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Can old dogs learn new tricks? An account of an experimental course using the Internet in the classroom

Kathryn English, Tina Mc Donnell and Shirley Carter-Thomas

We would like to thank Gilles Mercey, Dominique Meyerie and Frédéric Gaziano from the Moyens communs informatiques Department for their invaluable help.

- 1 Describing all the potential didactic applications of the Internet is an impossible task. What we simply hope to do here is provide an example of how this (new) tool can be an inspiration in the EFL classroom, by not only motivating students and providing numerous opportunities for authentic communication, but by breathing new life into some of our traditional tricks of the trade.
- 2 When initially setting up the course, several of our scientific colleagues were convinced that the students would only use the computers to play games in their English-class time. As we will see, this was far from being the case. However, how can we justify blocking the computer laboratory in an engineering school, for a language course? What do students actually learn attending a course of this type? How can we evaluate their progress? Before attempting to answer questions of this type, we would like to give a brief profile of the students involved and describe the language programme in question.
- 3 The English programme at the Institut national des communications (INT) includes a wide variety of theme courses, from which the student chooses three subjects during the course of an academic year. Each course represents approximately thirty hours of class time and the number of participants is limited to eighteen. The theme courses include skills-based courses such as oral presentations and writing skills, and content-based courses such as literature, cinema, advertising and telecommunications English. The Internet course was added to this list last year.
- 4 Working in an engineering school, we are fortunate to be well-equipped in terms of computers and technical back-up; the teachers setting up this course had weekly access to a computer laboratory equipped with twelve work stations operating on Unix.

Teaching in an engineering school also means that the students' level of English is in general advanced. During their years of *lycée* and *classes préparatoires* they have already had a thorough grounding in the language and many of them have also spent time abroad in English-speaking countries. Although not completely fluent, they do have a good command of the mechanics of the language.

- 5 However, this previous linguistic training has not enabled them to develop autonomous learning skills. Up to now the objectives and content of their language classes have been preset, either by the teacher, the school or an external examination criterion, as is the case for the majority of students learning a second language, (Dickinson 1987: 88, 89). The students are not used to taking decisions related to their study practices in general.
- 6 In this course the students were encouraged from the start to take responsibility for their learning and eventual progress and to some extent even the content of the course. The World Wide Web changes every day. The teacher cannot possibly control or even select the content, although she can to some extent control the tools. At the end of the day though the teacher cannot be sure of what the students will find; a degree of guided autonomy becomes an essential element of the proceedings.
- 7 Course objectives were negotiated with the students in order to place them at the centre of the learning process (Nunan 1988: 60,61). This again was something totally new to them. Naturally, some of the students set themselves impossibly ambitious objectives, which had to be renegotiated but their participation in the objective-setting process was nevertheless stressed. Furthermore, the objectives were set on an individual basis; students e-mailed their ideas to the teacher who shaped and refined their objectives. There was not a single class objective. Setting objectives thus provided the semi-autonomous background to the course that we wanted to foster and from the first lesson on student responsibility was stressed.
- 8 Another concept stressed throughout the course was that of **authenticity**. If the use of authentic materials is seen as a moral imperative in second language teaching (Clarke 1989) then the Internet is an ideal source of course content. The Internet also provides ample scope for authentic communication, particularly using writing and reading skills, and we exploited this aspect as fully as possible. The details of course content we will look at in a later section, but we would like emphasize here that our approach was two-fold; autonomy and authentic communication were the mainstays of the course.
- 9 According to Widdowson, in a recent article in the *ELT journal*, these two concepts have traditionally been regarded as contradictory. Authenticity concerns native speaker usage. Learners do not belong to this community and therefore any autonomous language learning process cannot duplicate native speaker contexts. However for him, the question remains open: "Authentic language is, in principle, incompatible with autonomous language learning" (Widdowson 1996: 68). We believe that in our course these two supposed contraries were successfully reconciled. Let us now look in more detail at the actual organisation and content of the course.

Content

- 10 As already emphasized this was not a fixed content course which represents another advantage of the Internet in terms of a learner-centred curriculum (Nunan 1988: 5). The

role of the teacher was more of that of a tutor facilitating computer-aided linguistic exploration:

At the heart of the matter lies the notion of the teacher 'distancing' her or himself from the 'learning' process, concentrating more on allowing/encouraging learning to take place. (Richards & Roe 1994: 6)

- 11 However, before this could take place, it was necessary to explain to some students the basic functioning of the Internet. Once this was done, directive teaching was kept to a minimum; we preferred to provide the students with the *activation tools*, and limit direct intervention to specific items.
- 12 The activation tools used included: the Tandem penpal service, the Eng-Fra discussion forum, e-mail comments to the teacher, imposed and free Web search themes, the e-mail talk function and some traditional EFL classes revamped for the computer. We will first give a few details about the Tandem project.
- 13 The Tandem is a Lingua European financed project, that is hosted at the University of Bochum in Germany. There are two main parts to the Tandem concept. The first is a penpal service, where the students are linked up with a penpal in an English-speaking country; in this case England, the United States or Australia. The French students write in English and their penpal writes back in French. The correspondents are supposed to correct any linguistic mistakes in their partners' letters. (In fact, we discovered that when the penpal is American they usually avoid **writing** back in French, apart from the use of the final greeting, *au revoir et à bientôt*). Our French students appreciated this penpal service and generally speaking would exchange about three mails a week. This was without any nagging on our part and we doubt whether they would have written as willingly in a traditional writing class. The other part of the Tandem is a discussion forum. The idea is for the students to write a few paragraphs in English and a few in French on a topical European issue.
- 14 E-mail was also the medium used for all official correction on the part of the teacher. The informal register of e-mail, which is very different from a regular formal written style posed little problem for the students. However, class essays were required in a more formal register as we wished to emphasise the importance of appropriate register and style in writing.
- 15 Imposed Web search themes usually began with a question or occasionally an address and the students were then asked to discover as much as they could on the question. The free Web search themes were chosen by the students during the objective-setting phase. During the course however they were asked to report on their findings.
- 16 Some of the Web search themes we proposed included the following:
- 17 - How many Presidential candidates are there in the US elections? (This question may appear futile, but at the beginning of the election race, in January 96, there were 45 candidates!)
- 18 - Describe Route 66. (This is part of the EFL Web and is in fact a language course in itself, with pictures, games and questions.)
- 19 - Rank the leading sites for English grammar exercises. (This was less successful, perhaps because the idea of exploration was somewhat missing. The students knew all too well what they were going to find.)

- 20 - Was Shakespeare gay? (This was originally a student question and led to a lot of research and discussion. All of Shakespeare's works are now on line and students did a lot of reading. A remarkable feat, bearing in mind that they are engineering students and not language students as such. Would the students have wanted to read Shakespearean sonnets in a regular English class?)
- 21 - Where can I get help with technical writing? (Ohio and Perdue Universities have very well developed sites, and Perdue even corrects technical papers.)
- 22 - What are the most frequently visited sites on the Web? Basically they are search engines, the White House and Microsoft.)
- 23 Many of these computer-aided activities were conducted simultaneously. Most of our students are proficient in, as well as fascinated by computer science, and are capable of opening three windows at the same time. They can simultaneously write an e-mail and pursue one or more Web searches. They rarely waste time waiting to download information.
- 24 Other communicative activities that worked well in the classroom were made possible thanks to the Talk function which is part of the Unix environment. The top part of the screen can receive incoming messages and the bottom part of the screen your answer. The two can be sent simultaneously. Students can thus swop ideas and generally communicate with each other. In fact, during the course an engineering student from another Telecom Institute in Poland also joined in our discussions in this way!
- 25 Using the Talk function we also wrote a collective short story and did many other standard activities that have been going on for years in EFL classrooms. We based another class, for instance, on solving John Barrington's murder, the EFL murder mystery chestnut so dear to our early teaching days. In general, we noticed that using the Talk function led to high student participation. The ratio of student 'talk' time to that of teacher 'talk' time is vastly superior. In comparison with a traditional class, teacher 'talk' time was negligible.
- 26 Writing practice, and in particular group writing played an important part in the course. In a traditional writing class, the teacher provides an essay subject which the student may or may not like, the student writes the essay and hands it directly to the teacher. However, when students are in front of a computer they will revise and reread their compositions numerous times before handing them in. This would seem to be a very interesting use of the computer and one whose potential cannot be overestimated.
- 27 The process of revision, which seems to come so naturally in front of a screen, is a learning process. The student is learning to judge and be responsible for his written output. During this rereading phase, the teacher is also active, circulating round the class, answering questions and giving advice where necessary. The teacher is thus able to intervene in the writing process, see how the students formulate their ideas and help them organise their writing rather than simply give a superficial lexical or grammatical correction.
- 28 Furthermore, the writing tasks the students were engaged in were all part of a communicative approach. All too often, a student will be requested to write an essay to no one, to write for no purpose except to obtain a grade. In real life, we always write to someone, even if it is just a note to ourselves. In the Internet course, students were asked to e-mail their essays to a minimum of three other participants in the course, who were

asked to read the essay and write comments back to the author. The essay was then forwarded to the teacher. This process also proved useful in preparing debates.

Evaluation

- 29 How can we best evaluate students' progress on such a course? We tried first to make the students evaluate themselves. According to their own individual objectives, how did they feel about their work. How much time had they spent and how happy were they with what they had achieved? As far as the time element was concerned, students spent far above the allotted class time working on this course. They have computers in their accommodation and all of the penpal activity, for example, was carried on outside classroom hours. In addition to self-evaluation, we tried to develop a form of peer evaluation. As explained above an e-mail essay was not judged solely by the teacher. The teacher was in fact the fourth recipient, the essay already having been 'judged' by fellow students. The final evaluation was that of the teacher, who after taking the other forms of evaluation into account, was the one who gave the final grade.

Conclusion

- 30 What did students learn on this course? Actual quantifiable progress in such a short time is extremely difficult to measure. Moreover for each individual student the answer will not be the same. However, we can begin by pointing out that no other way would students have read as intensively or have done so much work out of class. Furthermore students got used to rereading and revising their written work, something they are traditionally reluctant to do.
- 31 We encouraged teamwork and in particular joint composition. These are not students alone in their corner with their computer, they are sharing what they are learning and writing with their fellow students. The feedback from the other students contributes to the final product. We believe this form of peer editing, is extremely beneficial to all concerned.
- 32 As already emphasized we tried from the outset to underline students' own responsibility for their learning. Some students would maybe have liked more intervention on the part of the teacher. However, autonomy is not a given and particularly with the type of student we are working with, who have been used to a very directive style, it is something that has to be constructed (Holec 1994: 61). Furthermore according to David Nunan by building new experiences into courses the student is sensitized to the learning process itself and this in turn should facilitate the growth of autonomy (Nunan 1988: 46).
- 33 Throughout all the activities we emphasized the importance of process over product. It is not so much the quality of the final essay that we are concerned with, but the process of how to go about writing. The fact that as teachers we were able to e-mail corrections directly to students and that they could continue writing or researching in their accommodation also contributed to an awareness of the ongoing process. The concept of learning English as a process was thus something going on all the time. It was not only restricted to actual classtime.
- 34 From the teacher's point of view the course was exhausting, but at the same time so challenging that numerous future courses using the Internet are in the pipeline.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix: Some selected web sites

Comparative cartoons

- Calvin and Hobbes <<http://www.csd.uu.se/~d94her/calvin/jumpstation.html>>
- The Dilbert Zone <<http://www.unitedmedia.com/comics/dilbert>>
- The Dysfunctional Family Circus <<http://www.thoughtport.com/spinnwebe-cgi-bin/dfc.cgi>>
- European Comics on the Net <<http://grid.let.rug.nl/~erikt/.Comics/welcome.html>>

Politics

- Project Vote Smart <<http://www.vote-smart.org/index.html>>
- The Jefferson Project <<http://www.stardot.com/jefferson>>

Reference

- The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World <<http://ce.ecn.purdue.edu/~ashmawy/7WWV>>
- The U.C. Berkeley Museum of Paleontology <<http://ucmpl.berkeley.edu>>
- CIA Statistics <<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/95fact/index.html>>
- The Library of Congress <<http://www.loc.gov>>
- The Internet Public Library <<http://ipl.sils.umich.edu>>
- Lonely Planet <<http://www.lonelyplanet.com.au/lp.html>>
- Shakespeare <<http://www.gh.cs.usyd.edu.au/~matty/Shakespeare/index.html>>

ABSTRACTS

In this paper, we present an account of an on-going experimental class which exploits the World Wide Web as the main source of course content and e-mail as the principal communication

medium. The ensuing situation in which the teacher no longer controls course content or even the intelligible input is discussed as well as new ways of establishing course objectives and evaluation procedures.

L'article présente le compte rendu d'une expérience menée dans un cours d'anglais où le World Wide Web est la source du contenu de cours et le courrier électronique le moyen principal de communication. S'ensuit une situation où l'enseignant ne contrôle plus le contenu du cours. Sont examinées également de nouvelles procédures pour fixer les objectifs et évaluer les résultats.

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Keywords: authenticity, autonomy, Internet, writing

Mots-clés: authenticité, autonomie, expression écrite, Internet

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