tools within the study centre they would see the relevance of working with these tools and would see a relationship between their work in the centre and their language learning success.

Training the learners in the strategies they need to become properly autonomous could go some way towards solving problems 3 and 4. Workshops could be organised in which teachers discuss the best ways of training their students to be autonomous. There seems to be a lack of awareness in this area. Problem 4 highlights the popular misconception that in order to become autonomous learners, students must be left totally on their own. This is not true. In order to become autonomous, students can need a lot of training and support in order to learn the skills that will stay with them for life. Learner autonomy is a long term, not a short term goal.

### **Interview 3: Interview with a representative of Thames Valley University**

Thames Valley University has a far-sighted approach to learner autonomy and has a well-established policy of promoting independent learning throughout the university. This is why we decided to interview Heather Matlock, Teaching Resources Manager, School of European and International Studies. Here is an abridged report of the interview:

#### **3.1. Profile of person being questioned.**

**Question: What is your role with regard to learner autonomy and the use of self access/new technologies for language teaching?**

Primarily to promote and facilitate the adoption of innovative learning strategies within the curriculum - including learner autonomy. Priority is given to supporting staff development needs which reflect both the University and School Strategic Plans and the changing needs of our increasingly diverse student body.

#### **3.2. Self access facilities available for language students at Thames Valley University.**

**Question: What autonomous learning facilities (self-access centres, multimedia, computers etc.) does your institution already have in place? (please mention both hardware and software).**

Currently there are three Learning Resources Centres (LCRs) at the University. LRCs house library, media and IT resources. In addition to the above there are a number of specialist facilities dotted around the university.

Through the provision of resources, both physical, intellectual and human, and through the provision of learning systems, both hard and soft, students enjoy opportunities to interact directly with the source of information and knowledge. This is supported by a wide range of people: teachers, librarians, media staff, administrators and a whole range of support staff.

The LCRs are equipped with books, computers, on-line information services, CD-ROMs, media facilities such as: video/audio players, equipment loan, sound and video editing suites, and Media Shops which provides services to students and staff in producing learning materials. Books and non-books materials are shelved side by side for ease of use.

The Language Centre at the Ealing Campus is a specialist Centre, equipped with over 45 computers, CD-ROMs, video and audio players, Internet and e-mail in an open access environment, several language and Interpreting Labs, satellite viewing areas and latest video conferencing facilities.

**Question: Amongst these facilities, which equipment/facilities have you found to be the most useful?**

Self-access environment.

The computer facilities are used a great deal for word processing, and along with language learning packages, this is the most popular activity in the Centre. Videos are also very popular, especially foreign films. The audio facilities are mainly used for assignments set by teachers. The satellite TV system is used by many students, but not the same extent as video playback. There are also some PCs with Internet access, and these are increasingly used for assignments.

**Question: What, in your opinion, can computers offer language students, that other types of support (e.g. television, video, language laboratories etc.) cannot?**

They offer greater individual flexibility and learners can combine all media indicated above plus interactivity and access from distance. Computers equipped with multimedia facilities can, with the right software, provide more interaction than is possible with audio or video materials. New material is better absorbed through an active process, rather than passively listening. Well written language learning programs can also provide feedback to students as they carry out exercises and thus enable a certain level of self assessment to take place.

**Question: What student needs have been identified in terms of material and human support for learner autonomy?**

Students need to be strongly motivated in order to learn autonomously, also they need to know how to learn in this way. We have developed (written or on screen) "user guides" both for self-access materials and for multi-media equipment which helps reduce pressure on our resource assistants so they can then use their time to help students with more specific problems. Language teaching staff for their part provide instructions and guidance for students in learning independently in their module guides. A major motivating factor here is that the outcomes of students' independent learning are assessed and accredited.

**Question: How do you rate the commercially available material on computers for autonomous language learning?**

We would only invest in those materials that students and staff can actively use to support learning. We provide a balance between commercially produced materials and in-house. Computer Aided Language Learning has not really fulfilled its early promise. Most programs fall into one of two categories: authoring packages or 'off the shelf' packages. The former are often too difficult or time consuming for teachers to learn easily, while the latter are limited by their inability to handle new material. Since CALL was first developed during the eighties, there has been little innovation in program design or content. Most improvements have been cosmetic or presentational. Multimedia technology, however, seems to be able to offer something beyond traditional gap filling or vocabulary drills and there is now much good quality material available at reasonable prices.

**Question: What other material, if any, might be useful for your students?**

We are currently investigating the use of video conferencing in teaching and learning foreign languages, particularly with our overseas partners. This involves active participation by students and staff as well as Network Learner Support. There is a lack of self assessment materials with which students can judge their progress. With the increase of resource based learning, this sort of material will be needed more and more.

**Question: What lessons have you learnt from your experience in setting up your learning resource centres?**

Equipment and materials need to be self-access as far as possible. Security tagging is expensive, but worthwhile, saving not only on materials loss/theft but also on staff time (issuing videos, cassettes, etc.). It is essential to conduct needs audits and consult with students and all stakeholders, also go out and see what other centres operating in comparable contexts are doing/how they operate. We operate all MM sources integrally and this works well. Location is important : It is a great plus if staff rooms/offices and classrooms can be located in same building as the language resource centre - the creation of a seamless learning environment for languages has certainly enhanced the language learning experience for staff and students alike.

Also it is important to relate infrastructure and materials to curricula, including assessment requirements. This also works in reverse - curricula must be designed with the resource centre facilities in mind (this could mean awareness of the resource constraints).

**3.3. Attitudes towards learner autonomy amongst language students and others at Thames Valley University**

**i. How learner autonomy fits into the University's learning culture.**

**Question: What is the prevailing philosophy with regard to learner autonomy at Thames Valley?**

Taking increasing responsibility for one's own learning is at the root of TVU's teaching and learning philosophy and one of the key components of new requirements for graduates. We recognise that students will need varying degrees of support in order to become independent learners and this has led us to set up a Director of Studies scheme which in its first phase (starting September 97) will provide all undergraduate students with induction followed by structured, ongoing learning support. The Director of Studies will devise a needs-centred programme for the students in his/her group and approve the students' action plans geared to their own specific learning needs. The main aim of the scheme is to support students in their acquisition of pro-active transferable skills linked to their pathway/module outcomes (e.g. communication skills, group work, planning and management of learning, etc.) and will enable students to develop an individual profile of achievement as well as monitoring performance and progression.

**Question: To what extent do you perceive a need to develop learners' freedom to take charge of their own learning?**

TVU considers it absolutely necessary to prepare all its students to take charge of their own learning but recognises that they will, initially at least, need guidance and support in order to do so. We are a learning organisation, our staff and students will be working on this concept together. The curriculum and the Director of Studies scheme will within it provide learners with the space to express their own individuality in terms of learning style, pattern of learning and optionality, particularly as they progress. In other words our learning structures will provide a framework within which the student can grow and - crucially - understand their own learning needs, defined by their learning outcomes.

**Question: What do the students and the teachers think is meant by learner autonomy?**

In the past both students and teachers may have had a view of learner autonomy commensurate with working on their own/alone and self-sufficiency which could only work successfully for highly able, motivated students of a certain (personality) type. At its worst it could be seen as "dumping" study and responsibility for studying on students who were ill-prepared for learning in this way or unwilling to adopt it. "This isn't what we expected" - "Our students can't cope with this" - were familiar cries from learners and teachers respectively. Cultural and societal changes, economic and market forces, notably increased demand for flexible, cost-effective learning programmes, to which our mission responds, have helped shape the change to a more developed interpretation which supports the learner, involves active not passive learning and working with others, harnessing new technologies, not in isolation.

**Question: To what extent do you feel the notion of learner autonomy fits in with the British learning culture?**

The British learning culture is undergoing major changes at all levels and on all fronts. The establishment of a learning society is a priority and the notion that higher education is for some and not others has already been eroded. Mass participation has major implications for mode of learning provision and catering for a diverse student base. Learner autonomy fits firmly into the need for flexible patterns of delivery to suit mature students combining study with running a home, full-time/part-time employment, etc. The Open University's philosophy and success story has of course made a major contribution to the recognition and expansion of distance/open learning.

**ii. Encouraging learner autonomy amongst students.**

**Question: Have you taken any specific measures to encourage self directed learning amongst your students?**

Students are required to show evidence of ability to use and apply skills in learning independently and - as a diagnostic tool - the activities they have undertaken to improve their areas of weakness, including their own assessment of their progress. Students are actively encouraged to log their independent study and it may be accredited within their module or assessed as part of a portfolio of work. "Value-added" skills are developed and may also be explicitly or implicitly assessed, e.g. decision-making, time-management, technical ability.

**Question: Have you come across any pitfalls that other institutions might need to watch out for?**

It needs to be set up properly, i.e. planned, organised and ideally piloted to ensure it works and fully responds to learned needs. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation systems need to be put into place and embedded. All our languages modules involve the evaluation by students of learning strategies and use of Language Centre.

**Question: What recommendations would you make to other institutions who want to encourage self-directed learning?**

Students must be fully supported, tutored and helped towards taking greater responsibility for their own learning. It must be made absolutely clear, in the course prospectus or syllabus what is expected of them and what they can expect from the Lecturer. Often quite radically new roles and responsibilities are implied which need to be

spelt out and the boundaries or limits determined. Relatively few students - or staff - are "self-starters" in this field and traditional expectations of what language learning is and isn't may still prevail. Therefore a major culture change may have to be planned and provided for.

In terms of staffing implications all categories of staff need to understand and respond to the needs of self-directed learning and learners, e.g. lecturers (FT/PT), language assistants, Language Centre resource assistants, technical and administrative staff. Ongoing staff training is necessary and staff will need to organise/contribute to induction for students and ensure that student learning needs continue to be supported.

### **iii. Training students to use independent language learning strategies.**

**Question: To what extent have teachers been successful in encouraging independent language learning strategy use amongst students?**

As we have discussed their success is largely a measure of their ability to motivate students and this has most successfully been done through embedding independent language learning into the curriculum and assessment activities. In terms of staff development, funding is available to all staff for participating in external courses and workshops which reflect current training needs, with priority being given to those focusing on new learning and assessment processes. A "cascading down to/across staff" policy means that external good practice can be shared amongst colleagues via in-house workshops. Our Centre for Applied Linguistics Research organises weekly seminars which include topics which are relevant to the development of good practice in the field of independent learning.

**Question: What kinds of strategies have been most readily adopted (cognitive, metacognitive etc.)?**

Practical examples include : students negotiate own assessment or study topics; oral presentations may be recorded by students (group or individual); job search on the Internet; media review on Satellite TV; IT packages reinforce pronunciation, oral, grammar skills- they are also used for diagnostic or remedial purposes; video and film are used with worksheets for developing a range of knowledge extraction and comprehension skills which may be self-checked. Techniques and applications of this kind not only save class time but give students "value added" skills which may also be included in module learning outcomes and reflect the applications linguists may need to employ in a future career.

**Question: What recommendations would you make to other institutions in terms of strategy training?**

It needs to be systematic, explicit (induction) and embedded (curriculum). It also needs to be progressive i.e. it needs to accompany the student through his/her studies as part of his/her tool box. It helps reinforce the practice if training for independent study is provided centrally and generically (Effective Learning, Learning Support) as well as locally, specific to language students. Of course this may not be possible for part-time students. It needs to be available to all learners and compulsory for some. Staff training for strategy training must be provided, as necessary.

### **iv. Incorporating learner autonomy into course materials.**

**Question: To what extent is the concept of learner autonomy incorporated in course objectives, materials, methods, monitoring and exams?**

As previously stated it is being increasingly integrated into all aspects of the curriculum, including evaluation and review. It is explicitly assessed in coursework and assignments but to date generally only implicitly assessed through examination. However we are reducing our use of exams in the New Learning Environment in favour of more ongoing forms of assessment.

**Question: What recommendations would you make to other institutions with respect to the integration of learner autonomy in language courses?**

Go for it! It is key to motivation, opening up and taking hold (learner responsibility) and promoting "deep learning". Outcomes need to cover competencies which involve independent/group learning and they need to be explicitly linked with assessment strategies. Until we began to do this students could not see any direct link between the materials in the language centre and their studies and only the most motivated (e.g. specialist degree students) made any significant use of them. Learner strategy training is essential (at induction and ongoing) to underpin integration into the curriculum.

### **3.4. Reactions to new technologies at Thames Valley University**

#### **i. The students**

**Question: On balance, would you say that the learners' choice has been improved or restricted by the introduction of new technologies within your institution?**

Definitely improved, enriched, enhanced... resource assistants and technical staff move among students helping, explaining, encouraging - backed up by teaching staff and assistants. We have also done our best (resources permitting) to respond to student requests and comments - via the module/course monitoring process and through "user surveys" and the suggestion box in the Language Centre.

**Question: In what ways have you integrated new technologies into language learning programmes?**

We have made their use/application a requirement of a module/learning outcome, or in the case of "IT for Linguists" made this into a module in itself - Level 1 students are taught word-processing in the foreign language, the use and application of on-line dictionaries, language support packages, CD-ROMs, etc. and assessed accordingly. This provides a platform for continued use throughout their programme, particularly when they come to write their dissertation in a foreign language, and in their career/job search.

#### **ii. The teachers.**

**Question: What kinds of reactions have the teachers had towards new technologies in general?**

Initially reticent, slow to come around and respond apart from a few "enthusiasts". Our Professor in Computer Assisted Language Learning, Graham Davies, has been a "trailblazer" both at TVU and externally. In the last year or two the situation has changed so that now most language teachers are actively involved in developments in the field, particularly as they relate to their teaching/module design.

### **3.5: A changing role for the teacher?**

**Question: What kinds of changes are envisaged for the future role of the teacher?**

We envisage that as the role of the learner moves increasingly towards taking greater responsibility for his/her learning so that of the teacher will move increasingly towards supporting rather than directing student learning. Furthermore, we are also moving from a context where learning is based primarily on human interaction to one in which learning is based on the interface between materials and technologies and high quality teaching.

As resource based learning and mass participation becomes more established teachers' roles are by definition having to change. At TVU for languages the "purveyor of information" role is definitely on the decline, but it will be retained as part and parcel of the whole (it is important for preparing students to study abroad as most of our foreign partners still persist in delivering the curriculum primarily by lectures). Teachers are working more as facilitators, guides, mentors and indeed "counsellors". Students are increasingly seeking the support of language or resource assistants and role definitions are becoming more blurred or overlapping in respect of curriculum delivery/learning support. However, the role of the teacher as curriculum or materials designer, author and manager is accordingly enhanced and staff development in this area is key.

**Question: To what extent are teachers prepared to adapt teaching materials in order to use the available equipment?**

Teaching staff generally have a sense of "ownership" in the Language Centre equipment and resources due to working closely with Language Centre decision-makers. We have successfully run a Language Centre User Group involving all stakeholders, including students, which has enabled teaching staff to advise and influence resource decisions. This has contributed to their readiness to adapt teaching materials, as has more specifically the funding of materials development projects. These projects essentially bought out staff (teaching) time for the purpose of developing self-access materials linked to both the equipment and the curriculum and gave a vital "kick-start" to the culture change.

**Question: How great is the demand on teachers' time?**

Considerable! In the absence of funding/staff time for own materials development (which is always the ideal) institutions should look seriously at the "buying in" option, which we also invest in. Authoring packages require a lot of time to be developed, but assistants, even students, can be employed more cost-effectively than Lecturers for the inputting work, operating under Lecturer supervision.

**Question: Has self-access reduced or increased the teachers' load?**

As far as materials preparation and student support is concerned - increased, however as students progress they should require less from the teacher. Overall teachers' workloads have increased as institutions are having to cater for more students with fewer resources. Students too are having to conduct more of their learning outside the classroom. All our modules are quantified in terms of "student learning hours" and the ratio of classroom based learning to self-directed or guided study is decreasing. Teaching staff are therefore required to provide additional learning materials and activities. For languages we have continued to work with relatively favourable staff-student ratios compared to other subject areas, e.g. social sciences.



### **Summary of findings from the interview with Thames Valley University**

The most important message to have come out of this interview seems to be that training learners in self study techniques is essential if learner autonomy is to work within an educational institution. Study skills need to form part of the learning curriculum and students need to be made aware of all the learning opportunities that are open to them. Strategy training needs to be systematic, explicit and embedded and students need to be involved in decisions when new technological support material is being bought.

## Part 3

This final part of the report looks more closely at the implications of learner autonomy for

1. The provision of self-study materials.
2. The changing role of the teachers and learners.

It is based on reports of interviews carried out with two distance learning institutions where self-study has significant implications one or both of these areas. The reason for including these interviews is that we feel distance learning is becoming increasingly popular and its techniques are feeding more and more into the traditional universities. Educational institutions interested in learner autonomy might therefore be keen to know about the attitude of distance learning institutions towards the provision of self-study materials and the role of the teachers.

The first interview examines the respective roles of the teacher and the student at the Open University. It looks at ways in which learner independence has been encouraged and at the ways in which the contact between the teacher, the student and the new technologies are organised.

The second interview is with the Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance at Rennes where learner autonomy has meant that teachers have an unconventional role and that new technologies are of central importance. We look at how the role of the teacher is perceived and why particular materials are used, how these materials have been accepted and what changes have been necessary.

### **Interview 1: Interview with a representative of the Open University**

The Open University has a long-established distance learning tradition. It pioneered open and distance learning at university level in the United Kingdom. This is why we decided to interview Richard Tuffs, the co-ordinator of the Open University for Belgium.

#### **Question: What is the role of "learner autonomy" within the Open University?**

The university is open to anyone who wants to study there, whatever their academic past. This means that we have substantial individual differences between our students in terms of expectations and learning style. Furthermore, many of the students who come to us have been out of formal education for some time and lack study skills. This is why training in study skills is built in to all the courses provided by the Open University. However I feel that it is important to point out that if you said "learner autonomy" to any student in the Open University, they would probably say "well what do you mean?" This is because the term we tend to use here is "open learning". By this we mean "flexible learning", where students have control over their own learning and can vary the time taken to complete the degree. As open learning allows students to study in their own way, many of their individual differences are catered for.

#### **Question: To what extent do Open University students have control over their own learning?**

A person studying with the open University with no previous experience of higher education would normally spend six years completing a degree, over those six years the student would be expected to move from a very supportive environment to an environment where they would need very little support. At the beginning of each course the student is given a "study calendar". This calendar tells him/her what he/she should be doing towards their degree every week, it would typically include deadlines for essays, TV and radio programmes and which chapters of the main course material to read This

calendar is designed to help the students pace themselves. In newer courses, study guides are also produced, adding to the help that the student receives to study effectively.

**Question: What sort of contact do the students have with the tutors and with each other?**

Some students have face-to-face contact with their tutor, others never see their tutor, it depends on the course and the country. The most common forms of contact are by e-mail, fax and post. We have an e-mail system called "First Class" on which we set up conferences in which students studying the same course can communicate with each other. We feel that this contact between the students is very important; distance learning students can often feel very isolated.

The tutor's role is to provide academic support, they give distance tuition and they mark assignments. They establish times when they are available for consultation. In the first year students are allocated a "tutor-counsellor". The tutor-counsellor is expected not only to provide distance tuition but also to help the students through a difficult adjustment process to distance learning. In later years the roles of tutoring and counselling are split.

**Question: What form of guidance is provided by the Open University?**

We provide two sorts of guidance: "pro-active" and "reactive".

"Pro-active" guidance is often integrated into the course materials themselves. It can range from booklets such as "The Language Learner's Good Study Guide" (OUP Press) which is handed out to students at the beginning of the degree on Modern Languages to learning-skill building activities (such as the keeping of learner diaries) which are an assessed part of the course itself. We also provide "toolkits" to all our tutors which contain advice on areas such as reading strategies, writing strategies, note taking strategies and so on. This means that the tutors themselves have access to a bank of material that they can use in order to help students.

Here in Belgium we are running a series of seminars which are geared towards learning strategies. So far we have had seminars on basic learning skills, note taking, reading skills, essay writing and exam techniques. These seminars have been well received by our students. One interesting point about these seminars was that many of the people who enrolled were post-graduates who had already completed degrees at traditional universities. They felt that even though they had already completed a first degree, they had a lot to learn about study techniques and learning strategies. One of the reasons why we feel these seminars have been so popular is that they provide opportunities for human contact. Distance learning students often feel very isolated and need face-to-face contact with other students.

The "reactive" approach includes helping students out with problems after they occur. In order to do this the university provides a range counselling services both national and local which can advise students. The counsellor's job is to decipher the underlying causes for particular problems that the students may be having with their studies.

**Question: Do the students lack any particular learning skills?**

The learning skills which Open University students seem to lack the most are "effective time management" and an ability to assess their own strengths and weaknesses. They often have a very narrow range of strategies to fall back on when facing learning difficulties.

**Question: You mentioned human contact, how important is this?**

We feel that it is essential. Unless students have face-to-face human contact with either the tutor or other students the other types of electronic contact don't work. Once students have met each other properly they are more likely to continue to contact each other through e-mail. We recently tried to organise our counselling along the lines of a team of counsellors who were available for contact by phone. This idea proved very unpopular with students as they preferred to deal with their own personal counsellor rather than with a team and they were reluctant to discuss their problems by phone. An interesting line of research is going to be whether we can replicate this face-to-face contact through video conferencing.

**Question: How does the Open University use new technologies such as computing and the Internet?**

As I mentioned before, students can maintain contact with their tutors via the "First Class" e-mailing system. We are also putting more and more of our courses on the Internet. Some exams are administered via the Internet and some courses include CD Roms. We have just invested in video-conferencing facilities which we hope to exploit over the coming year.

**Question: How have students reacted to the new technologies?**

Reactions have been very mixed, some students are very keen to use them others more reticent. Two factors that we have identified as determining their reactions are age and social background. In other words those students who have never had the opportunities to use new technologies are still very wary of them.

**Question: How have you managed to overcome their reticence?**

We provide very clear, user-friendly guides on how to use e-mail and the Internet. We also run regular clinics where students can come to discuss any problems that they may have faced with the technologies.

**Question: What is the role of the Open University tutor in the contexts of "open learning" and new technologies?**

As I said before, first year tutors are also expected to act as counsellors, giving students tips on good study techniques and helping them out when they have problems. With the introduction of new technologies there is going to be an increased need for tutors with skills in the three areas of tutoring, counselling and information technology. This "multiskilling" is going to be increasingly necessary as the Open University faces an increasingly tight budget.

**Summary of the interview with the Open University**

Many students do not arrive already autonomous, they need to be trained in study skills. Human contact is still an important part of the learning process. There will be an increasing demand for tutors who can offer a wide range of skills in the areas of teaching, counselling and information technology.

**Interview 2: Interview with a representative of the CNED (Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance de Rennes)**

At the Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance à Rennes learner autonomy has had major implications for the role of both the teacher and the new technologies. We

therefore decided to find out more about these implications by interviewing a group of language teachers at the CNED

**Question: What is your perception of the role of the teacher now that we are going down the road towards the implementation of non-classroom-based language teaching modules?**

In fact even though we are a distance learning organisation we still place a lot of importance on human contact (by telephone). Teachers who spend time working in distance learning say that it throws new light on the importance of student contact time.

There are two types of students at the CNED:

- Those who follow distance learning courses complemented by classroom-based teaching.
- Those who follow only distance learning courses.

The students need to be encouraged and motivated. They find it difficult to work on their own. Multimedia might be attractive because it's new and dynamic but the machine is not enough.

**Question: But since the teacher has been involved in producing the material for computer assisted language learning, surely his/her personality can be felt in the computer programmes themselves?**

In distance learning it is through the correction of written work that the teacher's personality becomes known to the student including a kind of written equivalent of the sort of communication that would normally take place in class. Different tasks are carried out by different people, one person will be responsible for writing courses, another for correcting homework, another for giving advice by telephone.

**Question: Does this dissociation of roles ever lead to frustration for course writers, who never get any the kind of feedback received by correcting homework?**

Yes, there is a certain level of frustration.

**Question: How do teachers at the CNED divide up their working time?**

I for example work part-time at the CNED; I correct coursework, I provide a telephone consultation service (for Italian) and I use Newspeak to create Italian sequences. Our students use multimedia facilities to record their coursework. Their files (oral and/or written) are transmitted by the Numeris network during the night to the CNED. The following morning I listen to the work that the students have done, I record my reactions and this correction is sent, again during the night to the school where the students study.

**Question: What are the advantages and disadvantages of this deferred correction compared with immediate correction?**

One of the inconveniences is that there is no face-to-face communication. On the other hand, deferred correction can take the "trauma" out of the situation; the student who knows that no-one is listening will take more risks. The system also enables me to provide written feedback which complements the oral feedback.

## **Autonomy and learner support**

In classroom-based language teaching, when the students reply to a question they generally give the answer that the teacher wants. However in a distance learning situation the students are totally autonomous and the advisory capacity of the teachers increases.

### **Question: How do you go about preparing your computer-based language learning material?**

The central question I face in my work as a course-writer of distance learning Italian courses has been the following: "How do I fit everything that goes on in a classroom-based language course into my distance learning course?" I've made steady progress towards this goal over the three courses that I've put together.

### **Question: Which method is more appropriate for distance learning; inductive or deductive?**

The problem with a deductive approach is that it requires the provision of a great deal of material, this often makes the students panic. I prefer to use an approach which is very clear and concise and which hopefully does not panic the students.

## **Freedom and choice in learner autonomy**

**Question: In a multimedia environment, the learner is confronted with a number of choices but what are the best ways of making the most of this freedom? When using the Internet, students often like to "surf" seeing what comes up rather than setting out with specific goals and sitting back to work out their objectives. How does one guide them without constraining them? How can the teacher ensure that the students are making the best choices?**

You're right. Students are better at looking up exercises and information in books than on the Internet. When they use multimedia tools they don't often refer back to things already looked up, speed almost becomes an end in itself. The thing that concerns me most is the fragmentation of information on the Internet. In order to learn well, students need to be able to synthesise all this information.

We have found that students can be helped if they have a very clear and systematic commentary on the text. It reminds them to return to previous pages if they have any problems.

### **Question: What other problems have you faced?**

Another problem that we have encountered is that, for example when using the Newspeak listening exercises, students tend to refer immediately to the written text rather than listening again whenever they are faced with a problem.

Yet another problem is that the material presented on the screen often remains too "virtual" for some students who still prefer to write things down on paper.

We have many students enrolled on our courses who don't do any of the computer-based exercises we set them. They still claim to be happy with the service we offer.

Students on our distance learning courses need guidance. This guidance is more effective if it comes in the form of "do as I do" rather than the "follow me".

## Summary of findings from the interview with the CNED

The fact that students' work is corrected via e-mail has two advantages:

- The students are more adventurous when speaking in the target language.
- Both written and oral feedback can be provided simultaneously.

However, again, some kind of human contact is considered to be important . Students need to be helped to use the Internet effectively.

## Conclusion

Out of all this diversity, five points have emerged which we feel merit further research and perhaps a complementary study.

The first point is that increased use of new technologies and greater learner autonomy will require an investment of time. As is often mentioned in the replies to the questionnaire and in the interviews, more time will be required for training and for putting together materials for self-study.

The second point is that the layout of the self-study centres is crucial. In some cases classrooms will have to be (re)designed to accommodate both teaching and self-study.

The third point concerns the diffusion of information. This includes theoretical information such as the meaning of learner autonomy as opposed to self-instruction, and practical information such as the kinds of human support required, ways of encouraging students to become autonomous and so on. Both types of knowledge seem to be unevenly spread between institutions. Ways in which information can be transmitted from one institution to another need to be created and maintained.

The fourth point concerns training. We were struck by the gap between the high level technical skills and mastery of the new technologies shown by a small number of the centres, and the deficiencies in training and information shown by other centres. One of the challenges facing language educators will probably be to narrow this gap which exists both between and within countries.

The fifth and final point is that we need to allow room for different kinds of practices to co-exist, ranging from totally self-study learning to totally teacher-centred learning. We must not expect all HE establishments to go about promoting learner autonomy and using new technologies in the same way, as different approaches will inevitably suit different learning contexts.

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