

## Conclusion

The research showed that students think that learning English amounts to being able to communicate in the language. This is why they imagine it is feasible to learn the language through immersion and interaction merely by spending some time in a country where the target language is spoken.

Research has shown that there is more to learning a language than immersion and interaction:

- socio-cultural influences
- identity problems
- socio-cognitive parameters etc.

But students think they are good at languages as long as they can make themselves understood, and find it hard to figure out what the institution expects from them.

On the other hand, what the institution expects goes beyond basic communication skills. Most of the time teachers expect students to master capacities that are in keeping with the representation the institution has of their future socioprofessional status.

Discussion of these representations could help reduce the gap and facilitate communication between teachers and students, and the proposed checklist is offered to that aim. From that starting point, independent learning supported by tutorials can be proposed to the learners. However, it is essential that teacher and learner should agree on the type of tutorial proposed : the learner can refuse to participate. The teacher should be aware of the cognitive aspects of language learning and the learner should be actively involved in the process. The role of the teacher as tutor should be to raise the learner's awareness of his own metacognitive processes. The starting point should be the learner's own representations of what it is to learn a foreign language. The next steps could be raising the learner's awareness about the goals he wants to set himself and what he should do to reach those goals. Our hypothesis is that reflexion of that type on both parts will enable more effective learning to take place.

## References

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## A METHOD IN MADNESS – AUDIO - JOURNALS

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*"I really like this tape thing - it changes and you have to think about how you're speaking and everything, because normally when you're talking to other people you're just there, you know, talking talking talking but you really don't have to think of what you're saying or how you're saying it. Well, now, (when you're doing the tape) you shouldn't think too much about it either because then you're not speaking naturally but at least afterwards and before you get more conscious about it and I think that's great".*

Audio-journals are a simple, practical way of helping learners improve their English (or indeed any other language) outside the classroom. I have used it for many different levels and teaching situations, and in this article I shall explain how the system works, its benefits and practical drawbacks. Much of the article has really been written by the learners themselves through the transcripts of their opinions of these audio-journals, as it is, after all, largely their observations and attitudes which matter. Their comments appear in italics, unedited. I have also included some of the questions and comments of people who attended my talk on this subject at IATEFL in Dublin in March 2000. Each week the students record approximately five minutes of themselves talking alone about any subject of their choosing and hand the tape to me. I then listen to it, do a written feedback sheet, give them back the tape and the feedback sheet and they then continue where they left off. I give them free choice in the topic as I think that they will take more interest in talking about issues which concern them and their everyday lives. Furthermore, they will be more motivated to discover, recycle and remember new vocabulary when it is in their relevant and immediate field of interest. Fixed tasks require more planning and structuring which I do not consider relevant to this exercise. Learners come up with a huge range of topics, amongst which have been the following:-

Moving to Ireland and marrying; why I love/hate living in Ireland; why I feel so alone; sadness on Valentine's Day; bereavement; genocide and reconciliation; families, good and bad; last weekend; films recently seen; past events; what the future holds for me.

As can be seen from this list, a lot of these issues are extremely personal. Assurance needs to be given at the outset that the tapes are totally confidential and no-one else will hear them apart from the person to whom they are given, in this case the teacher.

*"I'm very shy, and if I knew somebody else listened to it I could die. I do it because I know there is a teacher there who is listening to it and only her and me can listen to the tape".*

This confidentiality often creates a useful personal dialogue which may be difficult or inappropriate to establish in a classroom. Sometimes issues are raised by the learner which may need to be addressed - personal problems, difficulties adapting to a new life and culture, and so on. Very often the teacher is the first and only available source of help to a newly arrived student in a strange country, but the cry for help may not be heard in a busy classroom.

*"The other benefit (of the tapes) and it's not really concerning English, and the English course, is probably that most of the people coming to the course are foreigners and they might not know that many people as yet, and I think it can be beneficial to say something which helps to unwind some of the problems one can face when coming over to a country where they don't know anybody."*

Doing an audio-journal has many other positive aspects:-

a) It improves self-confidence as learners can practise "difficult bits" of the language in privacy without worrying about looking foolish in front of their classmates. Getting one's tongue around "th" can be an amusing experience, but it can also be acutely embarrassing.

b) It improves pronunciation and fluency. When learners hear themselves they become more aware of their mistakes or general lack of clarity....

*... "really I think it's handy, it's really useful, because when you speak every day the perception of what you are speaking is only the ideas you have. You don't have any kind of feedback about your pronunciation. You only know what you try to speak and nothing else. But the situation change when you can record your voice, wait, play it and in that moment is when you understand how bad you speak English. It's **unbelievable!** I was really surprising - I thought my English was better, but no. Now I have the point of view as somebody else who is listening me and now I understand sometimes it's really difficult to understand me. That is a very good point to try to improve the pronunciation and to speak slowly because it's terrible, it's **terrible** when you try to speak a lot! You have **tons** of ideas and then to recognise probably the people only catch 10-20-30% and a lot of information is missed".*

In face-to-face conversation learners can get around their lack of language in many ways, for example by gesture, re-negotiation, or rephrasing. This in turn sometimes can lead to a slightly idealised perception of their actual ability in the language.

c) It helps with hesitation and space-filling language.

d) It provides an objective progress record - learners can actually HEAR their progress when very often they cannot

FEEL it. At other times they can SEE it (from the feedback sheets) when they cannot HEAR it.

e) As many students have a very limited class time each week, and often have little or no other contact with native speakers and limited opportunity to express themselves, the use of a tape and a tape recorder provides valuable practice and time to become more familiar with the language.

f) It is something new and fresh, something that breaks the moulded format of grammar, reading and writing homework ..

*"It's also good to have some new elements in the teaching because we always do the same thing, you know, reading, writing, learning grammar and just some new elements, I think that's motivating. When you introduced this tape thing I thought "Oh, that's great, that's a new idea - she's really conscious of us and wants to do something new".*

g) It helps students prepare for examinations such as the Cambridge First Certificate ...

*"I think it's good because it's a way of facing the oral exam in June (FCE). I think in the exam we have to speak by ourself, well I mean not to ourself - we have to speak to someone who is there listening to you but it's like if you were alone because it's not a conversation so I think it's a good practice".*

h) It takes the mystery out of machines ...

*"Where I see some benefit (of the tapes) is to talk to a machine, if I can say so, and to learn to forget the fear one can have to talk to a machine and not to a person or to somebody real".*

In fact many people are required to use for machines frequently in everyday life - tape recorders, dictaphones, telephones, microphones, and the ever-present threat of the answering machine ...

*"The first time when Sally-Ann gave me the tape I thought no, I don't want to do it, because I belong to those persons who doesn't want to speak into the tapes or even leave a message on an answering machine so I wasn't very enthusiastic about that homework at first. But then I decided to do it and now I think it isn't a bad idea of Sally-Ann, so I can hear if I improved myself and what kind of mistakes I did when I am speaking and everything. It's really helpful and I think I will go on speaking into tapes".*

The disadvantages that I have come across and that have been mentioned by students are as follows:-

a) At first, students may take up to an hour to produce five minutes of recording, so it can be very time-consuming, frustrating, and plain difficult. However, it is encouraging for them to point out that in this hour they are

thinking, talking and planning all the time in English so it is all of value in the learning process. Furthermore, this preparation time becomes shorter as they get accustomed to the equipment and the procedure. So far, I have not had any students who have given up because of these initial difficulties. Once they start, they continue.

b) There is often the practical disadvantage that there is no tape recorder or quiet room available. This can sometimes be overcome by lending a student a tape recorder and providing a suitable place. One of the members of the audience at IATEFL suggested that a dictaphone might be used, and recently one of my students has started using one of these and it works well, but they are not usually widely available to students.

Recording of these audio-journals is voluntary, and some students choose not to do it for various reasons such as time constraints, but very often people who are not initially very keen will take up the idea as they see their colleagues obviously benefiting from and enjoying a purely voluntary project.

*"Another thing that is very good is that you have never forced to us to record the tape.... Last year at university .... we had to write down a diary ... it was compulsory and it was awful .... it makes you very lazy to do these kind of things"....*

Feedback may cover such areas as pronunciation, structure, word order, lexis choice, stress, and appropriacy. The areas I select depends on the level of the learner concerned and their particular areas of difficulty. As several pages of feedback can be de-motivating and also too overwhelming to take in, I usually limit the feedback sheet to one or two A4 handwritten pages. There is also the practical consideration of the time available to the teacher for writing these feedback sheets. Once you get used to the system (like the students), a feedback sheet on a five-minute tape recording should take as little as ten minutes.

I always include some personal response to what the students have said. If people are going to bare their souls, or indeed even take the time and trouble to commit themselves to tape, it seems to me to be natural and appropriate to do this. This in turn often continues the learner teacher dialogue. And why not, from time to time, do the very exercise that you are asking your own students to do? I was gently reprimanded once by a student on her cassette, saying it was not entirely fair that she was always doing all the talking and revelations, and why should I not do something similar? I thought she had a very valid point, so I did so, and this was her response:-

*"What I think is also helpful is Sally-Ann gave me once a tape and she told me about her life and everything, and I think it was also helpful for me so I can see the difference between my tape and her tape and how I should express some things. I think for me it was very helpful. Maybe she*

*could do it more often. I would be very pleased if I could get more tapes off her".*

Several people asked in the seminar why I did not record oral feedback. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, I feel that it is easier for the learner to have a written sheet that (s)he can refer back to over a period of time and thus have a written record of areas that have improved, need more work, and so on. Secondly, at some levels one would need to be very selective and clear with regard to language used in the tape feedback in order to make sure that the learner will absorb and understand the feedback. Thirdly, if the students are already experiencing practical problems getting hold of a tape recorder and a quiet room in order to record their own tapes, their problems will then be compounded by having to listen to and take notes from the teacher's oral feedback. Furthermore, it is less time-consuming for the teacher - you can write the feedback while listening to the tape (with occasional pauses), but for feedback to be recorded on tape it would be necessary to firstly do the notes while listening, and then do a second phase of recording. However, I do feel that oral feedback would be more appropriate in certain areas, for example to record personal responses and highlight stress and intonation, and I have already started recording models for pronunciation on some students' tapes in their particular area.

As well as putting in a lot of hard work, both the learners and I have had a lot of fun doing these tapes. We have discovered things about one another and about a different way of learning and teaching English. It has been very much a co-operative process, a partnership in learning, which is so much more rewarding than a one-directional process, and one which at least some of the students will take with them into their own teaching career.

*"Actually, if I teach in Spain, some day, I don't know, that's a new idea that I have for practising with my pupils".*

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I should be most interested to hear from people who have used audio-journals, and I would be happy to enter into any correspondence on the subject.