

In Harding-Esch, E. (1977) Self-directed learning and autonomy. Proceedings of a seminar held at Cambridge University, 13-15 December, 1976.

Self-Tutoring and assisted Self-Tutoring in Modern Languages
at the University of Aston

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LANGUAGE SKILLS PROGRAMME - MINORITY LANGUAGES

An investigation within the context of a technological university of supported self-instructional programmes for the learning of languages and aspects of languages where class-instruction is uneconomic and impractical. The project was primarily concerned with the study of teaching and learning problems in foreign languages at undergraduate level, using native speakers and self-instructional materials. Dutch, Chinese, Swedish and Arabic were at first the languages of special interest.

1. A survey of undergraduate demand at Aston for languages outside degree courses was made in 1974-75 by Dr. Eric Clavering of the Department of Modern Languages and Mr. William Jones of the Faculty of Management. Tables and graphs are available on request: of also surveys at Cambridge andindhoven. It is currently being made again this 1976-77 session and first figures confirm the earlier ones. There was plainly a much greater interest than foreseen and more than is provided for. 72% of the undergraduate sample expressed some need or wish to learn a language; 40% of all students were well motivated towards language learning; another 13% were very highly so. There was a fairly even distribution throughout all Departments.

The main purpose of language learning was communication, and the aims of communication are work abroad and social contacts. Demand for a special reading skill is minimal. Of the 72% half wanted to work in Europe. Thus nearly 2/3 wanted French and 1/3 German.

The less widely taught languages were in small demand in 1975: Italian and Russian each 7%, Spanish 6, but 16 other languages were requested by individuals or twos and threes and the postulants were highly motivated with precise objectives. Appreciably more students expected to work in the third world than wanted to. 10% of Aston undergraduates come from non-English

speaking homes and this appears to be a highly motivating factor towards language learning.

From the findings of the survey the present project was formulated and made possible by a Nuffield Small Grant of £2,000, starting in November 1975 and to last for one year. To this the University of Aston contributed in effect an equal sum to make up a Research Assistant salary and for room, materials and resources, secretarial and technician help.

The University has decided to continue the experiment for one more year and to establish a post, to which it is hoped also to attach further research developments.

2. The Modern Language Department has responsibility for all language learning provision in the University of Aston. It teaches French, German and Russian in its own degree work in Modern Languages, currently to 118 students and, within the language half of Combined Honours degrees, for 145 students from other departments such as Management and Administrative Studies. It also has responsibility for 40 students of a Computer Science and Linguistics degree with the Department of Education, who take German.

In its function as a language centre it provides voluntary lunch-time classes in French, German and Russian for postgraduates and staff, currently with an attendance of about 80, and regular courses in English as a foreign language for postgraduates from abroad with also some assistance for undergraduate needs in EFL. Otherwise, for the general body of students, the Department has, in the past, made no provision except classes of three hours per week in French or German or Russian or Italian organised for a limited number of about 150 of the estimated 1000 second-year students who are all required to attend courses from a wide choice of Complementary Studies options. More than the 150 would elect to study a language, if allowed, but this may be, in fact, because language requirements seem easier in prospect to some students. An assessment A, B, C, D, E, or F = failure is given for Complementary Studies to a student's department for his record. In a language a steady performance throughout the 80 hours of the year's work can get a

satisfactory result; but for other options the grade is mostly given on an extended essay written at a time of some pressure just before university sessional examinations. Failure is serious. A student has to satisfy before he can proceed to a third year.

Complementary Studies are an obligatory requirement in the student's first two years only, the first year being a programme of lectures and discussions in which no language option is possible.

3. Assisted self-tutoring, giving attention to individual needs, setting up for this purpose small group meetings one hour per week for a language need with assignments of three hours or so per week of work to be done at home with the help of cassette recordings of a taped course, has given additional provision in five or six directions:

- (i) for undergraduates, post-graduates, teaching and administrative staff wanting a language not already on offer one way or another.
- (ii) in an experimental overlap into the Complementary Studies programme:
 - (a) by extending the range of languages available to include Dutch, Japanese, Spanish etc. (This will need Senate approval in June 1977 to become part of the regular framework.)
 - (b) by permitting the normal options of French, German, Italian or Russian for small groups which would not be economically viable or which do not fit into the normal second year pattern of three consecutive terms because a department's sandwich training arrangement interferes.
- (iii) in degree work:
 - (a) first year students of German admitted to Combined Honours or Computer Science and Linguistics courses with Grade E at A-level, very weak and needing intensive work to remedy this in their first term (30 in 1975-76 and 24 in 1976-77).
 - (b) for 1977-78 and future years two new degrees will allow, on assisted self-tutoring lines, the learning each year of Arabic or Chinese or other non Indo-European language to a modest level, as part of a linguistics requirement (Department of Modern Languages new degree in one language - French, German or Russian - and Linguistics and a new degree with the Department of Education: Communication Science and Linguistics, to replace the present Computer Science and Linguistics degree.)
 - (c) occasional extra individual help for some of the degree course students using the French, German or Russian tape library (not counted under (iii) in table of enrolments).

(iv) in some small application for the needs of Birmingham industry or individuals outside the University in languages such as Bahasa Indonesia, Cantonese, Japanese, Persian, Swedish for which little or no help is available otherwise.

Enrolment for (i) - (iv) has been:

<u>1976-76</u>	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)
by December 1975	40	8	30	
by May 1976 another	50	8		
by July 1976 "	20			

About half of (i) were undergraduates and the other half postgraduates and teaching or administrative staff. The July recruitment was entirely postgraduate and staff for vacation purposes and also a waste of time.

Continuing into the 1976-77 session from (i) were about 10 undergraduates and 20 postgraduates and staff. A City of Birmingham Adult Education class took 8 students continuing with Landarin (but the class has now disintegrated and returns to assisted self-tutoring).

1976 October - December enrolment:

	(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)
October 76	50	28	24	18
by December 1976 another	40			
by January 1977 another anticipated	20	11		
by May 1977 " "	20			

Included in these 1976 numbers are the 30 continuing for 1976-77.

About half of (i) remain undergraduates and the other half postgraduates and staff.

Total numbers involved in the experiment are much the same each session, about 150-200, but the increase under (ii) Complementary Studies, is highly significant and this figure will rise if, as expected, Senate agrees to the proposal to allow a wider range of languages and assisted self-tutoring to come formally within the options.

4. Student enrolment by language: undergraduate (UG), with additional () for compulsory attendance from G.S., CH, CSL; postgraduate and staff (PGS),

staff being teaching, administrative, office, clerical, technician and maintenance staff; and external, being from Industry, Birmingham area:

	1976-76		Dec,1976		External (for 1977)
	UG	PGS	UG	PGS	
Arabic	6	4	6	1	
Bahasa Indonesia					8 (?)
Cantonese	2	5		5	1
Czech	2	1			
French	1(2)	2	(3)	6	
Dutch	3	2		2	
Gaelic		2		5	
German	2(36)	4	(24)	15	
Greek		1	3	5	
Hindi			2		
Italian	4	3	7(9)	2	
Japanese	1	1	4(2)	2	1
Mandarin	13	1	1		
Norwegian	1	1		2	
Persian			3		6 (?)
Polish	1	4		2	
Russian			(6)		
Spanish	4	3	10(8)	2	
Swedish	4	2	2	3	2
Urdu			2		
Welsh				2	

Omitted from this table are the casuals, i.e. students getting help to join the lunch-time classes and the 20 wanting French or German last July and who mostly got nowhere.

Omitted also are students who only appear for 3-4 weeks.

5. Method employed has been to use a consultation or counselling or

or tutoring session, or group meeting if possible with a native informant, of one hour per week. A three hours assignment of work is then given for the week for the student to do on his own, mostly with a loaned cassette copy of the particular course unit, virtually all students having their own cassette recorder. The student must buy his course book.

General principles of language learning become life or death requirements in assisted self-tutoring. The student on his own underestimates the all-importance of listening; he wants to rely on the printed word and a Romanization; he seeks first to translate or confuses a passive understanding with active use. Daily expenditure of time for some months at least is not properly foreseen. Error and deviance from a model easily become a norm. Easy repetition practice is skipped and so is active manipulation of newly acquired vocabulary and structures. The necessity for regular written work and forms of self-testing is not felt. And so on.

The library mode of operation in which a student simply works at a tape with minimal assistance can be used effectively by fairly advanced students, but at Aston only about 20 beginners or near beginners have worked this way. They have also mostly attended an occasional group session to get tutor, native informant or encouragement.

Different styles of group meeting, voluntary and spontaneous, formal with obligatory attendance, with or without native informant or tutor, different motivation, pace, level or purpose, and the special requirements for languages as difficult as Arabic, Chinese or Japanese, could all be considered in some detail, and also perhaps with some reference to Valdman's table, (page a) used by Edith Harding at a seminar a year ago. But the common factor of general importance is the use of the tutor or native informant.

Aston has a larger proportion of overseas postgraduates than other universities and the postgraduate can be paid at Demonstrator rates when acting as an informant. It is thus comparatively easy to find the native speaker who will work well with a fairly advanced group which, in any case, at that level, tends to take over. But, for beginners to about G.C.E. O-level

Systems analysis of Instructional Functions and Instructional Agents Qualified to Assume Them

FUNCTION	COMPONENT				
	Teacher	Teacher Aide	Native Teacher Aide	Machine Materials	Student
1. Presentation of authentic native model (X)	X		X	X	
2. Manipulation and drill	X				X
3. Explanation	X			X	X
4. Testing	X	X	X		X
5. Evaluation	X		X		X
6. Diagnosis	X		X		X
7. Remedial Prescription	X				
8. Listening comprehension practice	X		X	X	
9. Dictation	X		X	X	X
10. Free Conversation	X		X		X
11. Guided Conversation	X		X		X
12. Developing Motivation	X				

Albert Valdman: Criteria For The Measurement of Success in an Individualized Language Program.

(Proceedings of the Stanford Conference - May 1971).

experiment, take the Institute of Linguists Grade I Certificate examination in Italian, Spanish or Russian, possibly also the Preliminary Level in Japanese. Increasingly the beginner is now being asked to envisage this as the minimum level to achieve in one year of assisted self-tutoring. There is no need, at Cambridge, to say that the threshold-level of the Council of Europe C.C.C. European unit credit system project, will, eventually, be a better objective.

Unless a brisk pace is maintained, and the weekly task methodically performed, for a goal clearly seen and understood, assisted self-tutoring attracts the curious who, in a small group, will unfortunately be disruptive within three or four weeks. Each student record within the project now has an indication of what level is being achieved and, if a failure, some notion of why. Mostly this comes back to lack of clarity in aim and purpose.

7. Materials and resources: the Modern Languages Department has a self-tutoring language laboratory, a rapidly growing tape library and cassette-recorders to loan - although nearly all students have their own. The University library also loans cassette recorders, has carrels and may have copies of some taped courses. One sixth of a secretary is available and due assistance from the Department's technicians.

Evaluation of materials was specifically ruled out from the project. It is, however, inescapable, and hardly any good courses are made for self-tutoring. Two styles or levels of course materials for each language are being used at Aston, corresponding perhaps to the needs of the two populations in the survey. One is the Linguaphone type, clearly seen to have the minimum social content and to be sequenced in about 30 assimilable units. The other is the more sophisticated American Foreign Service Institute style of course, very carefully devised and much more ambitious. Another example of double stocking would be the BBC Mandarin course and the Cambridge or Peking ones. But sophisticated courses are difficult to get and John Trim has defined the needs for self-instruction in Less Commonly taught languages: resources and problems (CILTEAP 12) and made interesting suggestions for the creation of highly necessary resource centres.

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In the Huffield Towards Independence in Learning papers the account of the Keller Plan stresses the teacher's main effort as writing the units. In the application to an exact science - Civil Engineering at Heriot Watt - John Cowan shows this careful programming at work. By language teaching notions his preparation of his units enables him to assume a library mode, counselling and advising, explaining and correcting. But the cassetted units should do the job.

Well designed course units for self-tutoring make it easier, no doubt, to use the native informant to best advantage with a group. But language learning needs talking situations and living contact and, so far as Aston, comes back to the importance of group work.

8. What else has been learnt from the Aston experiment? Questionnaires issued to all students in the project and personal interview have brought answers:

- (i) with successful students there is no change in purpose or level intended
- (ii) expected allocation of time is three hours per week, besides the one hour group session. Mostly this becomes only two hours and is not a methodical daily allocation. But students do observe how important it is to discipline themselves in this respect
- (iii) comment on materials is mostly only useful when flatly negative. Criteria are lacking.
- (iv) the converted like working on their own but mostly they also like working with a group, at least occasionally
- (v) more opportunities to talk with native speakers are requested
- (vi) written work, tests, are not seen as important
- (vii) there is more drop-out than there should be, even allowing for the pressures of over-burdened time-tables in a technological university

Undergraduates mostly do not study a language for more than one year - their second. A few will start in their first year and continue but also usually not beyond their second year. This draws attention to the need for a level such as G.C.E. O-level to be set as a goal for beginners in the present experience.

Students are very explicit on two further points:

- they have to work far harder than if they had spent an equivalent three or four hours in a taught class,
- they have to learn to learn. "I could not have worked like this a year ago..."

To many of them assisted self-tutoring has been a maturing experience - a revelation, in fact, of their own potential. It has also been educationally valuable beyond its immediate purpose of enabling a student to gain a skill, a language to use socially or for a job possibility. And a language knowledge so acquired, if ostensibly for vocational purposes, inevitably becomes a major contribution to Education Permanente.

The project intended at first at Aston to be concerned only with a limited number of undergraduates, learning Arabic, Chinese, Dutch and Swedish and to ascertain what made individualized learning work or why it failed.

Had this been pursued the results would have been highly positive with virtually no drop-out. With the large numbers at Aston and the spread across a range of languages and into all sections of the University population, extension into obligatory or degree requirements, a close study has been difficult. But if the whole affair can be digested in this second year, much more valid results should come from the larger scale operation.

It is abundantly clear that self-tutoring without assistance is a failure. It is also apparent that, for example, with languages such as Japanese or Arabic, demand will increase with a facility: for 1977-78 it is already known that 15 students at least will want Japanese for their Complementary Study. Assisted self-tutoring is an economic provision, the only one under present circumstances, for this changing situation.

But more students gave up than we expected. There is still much to be learnt about why this happens and how it can be remedied. A measure of final success might well be to ensure that failure becomes virtually non-existent.