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*The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution*

## Towards new roles for learners and teachers in a language learning system?

Anne Chateau, H el ene Zumbihl\*

*ATILF-  quipe CRAPEL ; CLSH - B timent F; 23 Boulevard Albert 1er  
B.P. 133.97; 54015 Nancy Cedex*

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### Abstract

In a flexible language learning system, developed at a French university and gradually improved through Action Research, different elements are combined: individual work on a virtual learning environment (VLE), pair-work and counselling appointments. One of the objectives of the system is to help the students involved progress towards autonomy – defined as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec 1981: 3) or “as the capacity to take control over one’s own learning” (Benson 2001: 2) – in their learning of English. The implementation of the system involves a new conception of the different actors’ roles. Teachers become tutors, or counsellors, as defined by CRAPEL (Gremmo, 1995; Ciekanski, 2005) with new specific pedagogical goals (Bertin, Grav  & Nancy-Combes, 2010) and the learners have a new role to play. The introduction of two new guidance tools over the last years – a logbook, and specific sections in the existing forum of the VLE – were meant to help the students develop a reflexive approach and thus enhance autonomization, or developing learners’ capacity to learn (Holec 1990: 77), and, in a second time, to promote the development of collaborative learning strategies and encourage the students to use strategies which they would not primarily have thought of. The guidance tools used in this specific language learning environment such as the counselling appointments, the logbook, and the forum, may influence the roles played by the different actors, but also the representations they have of their own roles, which may have an impact on their motivation and thus on the autonomization process (Dickinson, 1995). From the creation of the flexible system five years ago, the research has studied a population of 610 students through quantitative and qualitative analyses (Chateau, 2008; Chateau & Zumbihl, 2010). Focusing on the results obtained with the last population of students, the paper discusses the differences between them and the previous populations, and in particular whether the evolution of the roles played by the different actors, as compared with traditional language teaching/learning situations, has been enhanced.

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Language learning system; autonomization; roles; counselling

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### 1. Introduction

Information and communication technology (ICT) has changed many aspects of the way we live in the last twenty years. Applications in foreign language teaching and learning have aroused considerable interest, as the papers presented at the Eurocall conferences since 1993 demonstrate. As Chappelle put it in 2005, ICT may “afford the learner more appropriately individualized instruction than what can be

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\* Contact author. Tel.: +33 (0)3 54 50 51 12; Fax: +33 (0)3 54 50 49 11.  
E-mail address: anne.chateau@univ-nancy2.fr.

achieved through classroom learning” (p. 78). At Nancy University, since 2005, MA psychology students (i.e. 4th-year students) are required to work on a flexible language learning system in the first semester of the university year, in order to be able to follow a course in English for Psychology in the second semester. This learning system, studied since its first year of implementation, has gradually been improved over the years, via students’ feedback. It is accessible from the ‘Espace Numérique de Travail’ (ENT), the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) of our university. It comprises individual work and pair-work, both types being accessible from the VLE (Chateau & Zumbihl, 2010; Chateau & Zumbihl, 2011), and incorporates different guidance elements, in order to favour collaboration and pedagogical dialogue, both essential for the development of autonomy according to Benson & Lor (1998).

Since the study of the previous cohort had revealed the need for a new tool to enable learners to take more control of their learning (Chateau & Zumbihl, 2010), we introduced two changes for the fourth and fifth: a logbook, to encourage students’ reflection; and an improvement of the existing forum, to help them to go towards autonomy via collaboration with their peers. The impact of the guidance tools on learners’ autonomization has previously been studied (Chateau & Zumbihl, 2011), but we hypothesized that they might reveal the representations the learners have of the roles played by the actors involved in such a language learning system. In order to check this, we then decided to study these tools, as well as the answers given by the students to a five-level Likert item questionnaire. The paper thus focuses on the results obtained with the last two cohorts of students and discusses their perceptions of the change of roles played by the different actors as compared with what happens in traditional language teaching/learning situations.

## 2. Method

Most researchers (Foucher and Demaizière, 1999; Hurd, 2006; La Ganza, 2008; Mozzon-McPherson, 2007) agree that autonomy necessarily implies a change in the pedagogical relationship between teachers and learners and a modification of the representation the learners have of themselves as learners. From the point of view of the learners however, this change of roles is a difficult process (Portine, 1998); it has to do with the way they perceive their capacities as learners, and may be connected to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Furthermore, self-efficacy seems to have an impact on the way the learners deal with anxiety and can help them decrease it (Zimmerman, 2000). Anxiety is thus clearly an emotion that has to be taken into account in a system in which most of the language learning activities will be done on a VLE, and which involves learners to be more in control of their learning process than in a traditional classroom setting. This notion of control implies learners to react to difficulties and to take steps to overcome them.

Learners’ control, self-efficacy and anxiety are therefore parameters that play a part in the way learners may adapt to the flexible system. For that reason, we postulated that their perception of the pedagogical roles involved in such a system might be a key element. In order to check this we studied the guidance tools introduced to increase dialogue between teachers and learners and among learners themselves. The idea was to examine whether they revealed the representations the learners have of their role and of the teachers’ roles.

### 2.1. Sequence analysis

In order to study students’ perceptions of the roles we adopted a threefold methodology, to cross-check different data. We first carried out a study of the logbooks of two consecutive cohorts through a sequence analysis as the students’ perceptions of the roles in the system were not necessarily explicit. In the sequence analysis the discourse is studied in its development. So we decided to work on complete logbooks from one student in ten, chosen at random for the two cohorts. We studied 11 logbooks out of 115 for the first cohort and 8 out of 77 for the second.

### 2.2. Thematic analysis

The students’ perceptions of the actors’ role were also studied with a thematic analysis of the sheets filled in by the teachers during the counselling sessions. With this type of discourse analysis the contents of a document can be divided into categories. The categories are then applied to all the texts to be analysed. Each theme corresponds to a signification unit, which includes all the ideas on a specific subject. In this way the most important themes expressed by the students were identified, classified and categorised.

These categories were analysed qualitatively and compared against the results obtained from the study of the logbooks.

### 2.3. Questionnaire

Finally, a questionnaire was given to the students at the end of their work in the VLE, to obtain their evaluation of the learning system. The data obtained were analysed with the software Sphinx ([http://www.lesphinx.eu/fr/accueil\\_sphinx.php](http://www.lesphinx.eu/fr/accueil_sphinx.php)). The objective was to collect information about the evaluation and appreciation of the whole system. We obtained both quantitative and qualitative results as the students had the possibility to comment their answers on each specific subject.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Analysis of the logbooks

As there were little differences between the results obtained for the two cohorts, the data are combined in the following analysis. The content of the students' logbooks did not always indicate a conscious perception of the actors' roles. However underlying representations implicitly appeared in these documents. Four different aspects of the students' attitudes towards the learning system could be noticed.

The first obvious item we could remark is anxiety. Most students indeed seemed to analyse their problems effectively, but some of them expressed a certain anxiety as they did not know exactly where to find solutions to their problems. This implicit anxiety, noticeable in their logbooks, might be a request for help from their tutors since they know that their logbooks can be read by the tutors. It is also probably due to a misunderstanding of the new roles that working in such a language learning system implies, since some of them seemed to perceive their teachers as being simply 'absent'.

In a second step, some students, however, expressed the idea of having really accomplished something; which showed that they felt responsible for their language learning. They seemed to have taken over this responsibility from their teachers. These students appear to have a generally positive opinion of what they have achieved. Their comments illustrate the necessary process of transformation that learners have to undergo in order to reach autonomy as described by Portine (1998) or Mozzon-McPherson (2007).

The third central item to be noticed is the centrality of the teacher-learner relationship. Sometimes learners speak directly to the tutors in their logbooks and show that they follow the recommendations given during the counselling sessions. It seems to indicate that this relationship, which involves dialogue between tutors and learners, is an essential guidance element

The fourth essential result concerns collaborative learning: some students found solutions to their problems in that type of learning and chose to work in groups on the different resources present in the system. The importance of collaborative learning was generally implicitly expressed, however the different steps of the collaborative learning process are precisely described in the logbooks (e.g. with the repetition of the 'we' subject). Even if no explicit appreciation of collaborative learning appeared in the logbook, the students' discourse seemed thus to confirm the necessity of peer support in such language learning systems, as stated for example by Bertin et al (2010).

### 3.2. Analysis of the counselling sessions sheets

A hundred and eight counselling sessions were carried out in 2008-2009 and 77 the following year. The notes taken by the tutors during these meetings were examined, classified for each cohort, and sorted in 11 particularly noticeable themes which were then analysed qualitatively.

The results obtained seem to confirm those already found from the analysis of the logbooks. Indeed, many students explicitly stated they appreciated the work organisation with the flexible system (33 in the first cohort; 29 in the second). At the same time some students (12; 11) clearly mentioned their difficulties with this new organisation and with their new roles as learners. Generally, however, these comments could be linked with other statements made by the same students which showed that they had underestimated their level in English. These students who probably have a low self-esteem considering their capacities in learning a foreign language would prefer the continuous presence of a teacher to reassure them; they did not perceive themselves as able to control their success or their failure. This lack of self-esteem and corresponding difficulty in taking a more autonomous role can be connected with the

notion of self-efficacy described by Bandura (1986). However another result worth noting is that 8 students in 2008-2009, and 9 the following year, explicitly mentioned during the counselling sessions, the fact that collaborative learning helped them to find a solution to their problems, which confirmed the results already found in the logbooks.

### 3.3. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of the questionnaire

In order to further study the perception of the actors' roles, we focused on three items of the questionnaire which correspond to different stages in the system; the comments regarding each of them may reveal different perceptions. The quantitative results are given in the table below:

	2008-2009		2009-2010	
	useful	very useful	useful	very useful
usefulness of the introductory session	55.6%	11%	43.5%	14.5%
usefulness of the counselling session	61.1%	12%	46.8%	21%
usefulness of the flexible system	55.6%	16%	64.%	14.5%

The rather high percentages regarding the introductory practice session confirm the fact that it is perceived as an important element of the guidance tools in the system. 17 students in the first cohort and 11 students in the second mentioned the explanations and the opportunity 'to understand better what the teacher expected'. This sentence may reveal a certain level of anxiety from the students at the beginning of their work in the VLE, concerning the tutor's expectations about their work.

As far as the usefulness of the counselling session is concerned, a majority of the students acknowledged the need to meet the teachers. They also noticed that the advice was more personalized than in a classroom context. The word 'advice' and 'counselling' were found 5 times in the first cohort's comments and 8 times in the second: it seems thus that the counselling session helped these students integrate the teachers' role as counsellors. The counselling session also enabled the students to adjust their work. This probably means that some students still need the teachers to help them evaluate the situation. However this is not contradictory with a certain level of autonomy (Bertin et al, 2010). It also reflects a lack of self-confidence noticeable in several students' appreciation of their knowledge of English.

Finally, the percentages concerning the usefulness of the flexible system show a rather high level of satisfaction among the students.

The three elements of the questionnaire studied in this section correspond to students' perceptions of three different stages in the system. Comments about the introductory practice session seem to reveal some anxiety about the new roles involved. Those concerning the counselling session turn around the pivotal position of the teacher-learner relationship in this system and, finally, through some of their comments about the system as a whole, students seem to show their understanding of their new responsibilities as autonomous learners. This may thus indicate a progression in students' representations of the new pedagogical roles involved in flexible language learning systems, as opposed to traditional classroom-based situations.

## 4. Conclusions

As revealed by this study, specific items may have an impact on the roles played by tutors and learners in flexible language learning systems, i.e. students' anxiety in relation with their language learning, their adaptability to new roles, collaborative learning and the centrality of the teacher-learner relationship.

In this action-research however, the designers of the system also played the role of tutors, which may not be ideal, and may be the reason why some students have difficulties in understanding that the tutors

are at their disposal to help them and to give them advice. It is nevertheless often the case in similar systems as indicated by Riley (1986), because of institutional constraints. Even if we could notice a progression in the learners' representations of the actors' roles which could lead to more autonomy for some students, students still have traditional representations especially regarding the tutors' roles and this could be an obstacle towards more autonomy in this specific context. Therefore, students' understanding of the tutors' role of guidance and counselling should be reinforced, through a better explanation of the actors' roles during the introductory practice session, as well as by encouraging them to meet the tutors earlier in the semester so that they understand that the tutors are here to offer support in their language learning process. Generally indeed, meeting the tutor face-to-face induces a change in students' representations. Dialogue between learners and tutors is thus central in order to help learners change the representations that may block their autonomization process.

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