Compulsory self-directed learning : contradiction or challenge ?

Sophie Bailly, Emmanuelle Carette

Compulsory self-directed learning: contradiction or challenge?

Sophie Bailly & *Emmanuelle Carette*
CRAPEL/ATILF UMR 7118 UNIVERSITE NANCY2 /CNRS
Sophie.Bailly@univ-nancy2.fr
Emmanuelle.Carette@univ-nancy2.fr

This article presents the development of ongoing action research on self-directed learning (SDL) that we started in 2004 at the department of French as a foreign language at Nancy University (DEFLE). The DEFLE used to offer what we might call "traditional" classes, until SDL was introduced as a means of developing learners' autonomy. In that context, taking autonomy as an educational objective, as well as learning English, is an innovation for both teachers and learners (Bailly and Carette 2006). After two years of observations and research, we come to the point where self-directed learning must not only be encouraged but made compulsory, although, as the title suggests, there seems to be an apparent contradiction between the idea of "self-direction" and the idea of making it "compulsory". We will suggest that, far from being a contradiction, making SDL compulsory in this context is in fact a condition for achieving the goal of autonomy.

In the first part of this paper, the scientific and institutional contexts of our experiment are presented. In the second part, the methodology used and the outcomes of previous research on this specific context are exposed. The third part gives an account of our current research questions, and our prospects for future research.

I. Scientific and institutional contexts.

I.1. Definitions

In our terms, autonomy, as defined by Henri Holec (1996) is the ability to learn, an ability which has itself to be learnt. It does not refer merely to the way of learning, but it is a goal to reach through a specific organisation of the learning scheme which enables learners to enhance their ability to learn without being taught or other-directed. As a consequence, SDL, seen as a means to reach this autonomy, has to be supported through a specific selection and organisation of resources (self-access resources centres) and through the help of specific professional people that we call advisors (Gremmo 1995, Ciekanski 2005). The role of an advisor is to help learners to reflect on their learning and develop their ability to learn. We thus establish a distinction between an advisor and a tutor, who helps learners to learn the language without helping them to develop their capacity to self-direct their learning. We also make a difference between the roles of the advisor and the teacher, as the latter usually takes all or most of the decisions related to learning: selecting objectives, materials, defining the rhythm and the manner, assessing learners' productions (Carette and Castillo 2004). In a self-directed scheme, these decisions progressively become the responsibility of the learners. Advisors help them in the decision-making process by providing information and support, by validating learners' learning practices or by suggesting practices that are new to the learner. This is done through a specific discussion which we call advising sessions, during which learners tell about their learning experience, to which advisors react in order to help learners clarify their ideas on language learning.

I.2. Institutional setting of the experiment

The institutional context is composed of three entities: the DEFLE, the CRAPEL and the CLYC.
As mentioned above, self-directed learning is an innovation that was introduced in 2004 at the DeFLE, a department which has been based on a campus of the University of Nancy since the early thirties. Every year, two hundred students of more than thirty different nationalities are trained in French during a semester or a year. Around fifteen teachers and advisors work in the department which has been led by members of CRAPEL since 2003. The CRAPEL (Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues) has been working on autonomy and SDL for nearly 40 years and since then has experienced it in many different educative contexts with adults, students and pupils in secondary schools. The CRAPEL was involved in the creation of the CLYC (Centre de Langues Yves Chalon) which is the university resource and self-access centre for eleven languages. Thus there is a coherent and favourable context for the implementation of SDL, three parts of one system converging towards its development. The DeFLE is what we could call an "SDL-friendly" context (Bailly and Carette 2006).

II. Research
II.1. Introducing innovation

Before 2003, learning French at the DeFLE took place only through a traditional system of class-based teaching, what we could call an other-oriented learning scheme. In autumn 2003, with the conviction that SDL is a way to enable students to become better learners, we introduced supported SDL for twenty percent of the training time of some groups of students. We were interested in seeing what it is to generalize the CRAPEL's experience in helping learners develop their ability to learn on a large scale. At the CRAPEL, we are used to helping individual learners, and we have experience in combining SDL with work in groups and in class. The DEFLE context provides an opportunity to apply SDL principles to a large number of students at our university, and to blend the training offered. We think that SDL should not be imposed on all learners, and that an ideal training programme enables students to choose the kind of training they like best. But the mere concept of choice implies having information: thus we believe that, in order to be able to decide how they wish to learn, learners have at least to try and experiment with SDL.

We started this research (2004-2006) by studying the introduction of an innovation: we attempted to define the main local constraints that could impede or, on the contrary, enhance the practice of SDL in this particular context. Resulting from the rather SDL-friendly context described above, we rapidly focused our attention on advisors' and learners' attitudes and practices as regards SDL. Our main objective was to try to determine the impact of the advisor's advising practices on learners' learning practices.

The experimentation of SDL was at first conducted with some groups, not for all students. These groups were selected on the basis of the desire of certain teachers to play a new pedagogic role to which they had been prepared through academic and professional training (Bailly and Carette 2006). From 2006 on, SDL was proposed for all learners, including beginners.

II. 2. Methodology and data

We collected information about advising practices and learning practices using ethnographic methodology: questionnaires, interviews and observations.

(i) To find out to what extent students are ready for SDL and to adopt "new" learning practices, seventy-four questionnaires were addressed to learners with questions on how they learn, how they work at the CLYC and how they perceive SDL and the advisor's role.
(ii) To find out how advisors understand and justify their advising practices, we organised weekly training meetings, fifteen in total, with a volunteer team of advisors. During the fifteen meetings, collective discussions were based on written self-descriptions of each advisor's practices, which led to sharing and comparison of practices. These discussions informed us of how each advisor deals with different situations, such as: learners who ask for a linguistic correction of their productions; learners who complain about a lack of resources; learners who do not seem to change their learning practices; learners who lack competence in French, which is the language used in advising sessions; the amount of time spent individually with each learner; time spent advising to groups; dealing with technical difficulties.

(iii) During these research discussions, we also observed and analysed various means used by advisors to help students reflect on their learning practices: learning-to-learn activities in groups, learning support documents like objectives sheets, assessment sheets, advice sheets, example activity sheets.

(iv) In order to correlate observable practices with advisors' discourse about their practices, we observed thirty sessions of advising work at the CLYC. We also observed and analysed the way learners work at the CLYC to evaluate the effects of students' learning preparation on their practices.

II.3. Results

Initial results based on the data collected show that, on the one hand, learners seem to lack preparation and a reflective attitude and seem to depend rather heavily on the advisor, and that, on the other hand, most students seem to accept SDL.

(i) Lack of preparation
Results from the questionnaires show that learners are not well prepared for SDL by previous learning contexts: when they arrive at the DEFLE, 85% of learners have learned languages in classroom contexts only.

(ii) Lack of reflective attitude
When they work at the CLYC, only one third of students have a short-term objective, in other words, they know precisely what they want to work on at the CLYC. Two thirds of the students do not seem to reflect on their learning, at least in our terms.

(iii) Half of them depend on the advisor's help to select materials and are quite dependent on advisors for assessment of their performance.

(iv) 75% declare in the questionnaire that they did benefit from working at the CLYC.

(v) 55% declare they worked in the CLYC even when they were not obliged to: they did extra hours, not working with the assistance of an advisor.

As these results showed no sign of strong rejection (students who do not like SDL treat it as optional: they decide not to go and do not complain about it), we decided to generalise SDL to all students, including beginners. This decision raises new questions on how to reach our educational goal of learners' learning ability (skills and strategies, savoir and savoir-faire).

III. On-going research.

From these results, new research questions are raised: what becomes of the self-directed learning principles when applied to a large number of students who do not share the language of the advisor and who come from learning and teaching cultures which can be very different from French ones? What do we learn about advising and about the advisor's role when advising occurs in such a context?
We identified one main obstacle to the development of the students' learning ability: learners lack criteria for deciding what to do, how to do it and for self-assessing work and performances, and some of them are not competent enough to be able to talk in French with an advisor. The fact that learners do not have these competences is not surprising, otherwise it would not be our objective to train them in learning how to learn. If advisors had all the time they wanted to talk to the learners, this would not be a problem. But they only have two hours of advising time per week to deal with groups of sometimes more than fifteen students. As a consequence, they declare, and we could observe this too, that they do lack time. One solution would probably be to pay more advisors so that each of them would have more time available for every learner. But of course there are material obstacles, such as the available budget, or space and time. For socio-cultural reasons, such as learners' expectations (for classes with teachers), it is not possible at the moment to increase the amount of time dedicated to advising without risking rejection of the pedagogic scheme by students who want classes. Thus we decided to focus on how to organise the general training offer in a way that would give more space to an efficient preparation for SDL without raising costs or substantially reducing class time.

As SDL represents quite a small part of the general training curriculum (one fifth in total), the necessity of dedicating more time to preparing students for SDL led us to think about how to reshape the curricular organisation so that students' preparation for SDL could be improved. In other words, how could we better link other-directed and self-directed learning?

In 2006, the French course started with an induction week. During this week, students were explained the training on offer which is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages. They were presented with the objectives for each level and invited to self-assess their abilities on the four main skills, and to choose a group whose objectives would match their own. They had a "guided tour" of the CLYC and were given explanatory notes in various languages.

During the rest of the year (11 weeks for those staying only for one semester, or 23 weeks for those staying the whole year) students are offered 20 hours of training, divided between 16 hours in class and four hours at the CLYC, two hours on their own and two with the support of an advisor who is present and can help on demand.

Work at the CLYC and advising sessions were made available for all students, but are not exactly compulsory in the sense that some learners would prefer not to attend CLYC sessions. But at least for those who did choose to attend the CLYC and advising sessions, SDL could be discovered and experimented with, so the decision to continue or not was a real individual choice.

The two-hour session in the presence of an advisor raises several problems still to be solved: how can we organize advising sessions efficiently for the learners? Should the meetings be compulsory? How frequent should they be? Should sessions be collective rather than individual, and what would be the positive and negative aspects of this? How can advising take place with beginners in French? Can the lack of a common language be coped with through the help of more advanced students of the same mother tongue? What would be the positive and negative aspects of such a scheme?

At the CLYC, the advisors experimented with small-group advising sessions which were more or less successful: some advisors found it difficult and doubted their efficiency. One advisor organised discussion groups of 5 or 6 students on a "learning topic", e.g. "how to improve your written expression?", recorded the discussion and gave the recording to each participant; she assessed this organisation positively, but we have no student feedback as yet. While advising a beginner, one advisor tried enlisting the help of a fellow student of the same language who was more advanced in French to communicate with this beginner, but she expressed some doubts about the reliability of the process.

Outside the CLYC, SDL preparation is backed up by a curriculum that makes the contents explicit to students: they know what they will work on in each class they attend: 7 hours on speaking and listening and 7 hours on reading and writing. This clear distinction established between the four skills is supposed to help students understand that they are different things, and means they can join groups of different levels (for instance B2 in oral skills and A2 in written skills) and acquire specific strategies for each skill. We still have to justify this assumption and try to assess whether this organisation has an effect or not on the students' learning skills and their reflection on learning.

To complement the 20 hours of training, two hours of optional workshops based on cultural aspects such as literature, civilisation, visits in town, the production of a newspaper or performance of a play were offered. One advisor proposed a learning-to-learn workshop where she organised specific activities designed to make students reflect on what a language is, how to learn a foreign language, and what can be done to improve one's learning practices. This optional workshop focused on discussions of language learning and eliciting attitudes and representations towards learning and languages. Again, we still have to analyse their reactions.

As a consequence of this general organisation of the curriculum, students at the DEFLE can be grouped into three categories depending on the amount of time dedicated to their preparation for SDL:
- some students attend a learning-to-learn workshop (22 hours in total);
- others work on learning to learn with advisors and learning support documents;
- others do not share their reflections on their learning on a regular basis with advisors. They might share it with other people but information is lacking on this. This is why we intend to complement these data with individual interviews with learners. We still have to determine the sample of students and the questions to ask to get more precise and reliable information on

how students perceive advising and react to it, to see if they find it useful, what is most useful, if they try to apply some of the advice provided, among other things. These individual interviews could also show whether students reflect on their learning and in what terms.

Conclusion: intended follow-up

Given this kind of organization, we have new plans for future research.
We want to find out if there is a correlation between learning-to-learn workshops, advising sessions and learning ability.
We want to check if "interested" students (i.e. those who chose to attend learning-to-learn workshop) spend more time in the CLYC than others. From the analysis of a very small sample, we get the impression that there is no correlation between the learning-to-learn workshops and CLYC attendance.
We also need to know if learning-to-learn workshops as well as advising sessions have an impact on students' ability to learn.

As a consequence, we intend to study different kinds of students:
-Those who attend learning-to-learn workshops and advising sessions,
-Those who attend learning-to-learn workshop only,
-Those who attend advising sessions only,
-Those who do not attend either of the two (i.e. who consider SDL optional).

We will use the following methodology: analysis of what they say in interviews, analysis of their discourse when they talk to the advisor, observations of students working at the CLYC, and questionnaires on learning strategies.

Bibliography

BAILLY, S and CARETTE, E, 2006, "Introducing self-directed learning in an innovation-friendly institutional context", *Porta Linguarum* n°6, p77-97

CARETTE E., & CASTILLO D. 2004, "Devenir conseiller: quels changements pour l'enseignant?", *Mélanges CRAPEL*, n°27, p. 71-97
And on line http://revues.univ-nancy2.fr/melangesCrapel/articleCrapel.php3?id_rubrique=1

CIEKANSKI M., 2005, *L'accompagnement à l'autoformation en langue étrangère : contribution à l'analyse des pratiques professionnelles*, Thèse de doctorat, Nancy 2
And on line
http://cyberdoc.univ-nancy2.fr/THESE/htdocs/docs_ouvert/doc201/2005NAN21009_1.pdf

GREMMO M-J, 1995, "Conseiller n'est pas enseigner", *Mélanges CRAPEL*, n°22, p. 33-61
And on line http://revues.univ-nancy2.fr/melangesCrapel/articleCrapel.php3?id_rubrique=1

HOLEC, H, 1996, "Self-directed learning: an alternative form of training", *Strategies in language learning and use*, Council of Europe, p75-127