HOW CAN I FACILITATE LEARNING AMONGST MY LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED STUDENTS?

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CONTENTS

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ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

I wish to have my work assessed under the following criteria:

A   **Use of Workplace Experience**

M3   Can analyse and reflect on professional practice using an identified framework and/or general theory.

M4   Can critically evaluate workplace experience in the light of reflection and/or enquiry so as to identify changed understandings of it and suggest future courses of action.

B   **Use of Reading**

M3   Can use published research and other literature to evaluate findings of original enquiry.

M4   Can give critical evaluation of existing research and literature in the light of findings of original enquiry.

C   **Use of Research**

M2   Can justify plans and methods on methodological / epistemological grounds.

M4   Can reflect and critically analyse the enquiry process and the outcome of this.

M5b   Can discuss the implications of ethical issues arising from the topic of the line of enquiry.

D   **Content of Unit**

M1b   Knows the significance of contextual and other factors in relation to the concepts of the areas of study.

M4   Can critically analyse ideas and knowledge of the unit using experience and reading.

ABSTRACT

"How can I facilitate learning amongst my Leaving Certificate Applied students"?

For many years my non-academic students have struggled to cope with the traditional Leaving Certificate course in French. It has served them poorly. Last year the Department of Education introduced the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme which recognises a wider range of their talents and abilities. The value-basis underpinning this course is that it should be an interactive, applied approach where students should experience some degree of success in learning. Our school has chosen to teach French to fulfil the foreign language requirement on the Leaving Certificate Applied course. No prior knowledge of it is required. Although I welcomed this new Leaving Certificate course and the opportunity to teach French on it, I was anxious about its delivery as I was faced with a truly mixed ability class. Some had studied French up to Junior Certificate level with minimal to average success in it. Others had never studied it before. I wanted to keep everyone involved in a sense of learning and progress, neither overwhelming some nor underchallenging others. And in keeping with the value-basis underpinning the Leaving Certificate Applied course I wanted to help each student to validate their effort and achievement.

My research describes the steps I took to try to facilitate their learning, how I and my students tried to learn new roles as educator and learners, and how they, to greater and lesser extents, gradually embraced autonomous learning and peer teaching. The story of this change is told honestly, in all its chaos and triumphs, through observations, reflections and evaluations.

I believe I can show that, following this intervention, I facilitated learning amongst my students, that I have helped them to validate their learning, and that they and I have grown in our awareness of the learning process. Finally, I believe that I, most of all, have learned that improvement is always possible if I am willing to commit myself to change, willing to take a risk.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

My research focuses on the question of how I, as a teacher of French, might best facilitate learning amongst my Leaving Certificate Applied students.

Chapter two contextualises my teaching experience and how teaching in vocational schools has differed for me to teaching in convent schools. I explain the historical background to the introduction into Ireland of vocational schools, the clientele they targeted, the type of education they were intended to provide, the limitations which were imposed on them and the problems which arose therefrom. The traditional Leaving Certificate, which has served most of my students poorly, has been the only examination available in Ireland to mark the completion of second level schooling. The Department of Education finally introduced a new Leaving Certificate course last year, the Leaving Certificate Applied, which recognises a wider range of the abilities of my students, and I explain its approach and assessment procedure in this chapter. Despite my pleasure in finally seeing my students' abilities recognised by the Department of Education I found myself in the invidious situation of having to teach French to a class of mixed ability students. Most students had studied it for three years and had differing but mostly minimal levels of success in it, but some were studying it for the first time. This obvious mixed ability, the value-basis underpinning the LCA approach to teaching and the methodologies to be employed are discussed in chapter two.

Methodological issues are the subject of chapter three. In order to justify why I have chosen to follow an action research paradigm I first explain two other educational research paradigms on which it draws and also challenges - the scientific, which relies on quantitative data, and the interpretive, which depends on qualitative data. The advantages and disadvantages of the methods of data collection employed by these two research paradigms are discussed in the light of an action research enquiry. I continue by explaining the nature of my enquiry and the educational values I hold which promote the idea of autonomous learning as an indispensable element in facilitating learning amongst mixed ability students. I outline briefly the research process I

adopted, the plan I devised to facilitate autonomous learning, the data I gathered and ethical issues around the research.

Chapter four deals with the research in detail. I describe my class and why I was concerned. In response to a questionnaire I changed the structure of my classroom to facilitate group and pair work and devised the idea of a chart comprising various learning tasks which were intended to keep everyone busy, irrespective of standard. The chapter goes on to relate the chaos and dejection of the early days as we all tried to learn a new role, especially me, the glimmers of improvement along the way and then the more obvious ones. It reports my reflections, evaluations and observations, their reactions, feedback and progress and how I tried to overcome problems which arose during those months. The final interviews try to establish what progress the students believe they made during that period and what they found of value in the changed classroom practice.

In chapter five I examine the main areas of understanding and growth which I experienced as a result of the research. These include a genuine insight into the value of experiential learning as opposed to taught courses; the unmitigated strength of an action research approach to an enquiry intended to bring about improved practice; the value of student/teacher and student/student collaboration; my changed perspective on mixed ability learning and the value of writing as an aid to reflection and consciousness-raising.

Chapter six concludes my research as I reflect on how I will improve my practice in the future, the unresolved issues which arose during the research, and the strengths I have gained through my involvement with action research which will help me to confront future educational challenges.

Chapter 2

CONTEXT OF STUDY

2.1   My Teaching Experience

I am the product of a typical middle-class, convent education. I was a willing student and liked to achieve. Although I remember school as quite a boring experience I chose to become a teacher because, at the age of sixteen, I was profoundly influenced by a teacher who showed an enthusiasm for learning and a respect for her students' opinions that I had never before encountered as a student. I wanted to bring the same sense of self-esteem and joy of learning into young people's lives.

I did my teaching practice in my old school where nothing had changed. It was still a well-run school with no discipline problems. The students I taught were preparing for their Leaving certificate and were motivated to succeed. Their willingness to learn and the distinction I was awarded in my teaching practice convinced me that I was a good teacher. My next teaching experience was in a vocational school. I was shocked at the resistance to learning shown by my students and the enormous discipline problems I encountered. This teaching experience was followed by another period in a convent school which was similar to the year I spent on teaching practice - easy and satisfying. In 1979 I joined my present school, a vocational one, in what was my first permanent teaching position. I was once again confronted with huge discipline problems and a lack of respect by my students for what I was trying to teach. There was no support system in place for new teachers and I began to notice that the students' indiscipline was something akin to an initiation rite meted out to unfortunate new teachers. My colleagues guaranteed me that it would wane with time, which is true, but I have never since met with the same compliance and ease of teaching as that experienced in the convent schools.

Maintaining discipline is always an issue in teaching, but it appeared to be a much greater issue in teaching in vocational schools. Although I attributed pure boldness to

many of my students in my initial time teaching in vocational schools I have come to realise that their behaviour was the result of a great malaise they experienced with the type of education being offered to them. I recall how my friends and I, at the age of twelve, were amazed to hear that the most intelligent girl in our class had chosen to pursue her second level education in the local vocational school instead of the convent. The only other girls who were to take the same route were those who were not academically bright. We wondered why our friend had chosen to attend the vocational school when it was firmly implanted in our minds that it was a second rate type of schooling. It was many years later that I learned about the purpose and ethos of vocational schools.

2.2   Vocational Schools

In 1930 thirty eight vocational educational committees were established throughout the country to provide continuation and technical education to poorer children. Coolahan (1981) explains the purpose of vocational education:

> The term 'vocational' embraced two distinct elements incorporated in the Act (Vocational Education Act of 1930) - continuation education and technical education.......Continuation education was seen 'to continue and supplement education provided in elementary schools and to include general and practical training in preparation for employment in trades etc. and also general and practical training for improvement of young persons in the early stages of employment'.

Lee (1989) accounts for its perception as second rate education:

> The schools were, however, deliberately deprived, partly at clerical insistence, of the opportunity to prepare students for the Leaving Certificate,   the   then   status symbol of a completed secondary education. They were thus   stamped from the outset as second rate by a public weaned on the primacy of   the   more remunerative traditional education.

Coolahan (1981) mentions many of the problems which limited the role of the vocational education including small schools, distribution linked to demands for evening classes rather than day courses, a high drop-out rate from the two year course and competition from local secondary schools. He also refers to vocational schools

catering for "a more than normal distribution of dull or under-motivated pupils who saw the 'tech' [vocational school] as a convenient stop-gap until something better turned up". Some of these pupils, he explains, may also have failed to reach the entrance standards of secondary schools or have been unable to pay their fees. Greaney and Kellaghan (1984) conducted a study in 1967 of eleven year old students entering vocational school. They were seen to be disadvantaged in the following ways: they belonged to families of relatively low socio-economic status; they tended to have more siblings; they were generally below average in terms of primary school attainment and attendance; they received poorer ratings in terms of satisfactory classroom behaviour. The profile of the students had not changed in the intervening thirty years.

This second rate attitude to vocational schools has persisted in the cities and towns where choice of school is available. In the past, the less academic or disruptive student in the primary school failed the school's entrance test and continued their second-level education in the vocational school. Now, however, they are simply discouraged from applying to go to the local secondary school by their primary school teacher. As many of the secondary schools now offer a technical training the student's decision to attend vocational school is based more on academic inability than on the opportunity of technical training.   Students attending the school in which I work tend to feel stigmatised and of lower intellectual ability. They refer to the students attending the local secondary schools as "brainboxes".

2.3   The Leaving Certificate

As in many other vocational schools the Leaving Certificate was introduced to our school in 1980. Up to that point our students left school at the age of fifteen or sixteen on completion of their Group Certificate to take up apprenticeships which seemed to be quite plentiful and offered the prospect of permanent employment. The Leaving Certificate offered the possibility of a more complete second level education and alternative career avenues for those students with different aspirations. Despite its academic difficulty and literacy problems amongst a sizeable number of our students, enrolling for it has become the norm. Although this enrolment is perhaps due more to the increase in unemployment coupled with a decrease in available apprenticeships I

have, nonetheless, noticed a growing pride amongst my students in completing their second level education. While offering this opportunity should be seen as a positive step I have often had grave doubts about the quality of the Leaving Certificate curriculum and its suitability to the academically weak student. Humphreys (1993) claims that "education is not just about developing intellectual and occupational skills, it is also about helping students to understand and value themselves". What an impossible task when the curriculum is intellectually oriented and leaves little scope for the recognition of other qualities in the student. While some of our students manage to succeed in the Leaving Certificate examination a minority continue to fail dismally. They find it impossible to commit themselves to a course that bears no relevance to their experience and their capabilities. I have often wondered what it does to their self-esteem to experience intellectual failure each day. Drudy and Lynch (1993) have stressed the personal damage caused by failure in school: "Failure in school is construed as a problem of individual incapacity: we blame the victim for the inadequacy of the system, and the victim in turn internalises a sense of personal failure through the continuous experience of being labelled". For far too long we have failed to be critical of the educational system and its failure to cater for the academically weak. Richards (1991) associates a sense of justice with the idea of equality: "when social structures are planned no individual or group is to be given more consideration than any other". Yet we have persisted with this discriminatory practice in the field of education towards what McNiff (1995) describes as "systems disadvantaged people" and have allowed them to be labelled as slow, weak, dull etc. We have blamed them for their inability to cope with the educational system rather than blaming the educational system for failing to acknowledge their strengths and working to them. They have become an invisible, voiceless minority who struggle to survive within an uncaring system (Cluskey, 1996). "We need to devise systems, educational and otherwise, that acknowledge difference and plurality, divergence and individual creativity" (McNiff, 1995).

2.4   The Introduction of the Leaving Certificate Applied

Drudy and Lynch (1993) maintained that the Irish educational system had failed many children because of its ideology of fixed ability. This "exonerates us as teachers and

educators......as it places the responsibility of continued working-class underachievement in schools on the pupils themselves" (ibid). They believe we should see intelligence more as "a quality of human behaviour - not a mental quantity" (ibid). They refer to the work of Howard Gardner (1983) who maintains that there are at least seven forms of intelligences, the linguistic and logical-mathematical being the two upon which our school curriculum puts most of its emphasis. As such it largely fails to recognise the other abilities of our students.

The Leaving Certificate Applied, introduced in 1995, is the first effort by the Department of Education to give official recognition to the talents of the non-academic student at Leaving Certificate level. It targets the non-achiever, the likely drop-out. It is modular in approach and differs fundamentally from the traditional Leaving Certificate in that assessment is continuous. Students are awarded credits for attendance and participation in the various courses and completion of tasks. Final examinations only account for a third of the total marks. As such it is a recognition of a student's personal effort to learn, rather than their ability to achieve a certain national standard of learning which may be unattainable for them. Teaching is to employ active methodologies and the completion of tasks requires an inter-disciplinary approach. Although there has been no overt reference to the multiple intelligences theory of Gardner in the LCA guidelines the recognition of multiple intelligences is implicit in the organisation of the modules and has been referred to in in-service training. It has also been very evident to me in the teaching of the course.

When introduced to the Leaving Certificate Applied programme I was immediately attracted to the fairness and inclusiveness of its approach. The weaker student who applied him/herself to learning could succeed perhaps even better than the more able but less committed student. As outlined in the stated purpose of modern languages "the scope of the modules goes beyond the students' language needs to address their need to experience some degree of success in learning generally and to improve their confidence and self-image" (LCA Modern Languages 1995).

The modules in French aim to equip the students with social/survival skills as a traveller or customer in France. Although no prior knowledge of French is required,

my class is very mixed in both ability and standard. Nearly a quarter of the class had been in a remedial stream and received extra attention in their reading and writing in the junior cycle. Some others would have benefited greatly from the same intensive work. (As I have already explained, many of our students would have been discouraged from applying to enrol in the local secondary schools on the grounds of poor academic standard or poor classroom behaviour). A minority in my present fifth year class have never studied French before, half of the remainder had failed their Junior Certificate examination, the other half had just passed it. No matter how poor their grasp of French is they had, nonetheless, studied it over a three year period and were at a considerable advantage to the novices to French. The value-basis underpinning the approach to learning in the LCA is that it should be an interactive, applied experience, involving cross-curricular work to aid task completion. The use of specifically targeted teaching methodologies which would be appropriate to supporting such pedagogical aims, coupled with the varying standards within the class have caused me to re-examine my teaching style and its underlying assumptions. This fifth year LCA class poses a great challenge to my teaching methods which have been dictated more by the success criteria of national examinations than by students' learning needs.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

3.1   Choice of Methodology

In a previous article (Cluskey 1995), I referred to the claim made by Whitehead (1989) that "education is a value-laden practical activity". As educators, we teachers have our own set of values embodied in our practice, helping to guide us through our teaching lives and focusing us on our goals. In researching our classroom practice we attempt to establish if our goals are being met. Lomax (1994) refers to this research as an attempt by teachers to make sense of their practices and to improve them. Some educationalists (e.g. Bassey, 1990; Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Mc Niff, 1988) have conceived of educational research as informing three paradigms - the scientific, the interpretive and action research. Each has evolved from a particular view of the nature of educational knowledge.

3.1.1   The scientific research paradigm.

The scientific research paradigm, as part of a positivist approach, maintains that reality exists irrespective of people and may be discovered through observation and the senses. This method is employed in the physical sciences with a good deal of preciseness and is based on data collection which is usually numerical and statistical, in other words quantitative rather than qualitative. Its goal is to understand particular phenomena and through that understanding to produce general laws which will predict future educational outcomes. As Bassey (1990) says the positivist researchers do not believe that they themselves are significant variables in their research. Therefore, they seldom personalise their report and refer to themselves as 'the researcher'. While many researchers would claim that the quantitative nature of the scientific paradigm was the only authentic way to validate claims to knowledge Ernest (1994) maintains that there are other valid ways of obtaining knowledge, "and so any claim of exclusive rights on truth is arrogant and cannot be sustained".

3.1.2   The interpretive research paradigm.

A second paradigm of educational knowledge is the interpretive method. A researcher using this method does not believe that reality exists irrespective of people but rather that people construct their own reality. "Because of differences in perception, in interpretation and in language it is not surprising that people have different views on what is real" (Bassey, 1990). In recognition of this possibility reports are personalised and researchers refer to themselves as 'I'. This method, popular in the 'people' sciences, is based on field notes, conversations and observations. It is, therefore, qualitative rather than quantitative. In its detailed study of a particular case it hopes to create more understanding of general cases. "It may offer possibilities, but no certainties, as to what may be the outcome of future events" (Bassey, 1990). It does not necessarily lend itself to rigorous statistical analysis but, as Ernest (1994) says its strength lies in its rich accounts of case studies which are intended to illustrate the general, not with the precision of the exact sciences, but as a suggestion of a more general and complex truth. As a teacher-researcher I value the interpretive approach to research more than the scientific. It acknowledges the great complexities of people and the difficulty of quantifying their responses.

3.1.3   Action research

A third research paradigm is action research, as part of a critical theorist approach to research. Where the aim of the positivist approach is to predict and control and the aim of the interpretive approach is to understand, the aim of the critical theorist approach is to emancipate - "to uncover aspects of society, especially ideologies, that maintain the status quo by restricting or limiting different groups' access to knowledge" (Nielsen, 1990). Hopkins (1985) sees this emancipation as empowering people to take control and direction over their own lives thus enhancing what was heretofore an experience limited by their socially constructed thinking (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). As part of a critical theorist approach action research aims to enhance lives by improving practice. It is about teachers researching what is happening in their own classrooms. Hopkins (1985) states: "The original purpose of teacher research was to free teachers from the limiting constraints of prespecified research designs". For this reason action

research has rejected adhering to any one methodology lest it restrict the goal of improvement. Bell (1987), likewise maintains that no approach should depend solely on one method any more than it would exclude a method merely because of its label. Much action research is eclectic in that it employs the methodology of both the scientific and the interpretive approach. It recognises the value of data collection as in the scientific method and the sensitivity we need to have to human responses as in the interpretive method. But its pragmatic basis of being an enquiry carried out to improve practice in the classroom is what attracts me most to it and what I have found most helpful about its approach. As McNiff (1988) says: "The concept 'educational' involves the notion of 'improvement'" and as such, through action research, I have found that I can more fully live out my values as an educator. Its approach is wise enough to recognise the value of the two other research methodologies and to use them where suitable. The continual cycle of action - reflection, in other words a trial and error approach, where we admit that "there is no consistently 'right' way of doing things" (McNiff, 1992), frees us from previous constraints and promotes a humble and honest approach to research.

3.2 The Nature of my Enquiry

I have always wanted to be the kind of teacher who "respects students as potentially autonomous learners" (Lomax, 1994). My own experience of academic learning has belonged to two schools. I have had learning imposed on me in school as a young person and also in my undergraduate years in university. Apart from one exceptional teacher when I was sixteen years old, I always felt I was being treated as an empty vessel devoid of any potential original thought. Consequently, I believed I had none and deserved to be treated as such. I was only bestowed with knowledge that was both safe for the status quo and understandable. My learning was controlled. When I joined an action research group in 1994 and later enrolled for a Master's degree, I learned in an exciting way. My tutor always acknowledged our group's ability to learn autonomously. She allowed us the opportunity to deconstruct and reconstruct our own thinking. We never had the ideas of famous educationalists imposed on us. Some of my previously held views were either firmly reinforced or rejected as unsound. Little (1991) describes autonomy as a "*capacity* - for detachment, critical reflection,

15

decision-making, and independent action". This wonderfully exciting way of learning, which always made me yearn for more, had a very disquieting effect on me. It made me examine critically my own style of teaching and I was forced to acknowledge the lack of respect I showed for my students' ability to learn autonomously. Despite wishing that my students would show more responsibility for their learning, I seldom afforded them the opportunity. I was repeating the cycle of imposed learning which I had found so boring, uninspiring and dismissive of the learner's ability. I saw myself as a "living contradiction, holding educational values whilst at the same time negating them" (Whitehead, 1989). Whatever my reasons for denying my students this opportunity - professional insecurity, lack of trust, laziness, undue absorption with a national examination curriculum - I believe it is detrimental to the development of responsible, independent, fulfilled human beings. We expect them to be confident of their ability to make wise choices in life yet oblige them to spend their most formative years being passive, having the pace and quality of their learning dictated to them by teachers who have become too absorbed with the national examination system. Far from "helping our students to find meaning and purpose in their educational lives" (Lomax, 1996) we condemn them to a vacuous experience on the periphery of learning.

I experienced a second awakening when our study group engaged with feminist research methods. Pettigrew (1981) described her growing sense of invisibility, of someone without a voice or the right to be heard as she adopted the customs of a Sikh woman. I saw a direct analogy with my teaching situation. For years I had been teaching students whose abilities were not reflected in the national examinations. They and I had become the invisible minority, whose self-esteem had been so systematically battered by the examination system that we had finally become disempowered. We spent so much energy struggling to survive within a system which ignored us that we failed to demand recognition, to demand justice. Harding (1987) saw feminist enquiry as similar to other 'underclass' approaches in that it insisted on the importance of 'studying up' rather than 'studying down'. I had always wondered why my students did not succeed in the national examination system and tended to blame them as deficient in some way or uncommitted to learning. I had failed to examine that system critically. Rather than blame the system for failing to recognise my students' abilities I

blamed my students for failing the system. We all internalised a sense of failure. Failure in the national examinations highlighted what they had not learned. The effort they had made and the learning they had accomplished was seldom acknowledged. All this would change with the introduction of the LCA course and I felt the burden of failure lift from my shoulders. At last my students' success in their learning, no matter how small or great, was about to be affirmed. Their voices would at last be heard. I determined to assert always their right to this recognition and soon found myself in a position of having to do so, even amongst a few colleagues. Old habits die hard and familiar expectations do not suddenly disappear. But my reading had provided me with new insights and understandings and a conviction to see justice done. My own intellectual abilities had been treated with disdain when I was young, but I had at least managed to pass the national examinations and experience success in learning. My non-academic students have experienced the ignominy of failure within this examination system and what strengths they have are largely ignored. I do not support this elitist attitude to learning, nor the power structure which favours the academic student and ignores the alleged 'non-academic'. No caring system could possibly spurn a sector which it purports to represent in such a duplicitous manner. Glasser (1984) maintains that there are five basic needs in people without which we cannot survive. These are a sense of belonging, power, fun, freedom and survival. We feel powerful when we respect those who respect us and we feel free when we are allowed to think and act for ourselves. I believe it is my duty as an educationalist to respect my students' humanness and to encourage them to think and take responsibility for their actions. In so doing I enhance their lives and affirm the strengths which they express in their learning.

I decided that my enquiry would centre around my fifth year LCA French class. Their mixed ability and standard in French made them the ideal choice for me to stretch my own organisation and thinking in an effort to facilitate each individual's desire to learn. The poor results that most of them obtained in French in the Junior Certificate and the fact that some of them had never studied French before indicated that their confidence in their ability to learn would probably be quite low. I hoped to help each of them to validate their effort and learning according to their own ability

3.3 The Research Process

My research commenced late September 1996 and concluded four months later when the module in French ended. I started the research by explaining to my class about the enquiry I hoped to engage in with their support and how its aim was to enhance their learning through the improvement of our classroom practice. Having obtained their written consent to engage in the research (see appendix 1, also 3.4 'Ethical Issues') I decided to introduce them to it by asking them to respond to a questionnaire. Hopkins (1985) says that questionnaires are a "simple way of obtaining broad and rich information from pupils" but warns that although this information is quantifiable "children will try to produce the right answers" (op.cit.). I have the same reservations about the reliability of questionnaires, having found from my previous use of one in classroom research (Cluskey, 1996) that it is safer not to accept their results as an unchallengeable truth. On that occasion I had asked my students if they normally did their homework thoroughly, which included revising their class lesson before they did their written assignment. Sixty two percent of them replied in the affirmative but my subsequent observation of them in class definitely belied that claim. Nonetheless, I do see it as a valuable way of introducing students to the research being undertaken, of soliciting their co-operation and raising their awareness of the learning process. I agree with McNiff (1988) who says that "in an action research enquiry, questionnaires will probably be used in an exploratory fashion to get an idea of trends". Bell (1987) also cautions researchers to examine if a questionnaire is the best way of obtaining information as it is very time-consuming to devise, although at a later stage in the research "the interview can yield rich material and can put flesh on the bones of a questionnaire" (op. cit.). I found it quite a useful exercise in subsequent interviews with my students to tease out information which had come through in the questionnaire.

I hoped to establish through the questionnaire what style of teaching my students found most conducive to learning and, based on their responses, I changed the physical structure of my classroom to better facilitate group learning. Dam (1995), in her very

practical book on learner autonomy, spoke about the purpose of keeping a student diary. One of the reasons mentioned was that it would act like a calendar - "you can see what you have done". This gave me the idea of designing a learning chart so that my students might all have a task in hand which they could proceed to independently of others. As I expected that their pace of learning would differ according to ability and previous knowledge it would free me to give more attention to the novices to French while challenging the more advanced students. This learning chart included tape recording tasks for which they were provided with blank tapes. Many of the tasks were pair and group oriented, in keeping with the methodologies encouraged in the LCA. As they completed each learning task on the chart they were to highlight that section. This was intended to spur them on as they saw themselves complete one learning task after another. It would also act as a way of validating their own learning. I saw this chart as facilitating autonomous learning in that each student could decide to move on to a new task as a previous one was completed and would thus be acting independently, managing their own learning. However, as Little (1991) had warned that "autonomy is likely to be hard-won and its permanence cannot be guaranteed" I was not expecting an immediate transformation in either teaching or learning strategies but I was certainly determined to try to let go the reins of power and hoped that my students would gradually learn to take hold of these reins themselves. As explained by Page (1992) it is not just a matter of organisation but "requires a change of attitude by both teachers and learners.........Teachers have to learn to let go and learners have to learn to take hold. Learners must be seen as having value as learners and not being in some way defective". I have been too heedless of Dewey (1956) when he warned that subject-matter can never be imposed on the child. "Learning is active. It involves reaching out of the mind.......It is he [the student] and not the subject-matter which determines both quality and quantity of learning" (op.cit.). Although very well intentioned in my endeavours as a teacher, I don't know how I was ever led to believe I could dictate my students' learning. How did I ever assume such power?

The data I used was mainly qualitative in nature. In my diary I made observations which helped me to focus on the most important issues in hand and to recognise signs of inadequacy or improvement in our classroom learning. Hopkins (1985) maintains that field notes are the easiest and least time-consuming method of data collection to

operate, and provide surprisingly candid information. As I have already said, on a previous occasion I found that my field notes were more reliable in discovering whether people act according to their claims than the information given to me on a questionnaire. I gave my students a diary sheet to complete each day. In this they were to record whether they had carried out any plan from the previous day, what they had studied that day, how they worked on it, what was difficult or easy and what plans they had for further work. They gave me written evaluations of their learning (see 4.2.5 below). I changed my style of evaluating their work. The normal corrections and help was given as they completed tasks but my feedback was of a totally different nature to my normal style. I focused on the students' effort as I had observed it during the previous weeks and responded in writing to the work handed in to me. Because I focused on the person rather than the exercises I found a lot more good in my students than I normally convey to them. Of course, this more empathic style was due to the example I was getting from my own tutor. She had the perfect combination of a hard task mistress who pushes her students towards excellence while at the same time validating their effort and guiding and encouraging them through difficult stages of learning and writing.

I chose a small representative group to help me monitor the effectiveness of our learning strategies. They included the following: a novice to French; two people who had learned French before but had failed it quite badly in the Junior Certificate examination and one of whom felt particularly negative after the first evaluation; two students who had passed French but one of whom had been a very reluctant learner the previous year. Within this group of five there were really only three standards but I was being cautious lest any of them dropped out of school. In keeping with what Lomax (1994) said about validation being an "on-going event rather than a one-off at the end of a project" I hoped to show through our conversations, interviews, student diaries and field notes that they were being challenged in their learning, that they were taking more responsibility for it and that their French was improving. I also hoped that they would feel enhanced self-esteem through their achievements and my support. Excerpts from these tape recordings and diaries are presented as evidence in written form in the appendices as also is the evidence from a colleague who attended one of our classes and with whom I shared some of my ideas and thoughts. Also presented as

evidence is the validation of a member of my peer group in the Masters course of study.

3.4   Ethical Issues

In engaging in research one must always adhere to an ethical code. McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead (1996) provide a very clear checklist of points to remember when carrying out research. The most important one, in my opinion, is getting permission from the people I hope to involve in the research, and to impress upon them that they are "participants and co-researchers............you are studying yourself in relation to them" (McNiff et al. 1996). Lomax (1994) refers to treating them as "principals (not underlings) in the research". This is the kind of respect and consideration I would wish to show my students - the kind I wish I had received as a young person myself. I made sure to preface my research by first obtaining this written consent. There has never been a problem for me in this regard. Young people always seem happy to give their opinions and to have an audience. It is in depriving them of this voice that problems arise. Furthermore, when I needed to choose a small representative group at a later stage in the research I had many offers, such as: "Miss, if you need someone who failed the Junior Certificate and is now learning, I'm perfect for the job", and "if you want to interview someone who never studied French before, I'll do it". They were clever enough to know the different levels in the class I would need to investigate.

People are entitled to their privacy and to the truth. It is essential to promise them confidentiality - never to reveal a participant's name without their permission or to reveal anything of a personal or sensitive nature. Fictitious names are discouraged as they may belong to somebody else and for this reason it is preferable to use initials or numbers. Never interview a person without their permission and always check that they agree with the transcriptions or edit accordingly before they are published. Again, I have had no problem in that area except where tape recordings were muffled or difficult to understand, in which case I have asked the interviewee to try to recall or explain what he/she was saying at that point in the interview.

Bassey (1990) cautions us to be mindful that we engage in research in a quest for knowledge and as such must be scrupulously honest in the analysis and reporting of data. Bell (1987) warns us that "it may be easier to recognise bias in others than ourselves, and it is tempting to reject evidence that does not support our case". We should, therefore, "question everything and qualities of scepticism as well as empathy need to be developed" (op.cit.). I have sometimes found myself wanting to reject or enhance information that has not produced the desired results for my research. The issue of truth at all costs has been a beacon, therefore, in guiding me through my research.

Finally, participants also have the right to withdraw from the research whenever they wish and must be informed of this right. It is only fair and to the benefit of their continued interest in the research "to keep them involved and informed" (McNiff et al. 1996). In the course of my research I interviewed my research group twice. On these occasions I showed them how I was charting their progress through key issues which had come to my attention in the course of my evaluations or previous interview, a study of their diaries, my observations in class and the execution of their learning tasks. I thus kept them informed and, hopefully, involved in the research and their participation in it. At least, by the end of the research, the same students were still involved in the enquiry although it required them to be interviewed in their free time. They were under no obligation to do this.

Chapter 4

THE RESEARCH

4.1　My Concern

I was concerned about my fifth year LCA French class. As soon as I noted the names
on the register I knew that nearly a quarter of the students had never studied French
before. Although the LCA course is very suitably designed for the low achiever and
likely drop-out I felt very uncomfortable about trying to cater for the different
standards of French in the class. Some of the students also had a reputation for being
either lazy, unruly or very slow at learning. I worried that their difficulty in French
would cause them to be even more unruly or lazy. The module in French required no
prior knowledge of the language which was to the advantage of the novices to it.
However, I feared that those who had previously studied French would get bored very
quickly by an absence of challenge. Would I try to counteract that possibility by
moving too fast through the material for the novices? My question was how could I
facilitate mixed ability learning? How could I keep everyone involved in a sense of
learning and progress, neither overwhelming some nor underchallenging others?
Implicit in that question was the idea that each student should be validated in their
individual learning and effort.

4.2　My Action

4.2.1　A Questionnaire

Two weeks after the module started I discussed with the students the difficult learning
situation we were in, how challenged I felt trying to cater for their needs and how I
feared I might fall between two stools and service nobody. They agreed to become
involved in researching the issue and gave me their written consent. I had prepared a
questionnaire (see appendix 2) for them in the likely event that they would agree to
participate in the research. The issues I wanted to get information on were their

attitude to learning French, to homework, their apparent standard in French and, most of all, their preferred learning strategies. Also, through the questionnaire, I wanted to raise their awareness of their concentration levels in class, what helped or disrupted them, and how they behaved when they did not understand something. When I analysed the data received from the questionnaire I realised that it was flawed in its design in that only four of the seven questions were easily quantifiable. However, the information gleaned on the other three gave me a good idea of trends and, in any case, I have a certain scepticism regarding exact statistics arising from questionnaires in people-centred sciences.

4.2.2 Results of the Questionnaire

Q.1a. I was pleasantly surprised that more than three quarters of the class were happy to learn French (figure 1).

Figure 1

Do you want to learn French?
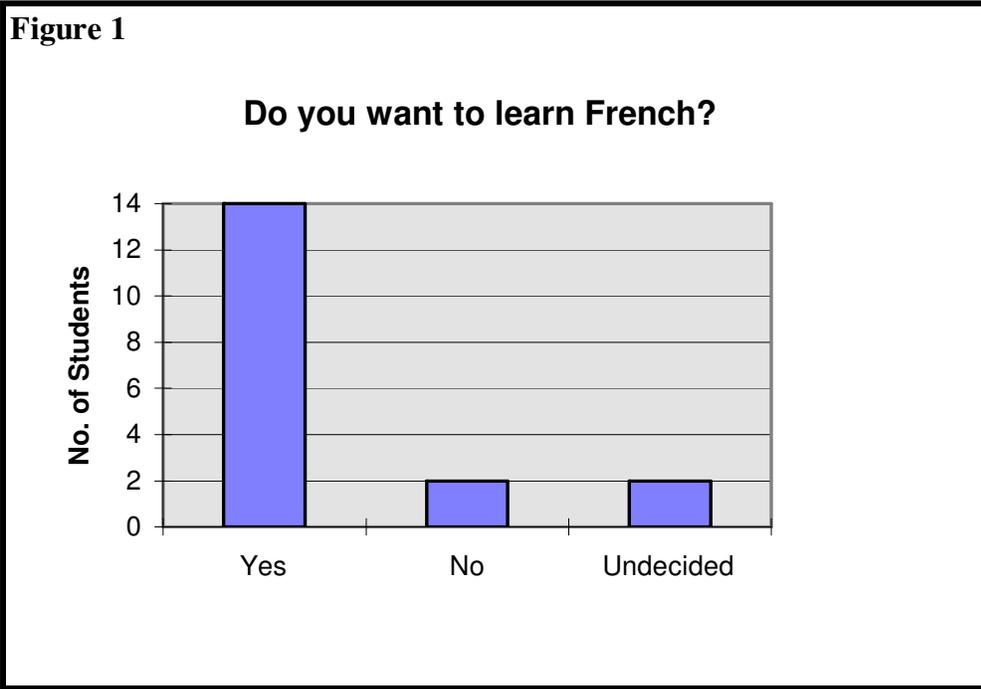
Q.1b. Most of them were motivated by the possibility of gaining a credit for it in their LCA results. The desire to be able to communicate through it with a French person and the appeal which the language held for them was not as high on their agenda. The

possibility of increasing their job prospects appeared to be the least significant factor (table 1).

Table 1. **Reasons for wanting to learn French**

Reasons/Order of importance	1	2	3	4	
I like speaking the language	3	4	7	0	N = 14
To communicate with a French person	3	3	4	4	N = 14
Gain credit in the LCA	6	5	2	1	N = 14
Improve job prospects	3	2	2	7	N = 14

N = Number of Respondents
Order of importance: 1=most important, 4=least important.

Q.2.   Their standard was weak and mixed.   Three of the eighteen students were novices to French, seven had passed it in the Junior Certificate examination (one with honours), the other eight had failed (figure 2).   The majority felt they could have achieved better results.

Figure 2

Results of Junior Certificate French
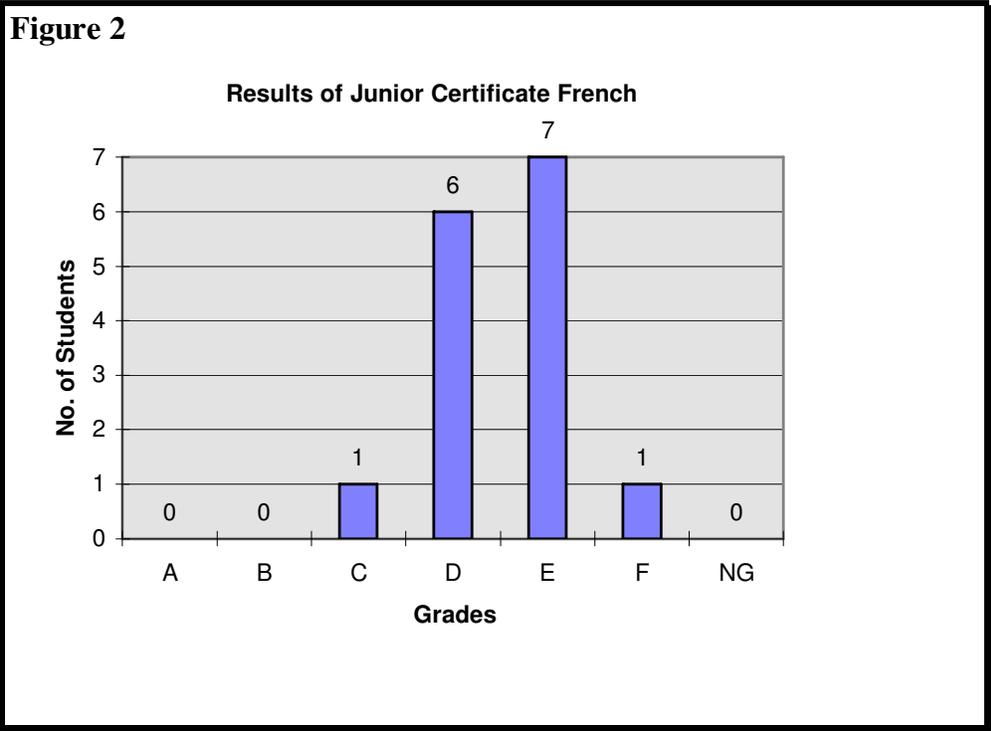
Q.3.   Their concentration in class was very poor.   The majority concentrated for about 50% of the class, two students for 75% or more and two for less than 33%.

Q4. Their concentration was lost mainly by another student talking to them, followed by the teacher continuously talking and, less significantly, when the work seemed too difficult (table 2).

Table 2.   **Reasons for loss of Concentration**   **(N = 17)**

Reasons/Order of importance	1	2	3	4	5
Teacher keeps talking	4	5	5	2	1
Not actively participating	0	2	4	8	3
Other people answer questions	2	1	3	4	7
Class work too difficult	2	4	3	3	5
Classmate talking	8	4	3	1	1

N = Number of Respondents
Order of importance: 1=most important, 5=least important.

Q.5. When asked how they reacted if they didn't understand something in class the majority asked a classmate or a teacher to explain, a sizeable number hoped that someone else would ask the teacher to explain, while a minority stopped concentrating.

Q.6. The majority of the class preferred group work as a learning strategy, followed closely by pair work. There was less enthusiasm for working alone but the teacher controlling the learning was a low preference (table 3). Of the five students who opted for a combination of strategies three chose a combination of B and D, one student chose a combination of A, B and C and the fifth opted for A and B.

Table 3.   **Preferences for Learning Strategies**

Preferences/Order of importance	1	2	3	4	
A. Teacher controlling the learning	0	4	7	2	N = 13
B. Group work	6	2	2	3	N = 13
C. Pair work	4	5	3	1	N = 13
D. Working alone	3	2	1	7	N = 13
Combination of Ways	5				N = 5

N = Number of Respondents
Order of importance: 1=most important, 4=least important.

Q.7.   When asked about homework nearly two thirds of the class said that they did not usually do it. Half the class found it useful as a consolidation of class learning although not all of this figure did homework. The other half considered it a waste of time as it would be a rushed job and that they had quite enough work to do in school without adding to it at home.

4.2.3   My Response to this Information

a.   My main duty as a teacher is to facilitate learning amongst my students and, so, the most important piece of information given to me in this questionnaire was their preferred style of learning. I reorganised the desks in my classroom into groups of four so that it would not only be physically more feasible to engage in group work but also help me to focus on it as a learning strategy. Moreover, I wanted them to know that I wasn't just paying lip-service to the notion of collaborating with them on the research. I worried that I was inviting trouble as they claimed they normally lost concentration when a classmate talked to them. Nevertheless, we could always abandon it if it was a dismal failure.

b.   I reflected on the idea of autonomous learning and bought books on learner autonomy specifically designed for language teachers. This mixed ability class was an impossible situation unless I did let go of the notion of teaching them as a unit. I hoped to find a prototype in Dam's book (1995) on learner autonomy which I could transpose to my own classroom. Of course, her group of students differed from mine in age, motivation, nationality, target language and exposure to it in their daily lives. But they were mixed in ability and she employed teaching strategies which gave me food for thought. When she spoke about one of the values of a student diary being that you can see what you have done I imagined devising a learning chart. This would include tasks pertaining to the acquisition of the language skills in the first module of French in the LCA. I was mindful of my students' preference for interactive learning and their desire to be able to communicate in French with a French person . These were very much in keeping with the active teaching methodologies recommended in the LCA guidelines on Modern Languages. The long-awaited textbook which I had ordered finally arrived, but, as expected, it did not cover all the language units I

needed. I armed myself with various materials, the module outline and spent the weekend devising the first language chart (see appendix 3). It was divided into five sections:

a. Language act

b. Class/homework, including role-play.

c. A tape-recording task for which they were given their own blank tape.

d. Extra work 1

e. Extra work 2

These tasks were active in nature and drew on oral work, tape work, games, wordsleuths, role-play, listening exercises, reading and a very small amount of writing.

The purpose of the learning chart was threefold:

1. After my initial input, those who were better at French could proceed from one task to the next thus taking charge of their own learning and avoiding boredom. It was not intended that every student should feel obliged to complete every task as they were graded in difficulty. I hoped that the novices could accomplish sections a, b and c.

2. The work could be completed at home if they wished. I had decided, from experiences of failure, not to fight with them on the issue of homework but for the more motivated it was an option.

3. As they completed each section they were to highlight it, and this should act as a visual confirmation to them of work completed.

And so, in the first week of October, I reorganised my classroom and gave my students their first learning chart and its accompanying worksheets. It was later than I would have wished, but better late than never!

4.2.4 Implementing my Action

Frustrated, dejected, perplexed is how I felt during my first two classes implementing my new strategy. My students had not listened to my explanation of how to operate

the learning chart and I had to speak to them in pairs or small groups. I expressed this sense of hopelessness in my diary:

> Oct. 1: .....what seemed clear to me was unclear to many of them. I was very dejected. If I hadn't put so much work into it I'd be tempted to scrap it.

The following day chaos hovered threateningly around my classroom again and, as if to show how ineffective it could make me, a parent called. Undoubtedly, chaos would triumph on this occasion. I asked them to continue their work (colouring and filling in the regions of France as a completion of an alphabet learning exercise), not at all expecting them to.

> Oct. 3: I was pleasantly surprised to discover that a lot of them had their maps nearly completed, proving that they had worked away without me   yesterday. They respond to spatial challenge - enjoy colour. One lad who had   missed the work actually asked me for it........A couple of students taped   themselves. Will this take off?........They seemed to understand better today   what the learning chart is about. I noticed one girl commenting: 'Oh good, I've done that. That's another one I can highlight'. They seem to want to highlight their completed assignment.

Yes, I was beginning to think that I might not have to scrap it. But there were more issues than just their ability to use the learning chart. I felt very disoriented in my new role. I forgot to remind them to fill in a diary sheet of what and how they learned in class. But I was beginning to change. The same day's entry notes:

> I noticed I was conducting class today less as a total unit and more on an individualised and group basis. I moved around the classroom from group to group. It felt a bit uncomfortable at times, found myself once again trying to service everyone's needs; being distracted by some groups while trying to deal with one particular one; allowing myself to be distracted by a student's request while trying to explain something to another. It took me a while to remember to say 'I'll be with you in a minute'. Some complained I was ignoring them. This **is** the beginning of something new. I can't control things like I did when teaching the class as a unit. We're all learning together. It's a new type of control - student based - and we need to learn to manage it better.

I continued to reflect a lot in my diary during the following week. Good and bad happened. I caught myself slipping into my old habit of trying to teach the class as a unit, trying to control their learning. I felt I had not drilled enough at the beginning of

29

class. When I left the class one day for a couple of minutes to see how the students taping themselves were progressing I returned to find that quite a few of them had stopped working and were messing. Other students taped themselves. It was rewarding to see them take charge of their own learning. Teachers expressed surprise at seeing certain students sitting on the floor outside my room diligently tape-recording themselves. One of these students was a novice who had been very giddy and unsettled a couple of weeks previously. Two other students dropped into me while I was working one lunch-hour and I encouraged them to tape-record themselves. One of them, although he had attended French class for three years, was terrible. The other student took on a teaching role with him. She was far more critical of his pronunciation than I would have been lest I should discourage him too much. But he accepted this hard-line approach from her and persevered with the work. She was really effective.

4.2.5   Their Evaluation of the Action

Although our new strategy was only in place over a period of six classes I decided to ask them to evaluate briefly their progress (see appendix 4). On the 10th Oct. I asked them to respond in writing to the following four questions:

a.   How are you getting on?

b.   What's going well?

c.   What's going badly?

d.   What changes would you like?

Responses:

a.   Thirteen of the seventeen present that day were happy enough with their progress, three of them claimed to have improved on last year. Four, however, claimed they were doing badly.

b.   The main things mentioned as going well were oral French, better understanding and learning French in general.

c.   There was less consistency about the next question. Items were mentioned once only but four people mentioned tape work with a partner.

d.   Some people wanted no changes, four wanted to study French all year (we would be changing to Irish half-way through the year) but there were five people who complained about me, their teacher - I distracted them by drawing attention to myself; I should talk more slowly; I should explain more; I should listen more to them.

4.2.6   My Response

I focused on their responses to (c) and (d).

I realised that some of them were anxious to tape-record themselves but it was difficult to arrange during class time as I only had one tape recorder. My principal agreed to me ordering three hand-held tape recorders which I believed would be the most suitable for their needs. In this way I could release two or three pairs of students at a time if they could find a quiet space somewhere. I also suggested to them that my classroom would be free at lunch-time if they wished to use it or they could stay back in the evening to tape-record as they finished school earlier than many other students at senior cycle level in the school.

I understood that for some, at least, I was interfering with their learning. I determined to withdraw but to observe them also for fear that it was a ruse on their part to be allowed idle in peace. I also wanted to give more attention to those who expressed a need for it.

4.2.7   Reflections on the Learning Process

On the 14th Oct. I gave them their second learning chart (see appendix 5) which focused on numbers, age, months and days. I drilled the numbers for those who were learning them for the first time. (This group included more than my four novices to French). The rest of the class proceeded with worksheets while two left the class to tape-record. Three of the people I was working with were really slow to tune into the sounds in French. I wished I could give them more time but, although the class were beginning to work independently of me, some were far better at this than others. If I left certain people alone for too long they didn't move on to the next task but resorted to idleness and chatting. The learning charts didn't seem to be having quite the same

motivating power as I had anticipated. Progress was very slow that week with the beginners. Everyone seemed to need an extra incentive to keep going. The one thing that seemed to be taking shape was the tape-recording. Even my laziest student stayed late to work at it.

4.2.8   Action Taken

a.   To help my weakest group, or any other students, with their pronunciation I made tape-recordings of the language structures they were trying to learn. This included asking and answering questions, counting, the alphabet, months and days. I decided not to give each student their own personal copy. Instead I made about four copies of the tape with the intention of giving one to four students per night. In this way they might be less inclined to leave it aside and forget about it but would be under pressure to use it while they were in possession of it. A few students actually made a copy of the tape so that they would have it for future use.

b.   I told them I would take all their worksheets, learning charts and tape-recordings up at the end of the week to see exactly what effort and progress they had made in the six weeks since we had started the module of French.

4.2.9   My Evaluation of their Progress

Of the nineteen students in my class fourteen handed me up their work. It varied in both quality and quantity. I was delighted and very surprised with some of the work. My diary notes my reaction:

> Oct. 18th: Spent three hours going through everything they did. Checked everyone's chart, exercises and tapes (those who had prepared one). __ and __ had done a great job yesterday. They took the class period to do it but did it very competently - intonation and good pronunciation largely, with dramatic effect. You'd know from listening to their tapes that they had enjoyed the exercise and felt they'd achieved something. I wrote each person quite a lengthy comment on my impression of their work and effort. I tried to focus on the positive. Perhaps it will encourage them more. I know Jean's *(my own tutor)* detailed, constructive and encouraging comments to me had an enormous effect on me. I must plan a diary sheet for them as most of them are negligent about it.

In my responses to them I referred to their completion of tasks and tape-work, their organisation, shading in of learning chart and attitude to learning. Most of them had done tape-work but I suggested to some that they re-do it or complete it. Only a few of them showed strong organisation and a follow-through on shading their learning charts. However, I also note that I have complimented the vast majority of them on their willingness to learn, something I would never lie about.

4.2.10 Their Reaction to my Evaluation

I was fascinated to see how very keenly everyone read my comments to them about their progress. They then read their neighbours'. I wondered about this. Was it to check the sincerity of my remarks or their state of progress in comparison with others? One very lazy and sometimes explosive student had shown wonderful patience tape-recording with a beginner who had less ability than anyone in the class for learning French. I was touched by his kindness and remarked on it in my evaluation. I noticed that during class he tried to make a further arrangement with this student to continue their tape-recording. Three of the students who hadn't done any tape-recording started it that following week. Some others handed in worksheets which they had not previously completed. It seemed that it was not merely the threat of the evaluation but also the evaluation itself which encouraged some to complete work. I have since noticed that none of them threw away my evaluation. Perhaps I had touched the right chord because I, likewise, have kept all of my tutor's evaluations. She, unlike any teacher I ever had before, took a holistic approach, affirming my effort and progress while challenging me to improve.

4.2.11 Further Action

As most of them had not been keeping diary sheets I decided to prepare one (see appendix 6) which I would give to them each week. I hoped that it might help them to notice their strengths in *how* they worked, to work or seek help on their areas of weakness, and to encourage them to do a little work outside of class. The diary had five sections:

a.   Did I carry out any plan from yesterday?

b.   What I did today

c.   How I worked on this

d.   My learning today - what went well, what was difficult

e.   My plans - any further work

I intended to collect it each week as I feared it would otherwise get lost. It could be useful as an indication of growing autonomy in learning.

4.2.12 Reflections on the Learning

We had one more week of class before the mid-term break. I caught a student listening to a walkman instead of working. He brazenly told me he was listening to my French tape and laughingly invited me to listen. I was 'snared', it was true. I was even more surprised when he told me the tape was really good.

On our return after the holiday we found the desks had all been re-arranged into single rows facing the blackboard. The room exuded an aura of alienation and cold control . I was surprised at my reaction as I was very worried at first about organising the desks into groups where students would focus on each other rather than on me.   The students, likewise, expressed their disappointment and wanted to return to group formation which, of course, we did. I collected their diaries of daily learning and noted in my own journal:

> Nov. 11th: Very few can articulate properly what they study in class and how they do this. Must guide more. ____, however, is a perfect example of how keeping a journal of her learning has helped boost her confidence. She is quietly working away, recording her learning and commenting on it.

We progressed on to our final learning chart (see appendix 7) which included a study of pastimes, sports and eating out. We studied a video about sports one day but the students didn't seem to respond until I gave them worksheets about it. I wondered if the programme had required them to be passive for too long, that they learned best by moving quite quickly into a productive stage. This final half term was interrupted for two weeks of work experience. I decided to interview the representative group in mid-November before they left for the two weeks (see appendix 8 for excerpts from these interviews). The tape-recordings are available on request for scrutiny.

34

4.2.13 The Interviews

Before interviewing the five students I had compiled a profile of their learning based on the information they had given me in their questionnaire of September 23rd, their own evaluation of October 10th after our new learning strategy had been put in place, my evaluation of October 18th on their work and effort and my observations. Students 1 and 2 were interviewed together.

Student 1 had failed his Junior Certificate French very badly. In his questionnaire he expressed a desire to learn French, his concentration level was at about 50%, normally did not do homework and said he learned best through group work and alone. On Oct. 10th he said he was progressing and believed he had learned more in the previous month than in the last three years. My evaluation of Oct. 18th was one of great praise for his attitude to work and his belief in his ability but that some of his work had apparently not been completed and he had done no tape work. During this interview, extracts from which appear in appendix 6, he claimed his concentration had improved but was not as high as 75%. He liked group work mainly because he could ask a friend to explain and avoid exposing his ignorance to the class "showing you need help". The role-plays helped his spoken French but created a bit too much chat. His listening and spoken skills were improving. The learning charts were not much help and the diary sheets were no help at all. My evaluation of Oct. 18th helped encourage him "to get a move on" and the following week he did his tape-recording. He was also normally doing his homework now, more to avoid boredom than because he had learning goals.

Student 2 had not failed as badly in his Junior Certificate French. In his questionnaire he expressed an indifference to learning French, normally did not do homework because of his evening job, his concentration level in class was less than 33%, and also learned best through group work or alone. By Oct. 10th he was still not learning much. He complained that I spoke too fast for him. This student also has impaired hearing and can be very indistinct in English. He did not hand me up work on Oct. 18th and I did not give a written evaluation of his progress although I knew he had done no tape-work. In the interview he claimed his concentration levels were now at

50%. His learning had improved but not much. Like student 1, group work was supportive in avoiding the humiliation of exposing his ignorance to the class. Role-plays helped spoken French but encouraged chat in English. Spoken skills had improved but listening was still very difficult. He forgot the learning chart sometimes and the journals were no help at all. He had, in fact, done tape-recording with student 1 after my evaluation of Oct. 18th. and determined to do some study during his work experience "before I go to the pub".

The next three students were interviewed together.

Student 3 passed her Junior Certificate French with a D grade. I had taught her for the previous two years and always felt she was a reluctant learner with a real lack of confidence in her ability. In her questionnaire she expressed a desire to learn French, found group and pair work most helpful in her learning, normally didn't do homework and concentration levels were at about 50%. In her evaluation of the 10th October she felt she had improved on last year but would like me, the teacher, to listen more. In my own evaluation of October 18th I commended her on her good, solid class work and the tape-work which she had completed with student 4 was excellent. I also noted that she was now speaking French in class in front of others, something she had always refused to do in the previous two years. However, she had not completed all the tasks on her learning chart. In this interview she claimed her concentration level had risen to about 75% "because I'm interested in it now" and liked coming to French class. She found group work very supportive for the same reason mentioned by students 1 and 2. She had listened at home to the tape I had prepared and had stayed in school late to prepare tape-work. She liked the learning charts - "now we see what we're doing" - and found the journal sheets helpful in focusing her attention on what she found difficult - "'cause if you said 'this was hard' then you know that you have to work harder at it". I pressed her on this wondering if she really would work on it and she insisted that she would, "probably not that night but the next class I'd ask 'how do you do that'". She had found my evaluation encouraging "'cos', like, you're more confident then when you said I'd done well".

Student 4   had quite a similar profile.   She had passed the Junior Certificate examination with a D grade, wanted to learn French, had a concentration level of 50%,

found group work most helpful in her learning followed by the teacher controlling the pace. On the 10th Oct. she was happy with her progress, especially vocabulary and tape-work but found the class too loud and she herself too chatty. My evaluation of the 18th Oct. was that she was managing her learning very well, her journal keeping was very good, she had done excellent tape-work with student 3 but some of her tasks were incomplete. In the interview she said her concentration level was up to 75% and found the groups very effective for the same reason as the three previous students "'cause, say, when you're sitting on your own and you don't know, I'd probably wait 'til another person doesn't, and they'd ask". Although they would often be working on their own within their group "we'd know we were all there for each other". She also said "we have our little chats but we still get our work done". She found the learning charts and journals very effective for the reasons already stated by student 3. Through the chart she could see not only what she had learned but also what she was about to learn - "where we'd be going". Listening to the tape-recordings of herself increased her confidence - "knowing that we done it". My evaluation encouraged her. The praise was important but also the urging to complete tasks - "it could have been good and then points could have been bad, and then if you didn't say anything I'd have gone at that speed all the time and that wouldn't have been good enough". My evaluation also showed that I wasn't just teaching them but that "you have an interest as well in us".

Student 5 is a novice to French. He had been given a lot of intensive help with his English in the junior cycle. In his questionnaire he expressed no interest in learning French, didn't do homework normally, claimed to have a concentration level of less then 33% and learned best through group work and alone. On the 10th Oct he felt he was "getting on okay " and the group work was going well. In my evaluation of 18th Oct I noted that although I knew he had been doing tape-work he had not handed up any for inspection. I felt he was disorganised in his work in that other tasks had disappeared which I knew he had done, nor had he handed up any journal sheets. However, he had shown a willingness to learn and a courage and curiosity about it. He now claimed that his concentration had risen to about 50% due to listening more, a desire to avoid falling behind or being suspended from school for a third time. Although he liked group work he worked better alone. The group wasn't helping him

much at first because the people in it were weak and he talked more, "but quietly". But he was improving now because he had moved out of the initial group and was with a more varied crowd. He was still not using the learning charts, nor was he doing homework. He felt he could not carry on a short conversation without a text. He did not say whether my evaluation encouraged him, just that "it shows that you're working as well as us, that you don't get paid for nothing".

4.2.14 Reflections on the Interviews

I had quite mixed feelings about my success rate with my class after these interviews. I found the three boys surprisingly shy in the interviews and although one of them was working well and apparently improving a lot I felt it had more to do with his own growing maturity and determination to succeed rather than with the wonderful new scheme which I had concocted. The reaction from the girls was far more heartening. They both expressed much more enthusiasm for the new strategies. While the boys disliked the extra paper-work involved in recording their learning in their journals and learning charts, and made a minimal effort on it, the girls did it willingly and welcomed the opportunity to reflect on their progress. Everyone was learning but not as much as I had hoped for.   Their concentration levels had increased and their French was improving rather than disimproving. Some were doing extra work outside class time, whether at home or in school. Nobody who had studied French before complained of boredom. So rather than be discouraged by the imperfect result which I had achieved I decided to stand back and acknowledge that it was working to some extent at least, that there were different levels of motivation present in everyone, and that autonomous learning, by its very nature, could only be facilitated, never imposed.

4.2.15 A Touch of Dictatorship

When they returned to school in early December after their two weeks work experience some of them had become very giddy. They had formed the learning groups themselves, either haphazardly or on the basis of friendship. Up to that point I had not dictated them but I felt obliged to take the unpopular decision of breaking up

some of the groups for the sake of continued learning. I regretted that this contravened the spirit of self-management. Yet the self-management of some was not conducive to learning and jeopardised the progress of all. Like Bone (1996) who found that holding values which committed him to a democratic form of school management were in conflict with his personality and other responsibilities, my values around a democratic form of classroom management were also in conflict with my personality. I had been conditioned by years of autocratic behaviour in the classroom (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Stenhouse, 1983) which encouraged me to always seek a quick-fix solution designed to create a semblance of control, rather than function as a manager of effective learning (Topping, 1988). My reaction, (as opposed to considered action), lacked thought and threatened to undo any progress the students had made in engaging in a process where they took responsibility for decision-making (Roberts, 1994). Schmuck (1997) referred to authoritarian teachers as likely to encourage a sense of dependency, competition and powerlessness among students. I agree with this. Had I taken a little more time to reflect I might have managed to raise their awareness about the detrimental effect their behaviour was having not only on their learning but also on that of their fellow-students, better solicited their co-operation and thus allowed them to claim ownership of their behaviour. It is that ownership of our decision-making that gives meaning to our lives. I did try to temper my obvious intrusion on their organisation by leaving two reliable friends in each group and adding a weak or very chatty person to the group. To my surprise there were no great objections. In their small groups they carried out a survey in French about their preferences regarding various sports. It went well, each person from the groups giving an oral report in French on some element of their results. I felt I had made the correct decision in breaking up their chosen group formation and decided to leave the new ones stand. However, my diary notes difficulty with these new groups two days later and I reflect:

> Dec. 9th: Groups may work but only if people are happy together. _____ chats a lot but when put with the lads she chatted even more. Then she and _____ ended up squabbling - they don't get on.

My decision to change their group formation had no lasting effect on their behaviour. It was a solution to a problem for a couple of days, but not having negotiated their agreement and commitment it was unlikely to last.

4.2.16 Reflections on Mixed Ability Teaching

On December 10th I note signs of improvement amongst some students but also how the research highlights that my class are such very hard work and make such slow progress. But I go on to say:

> It's good to do the research even though it discourages me and makes me expect results that they just don't / can't give. It means I have to work within a real context, not just a theoretical one.

I talk about inviting a colleague to observe the students the following day carrying out another survey in their small groups, this time on leisure activities. I write:

> This is where I really notice the benefit of mixed ability grouping. It went well the other day because of mixed ability . The better ones looked after the weaker ones and guided them through the 'sondage'. It took pressure off me. I never thought I'd like mixed ability teaching but I think it's beginning to work. It pushes the weaker ones along. Some of them might do nothing otherwise.

4.2.17 A Colleague's Validation

My colleague stayed for most of the class, during which the students carried out their survey and reported back orally their results. It was a very authentic class in that we were not prepared for a perfect performance and, although it was completely conducted through French, some students' pronunciation needed more work. What I liked best about the class was that, other than my few instructions at the beginning, I didn't feature in it at all until the end when I noted their results on the blackboard. Sotto (1994) maintains that focusing on teaching tends to produce a performance and challenges the idea that a performance can generate learning. I wanted my colleague to focus on their learning, not on my performance. I was delighted with her report (see appendix 9) - it was so encouraging. She praised them for their enthusiasm and that they all spoke French whenever they could. She remarked on the spirit of helpfulness amongst the more able students and the willingness the weaker ones showed to persevere and get it right. There had been no jeering. She was particularly interested in the academically weak students who were new to French and who she had known as lacking in self-confidence. Their responses were quick and enthusiastic and they

41

seemed to feel proud of their achievements in the previous two months. I was aware of their enthusiasm also and I noticed an eagerness in one of my novices to give an extra report that I didn't expect him to have the confidence for. When I asked him for it he did it very well. Before she left, my colleague reported her impressions to the class. They seemed very pleased with her validation, but no more than I was. I had dreaded exposing my teaching to the scrutiny of my colleague. It was the first time I had ever done this. As I reflected on her visit that night in my journal I noted that I now understood perfectly what Hargreaves (1992) meant when he said: "If isolation purges the classroom of blame and criticism, it also shuts out possible sources of praise and support".

4.2.18 Presenting my Data to my Study Group

My journal notes:

> Dec. 14th: I gave a disorganised but somewhat chronological presentation of my data, thus far collected, in Marino today. My colleagues validated the data I have gathered so far. Alec stated that he believed I have gone a long way in facilitating learning amongst my pupils and that "they are showing responsibility and leadership in their learning".

These were the 'educated' witnesses who are familiar with action research methodology and whose critical feedback the researcher must seek and consider as part of the validation process (Lomax,1994).

4.2.19 Concluding the Module

We had one more week of school before the Christmas holidays and worked on preparing an interview in French for the General Education task which was entitled "My Personal Profile". Executing tasks are part of the assessment procedure for the LCA programme. Although they compiled the interview in class time and typed it out in their Information Technology class, they had to arrange to tape-record themselves in their own time. This work was ongoing while we completed the end of the module during the month of January. Students sometimes came to my classroom to interview each other if it was vacant. I noted on Jan. 24th how relaxed some had become at interviews. I referred to one very shy and usually lazy pupil that day:

> He gave me his old tape to do the recording on thinking there was nothing on it but, in fact, he and _____ had done a little recording. It was very poorly done - nothing you'd be proud of as either a teacher or pupil. It was hesitant and had poor pronunciation. When I listened to what he did today it was so much better. Hard to believe it was the same person.

I noted another pupil's improvement that day, the student who seemed to have the greatest difficulty of everyone in class in reproducing French sounds. In my journal I have attributed his success to his friend who showed real leadership in his management of the situation. Three days later students 1 and 2 of my validation group recorded their interview. The student who had been making very good progress was very disappointing. He had not prepared for it. The other student had improved but I noted that his problems of articulation do not pertain only to French but that I also have difficulty understanding him in English sometimes as he mumbles a lot. Student 5 had improved a lot on his interview. And **I** had improved also:

> Instead of obliging _____ to practice a third time *(before tape-recording him)* , I caught myself in time, kept my mouth shut and put it to him to choose his next step. It was funny to see such a 'cool' character choose to practise again.

4.2.20 Concluding the Research

I interviewed my five students on the 4th and 5th of February. I hoped to ascertain to what extent they believed they had improved at French during the module, what they believed were their strengths as learners and to what extent the organisation of the class gave them scope to express these learning strengths. The interview was guided by a questionnaire (see appendix 11). The first section asked them whether, and how much, their French had improved in any of four areas of skill - listening, spoken, reading (word recognition), spelling - and, if so, what helped this improvement. The second section listed ten strengths that a good learner might have. They were asked to tick whichever of these strengths they believed they had as a learner, which of them they used in French class, whether the organisation of the class facilitated the use of them and whether it made them more aware of their varying strengths.

Student 1 felt he had improved in all areas but not much. Pronunciation had improved but he still had a tendency to pronounce the last letter of a word. Concentration was still far from perfect - he considered he concentrated for about three quarters of the class. Of the eight strengths he believed he had as a learner he did not use one of them in French class - the ability to work alone. "I can't work on my own in French, it's the only subject". For this reason he found group work helpful although it was also a distraction to sit beside friends. Although noise levels increased with group work he found some other classes which were organised into single seat arrangements often much noisier. "In fact, we seem to be quieter, in ways, by sitting beside friends. I don't know why it is". He has continued not to do homework unless a lot of emphasis is put on it. This was a shift in thinking for him from when I first interviewed him in November and he said that putting pressure on him to do homework was counter-productive for him. He felt he was more aware of the learning strategies he used in French because he had to work harder at this subject having failed it in the Junior Certificate examination. Overall, I felt there had been no further movement for him in his learning since November and that he had even waned a little in enthusiasm since then.

Student 2 believed he had improved in both listening and reading skills but not in oral or spelling skills. "For some reason" the group work had helped his listening skills. He only rated himself as a learner on four to five of the ten strengths mentioned, each of them being used also in French class. Although he believed he still only concentrated for about half the class he found French easier now and tape-recording with his friend had helped his spoken French. However, his part-time job was interfering with his commitment to the LCA programme. I believe he accurately assessed his learning progress. I was glad that, despite his hearing impairment, he recognised that his listening skills had improved and that it was due to paying more attention. He had been very negative earlier in the module about listening exercises and made little effort.

Student 3 felt that all her skills had improved. She attributed this to the fact that she enjoyed French now and "was willing to learn a lot more than the first three years". The organisation of the class into groups where she could work with friends rather than alone was the cause of her changed attitude to learning French. She considered

she had strengths as a learner in all the ten ways mentioned with reservations about two of them and that these strengths applied to learning French also. From mid-November her journals recorded her making a plan each day and carrying it out - this was homework she chose to do although she had normally not been doing it previously. She was now speaking French because she had more confidence and decided that on the next module of French she would "probably not talk so much". In response to the question of whether the organisation of the French class gave her enough scope to use her learning strengths she replied: "Yes, because at the start of the year we worked alone and now we work with our friends in a group. I prefare [sic] this and am glad that the teacher asked us what we felt like about it. I think the way we work in French class is brilliant". I agree with her assessment of her learning. She had continued working consistently and appeared to be a pace-maker in the class.

Student 4 considered that she had improved in all four areas and attributed this to group work which was particularly important to her in French class as opposed to other subjects. Although she rated working alone as the least helpful learning strategy in September's questionnaire she now rated it much higher and felt that sometimes she could do better on her own. She considered herself a strong learner in nine of the ten areas mentioned and these strengths also applied to learning French. She found reflecting on the learning process through the charts very worthwhile. It seemed to validate her efforts and achievements - "It's not really that you're aware of what you're doing .....until you look at these sheets and you say 'yes, I did do that, and I did stay back and do extra work and that did happen'". I asked her if reflecting on what she had done had a value in itself. She responded: "Yeah, when you keep going, keep going, you're not realising what you're doing until you fall back and say: 'God, that's great, like, I was able to do all them'"! I thought her progress was quite definite. Her enthusiasm for learning did not wane since the interview of November.

Student 5 was a novice to French. He considered that he still concentrated for little more than half the class. Not having studied French before he felt it was impossible not to learn it. Since the last interview he believed his listening skills had improved somewhat, his spoken skills had improved a lot (helped very much by the task), his reading and spelling had not really progressed. I asked him to read a short passage in

French based on the type of language we had been learning (see appendix 10). He understood about half of it but when I pronounced the words which he had difficulty reading he managed better. We then had a short conversation in French which was reasonably successful. He had difficulty understanding some questions but answered others quite fluently. He considered he was a strong learner in seven of the ten ways mentioned and these applied to French also, except for the ability to work with friends. Having come from a very small remedial class the previous year he found it difficult to adjust to the lack of immediate personal attention from the teacher when he required it. When asked how he rated himself now in French he replied "comme-ci, comme-ça" and felt "all right" about studying it next year. Although he did not consider himself an enthusiastic learner I definitely disagreed with this assessment. He was giddy and talkative in company which made it difficult for him to reap the benefits of group work. In fact, group work was "a bit messy", as he put it himself. When I asked him if working in a different group might have helped him work better he replied, "yeah, but I didn't want to". I pointed out to him that he had made a certain decision for himself regarding his learning. On the other hand, he had regularly shown satisfaction in learning, had supplied the correct French when he could for others who hesitated, had followed up on homework one night when nobody else had and had used the practice tape I had prepared for him and even complimented it - "it helped a lot when you weren't here". He expressed frustration when he did not immediately understand but normally continued to make an effort. His attitude was far more positive than the negative one displayed early in the module.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

Many issues arose in the course of my research and the painful but promising process of change began for my students and especially for me. These issues include the following points:

Facilitating mixed ability learning.

Facilitating mixed ability learning never arose as an issue in my initial teacher training. It was discussed once only in an in-service training course when a teacher shared her approach to it in a one hour session. I admired her energy and effort greatly but presumed that her approach was only feasible with highly motivated, disciplined students such as hers. Mine were different, I believed, too unmotivated and undisciplined to assume the task of autonomous learning. Although that course took place years ago I have never forgotten her story. It has always been a niggling reminder of my inertia or my fear of failure in the event of trying to implement a similar approach. I believed in autonomous learning but never tried to facilitate it. I held values in theory but not in practice (Whitehead, 1989). Had I not become involved in action research a few years ago I would still be suffering those pangs of guilt.

Action research for professional learning.

People sometimes ask me what is the approach advocated by action research that makes it such a powerful force for change, that gives a previously reluctant, sceptical teacher like me the courage to try to confront my inadequacies and improve my practice? Action research is a very personal approach to research which places me, the researcher, at the centre of the research. I, thus, impel myself to reflect honestly on my practice, on its contradictions, on its flaws and I commit myself to try to improve. In other words, I take full responsibility for my actions by systematically investigating them (McNiff et al., 1996), and by operating within an action-research cycle of "reflection upon action and action upon reflection" (Elliott, 1989), it allows me the freedom to make mistakes and change them as I seek to enhance my practice. This is the value of experiential learning, what Munby and Russell (1994) refer to as the

"authority of experience", which brings about real lasting change as opposed to the "vicarious experience of taught courses" (McNiff, 1988). If a plan doesn't work I try another. McNiff et al. (1996) describe this process perfectly when they say: "it is not a question of failure, so much as new beginnings and creative practices". I learned that I had misjudged my students, that they <u>were</u> able to cope with mixed ability learning and welcomed it, and that they had different levels of motivation just like any other group of students. I had not trusted my colleague's story because I had not experienced it. Rather than take action - a risk - I had taken refuge in conservatism (Lomax, 1994).

<u>Finding a voice</u>.

Éist le fuaim na habhann agus gheobhaidh tú iasc. This Irish proverb suggests that we listen to the sound of the river if we want to catch a fish. Russell (1995) recommends that those learning to teach should listen to their own voices, their own experiences and to the voices and experiences of their students. I see myself as one who is learning to teach in light of the suggestion made by Stenhouse (1985) that "no teaching is good enough" and should therefore be seen as experimental. McNiff (1993) also maintains that the best teaching is done by those who are willing to learn. This is a recurring theme in Russell and Korthagen (1995). In attending to my students' voices and to their experiences I was better able to facilitate the learning process. Sotto (1994) similarly advised that teachers must work with whatever motivation is already present in their students and that learners enjoy a task most when they feel that they themselves have chosen to do it. I listened to my students' requests to include more pair and group work as part of their learning strategies and to focus on spoken French. The peer teaching implicit in this kind of classroom organisation was not only beneficial in motivating the students who were weakest but I also observed students who had been previously weak, lazy or indifferent grow in confidence and consolidate their learning as their help was solicited by their fellow-students. Bennett and Dunne (1994) saw this kind of classroom practice as allowing the student to take on the role of a 'social being', "in a move from individualistic to co-operative classroom endeavours". I, who had been extremely uncomfortable about mixed ability teaching and suspicious of the value of group work, grew to like and value it by experiencing its benefits. Dewey (1956) saw this tendency towards mutual assistance amongst students as a "most natural form of co-operation and association" which

48

schools had turned into a crime and had forced to become clandestine. I have been guilty of this attitude, heedless of both the classroom benefits of peer teaching and support as much as of the wider social advantages of fostering a supportive approach amongst people where they "recognise their one-ness with the universe and each other" (McNiff, 1996).

Freire (1972) castigated the all too prevalent banking concept of knowledge where the teacher bestows the gift of knowledge on the student who is considered to know nothing. This concept acts on the false premise that people are passive rather than conscious beings. The central role of critical theory is emancipation - "enabling people to take control and direction over their own lives" (Hopkins, 1985). This emancipation from behaviour dependent on habit and tradition (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Stenhouse, 1983) is expressed in the classroom by consciousness-raising about the learning process. This was true for me, as I freed myself from the misguided presumptions I had held around mixed ability learning for my students. My students also grew in their awareness of the learning process in which they were engaging. As a result of our research, some of my students changed their opinions on their preferred learning strategies. What was a low priority in September had taken a much higher priority by January or vice versa. Some articulated strengths or weaknesses in their progress through their journalling after each class and all of them were able to do this when I interviewed them. Elliott (1989) saw action research as offering students and teachers alike this opportunity to reconstruct their prior understandings.

Writing as a conduit to learning.

While the winds of change may blow fear and instability into our lives, writing about that change helps temper those emotions and see the glimmer of a brighter future in the midst of our chaos. Rowlands (1984), Winter (1989) and Connelly and Clandinin (1990) saw the act of writing as one of learning - making sense of the experiences we are writing about. Wells (1992) saw it as a powerful tool which requires us to confront what we know and don't know, to compose a coherent text of our knowledge and, furthermore, rewriting "provides occasions for the development of thinking about one's thinking". I have always found my colleagues to be reflective about the teaching process, we regularly make mental logs of the issues we discuss, but committing those

49

reflections and questions to print gives me increased understandings of my classroom practice. I was fearful of trying to write up the data pertaining to my research, wondering if there was a very effective approach to adopt which eluded me. Finally, I decided to present my research in a chronological manner and to use my journal notes to this effect. Much to my dismay, the chapter I had most feared gave me the most pleasure. Out of the depths of those initial days of despair and disorder I saw fleeting signs of a new type of learning which held hope, and in the noting of these signs I had found the courage to continue. Holly (1989) recognised the power of journal keeping and compared it to a rough voyage, "like others which cover the most intriguing terrains". Mine certainly was rough and I have by no means reached calm waters yet. I was intrigued by the story of my changing practice as I read through my journal notes. And as I rewrote the story of my research I understood the power of rewriting referred to by Wells (1992) - my understandings became more lucid or even changed. Writing aids and encourages reflection and comprehension. Many of my students, however, are weak in this linguistic intelligence (Gardner, 1983). Their journal keeping is scanty and unreflective for the most part. But those who did not fear writing showed a good awareness of their progress and difficulties in learning, what aided their efforts, and, over a course of time, a growing commitment to improve their learning as they made plans at the end of class and executed them. Green (1993) in her research on diary writing in a mathematics education class presumed that her students found it a useful exercise as they continued their writing well into their coffee break. I also found that those students who were content to fill in the diary sheet did not promptly put down their pens when the bell rang for class changeover but stayed to complete the task. Furthermore, I found that the more I journalled the story of my research the more meaningful and thought-provoking it became, and, like my students who journalled their progress, the more I committed myself to learn from it and complete it. My journal became the mirror through which I reflected on my practice without bias, acknowledging the good and the bad, uncovering its presumptions, always growing, always learning.

Making my claim to knowledge.

When I set out at the beginning of my research to facilitate learning amongst my mixed ability students I was very sceptical about its feasibility. Yet I learned that it was

feasible, and in trying to improve the quality of my students' learning I have improved the quality of my own. I believe I have justified this claim both methodologically and epistemologically by drawing on the validation of colleagues and students and collectively we have contributed to the practical knowledge base on the value of mixed ability teaching (Twomey, 1997). Through my research I have created my own living, educational theory (Whitehead, 1993).

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

I have reached a mid-way point in the normal teaching life of forty years. But when I consider what I have learned recently about teaching as a negotiable, inclusive approach which "respects students as potentially autonomous learners" (Lomax, 1994), I realise that I am only at the embryonic stage of learning with regard to my remaining teaching years. Much of what I have unconsciously learned in the past or emulated from my own student days must be deconstructed and reconstructed, freeing myself as much as possible from the constraints imposed on me by people's expectations of my teaching (McNiff, 1988), enabling me to see my practice as part of a living educational theory generated from my critical enquiry (Whitehead, 1993).

When I reflect on my research I wish I could start again and do it better. My organisation was not prompt enough as my plan only evolved based on my students' feedback and my own readings and imaginings. Next time I would like to present their learning charts stapled to their worksheets to avoid the inevitable misplacement of them "somewhere in the schoolbag". One of the questions on the journal sheet was often answered ambiguously and ought to be re-worded. I would like to have paid more attention to the novices getting their tape-recording done and to have negotiated with more of the experienced learners in French to help the novices tape-recording. It was too haphazard this year. I would have the listening tapes prepared for them from the beginning rather than half way through the module and, finally, I would collect their work a little more regularly. However, I am aware that it was a start, and that many of the inclusions during the research were a direct result of my reflections on their progress arising from their feedback and my own observations. Such is the "chalk face of teacher-student discourse" (Lomax 1994).

Issues arose during the research which impinge on other teachers' teaching also. We are debating these at present but solutions are not coming easily. This LCA course is considered by many as the poor relation of the traditional Leaving Certificate. It is not recognised for entry to third level institutes and only some Post Leaving Certificate

courses will accept its graduates. Yet, when it was designed it was not anticipated that these students would be seeking third level education. Its emphasis is on the learning process rather than knowing a designated amount of facts, on applying oneself systematically to finding solutions to problems or to carrying out tasks, and on celebrating effort and being recognised for it. The students themselves seem to both respect and resent what is happening on this course - "I've never worked so hard in my life" - is a common claim and complaint. Yet they know they will have to be very articulate with the public if they are to properly explain the value of the course. Anything which veers away from the normal expectation of a Leaving Certificate course will be challenged as a deficiency rather than a strength. An issue such as homework will have to be resolved. Time can be wasted trying to contend with people who don't do it and many of these students don't. Yet if teachers don't set homework the course will lose stature with the students and the public, something it cannot afford to do as the students are already sensitive to its public image. I also had difficulty sometimes with trying to curb the private chats. Other teachers are experiencing the same problem. How do I marry this with allowing them to work in groups? This will have to be explored further, not only by the teachers but by the students themselves. They are naturally sociable, communicative people who love to talk with each other. As one student said to me in all sincerity: "Miss, how can you expect us not to talk? It's just not natural". I have also discussed the difficulty I had in getting my students to journal their learning. I see it as a valuable tool in my own learning and in the learning of those students who adopted it more easily. But they were a minority and I wondered sometimes if I should abandon it altogether. However, as one colleague remarked, it is not a habit that they will adapt to easily if it is suddenly introduced to them near the end of their school life. The issue goes back to fostering good classroom practice from an early stage, at the very least from the time they enter the post-primary school.

I now journey out into the second half of my teaching life, essentially the same person but with a new perspective. I am not as anxious and awe-struck about the changes those years may bring because I believe I have developed good research techniques which will help me to learn from those situations. I agree with Lomax (1994) who sees the informal inquiry of many other reflective teachers as "only a basis for the more

rigorous and reflective ways in which action researchers work". I have always been a reflective teacher who sometimes found my practice fall short of my desires, but I lacked the tools for conducting a systematic enquiry into that practice. I wanted to improve but felt helpless about how to do so. I had been imbued with the notion that those in authority in the universities knew a 'right way' to teach in any given situation but had omitted to teach me it. Nor had I ever found the answers to my problems in any of the in-service courses I had attended - stimulation, yes, but the power to act, no. Now, through my engagement with action research, I have been empowered to act - to engage in a systematic enquiry of my practice and to change it. But I do wonder if I would have made that breakthrough, would have persisted in following through on a plan of action had the promise of accreditation for my effort not been in the background. It provided an added stimulus and purpose to my enquiry. If the state values its teaching profession it must devise a system which accredits and encourages teachers to improve their practice and to provide a quality educational experience to their students.

Finally, as I became a more reflective, enquiring person in the last few years and entered more into dialogue with my colleagues and students in an effort to improve my classroom practice, I realise how privileged I am to belong to such an open-minded community of learners.

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APPENDIX 1

Ethics Statement

I agree to participate in Ms. Cluskey's research. I understand that she will not reveal my name without my permission or reveal any information of a personal nature. I also understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research whenever I wish.

Signed: _____

61
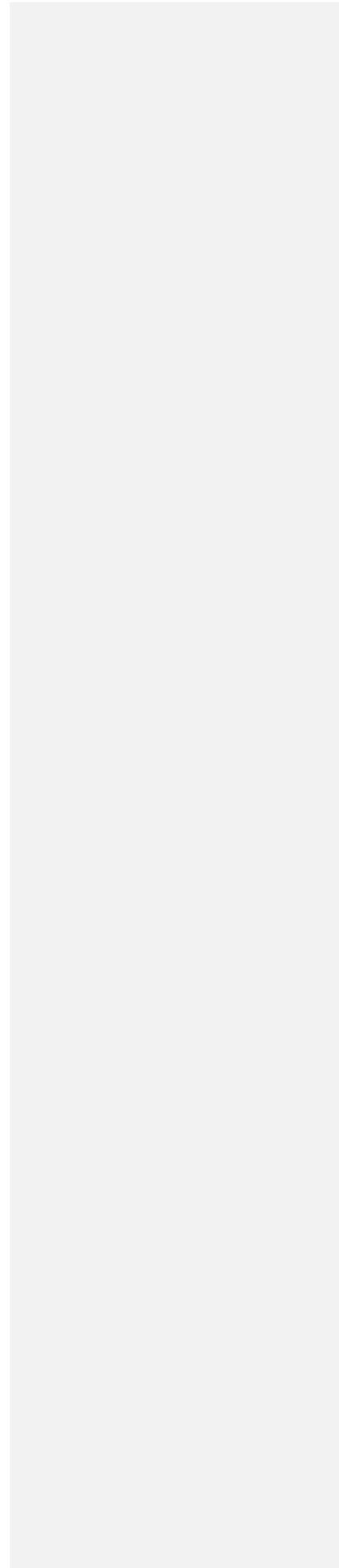
APPENDIX 2

LCA SURVEY ON LEARNING LANGUAGES

1.   Do you want to learn French?   Yes ⌖   No ⌖

    (Tick one of the above boxes).

    If your answer is "yes" put 1,2,3 or 4 in each of the following boxes in order of importance.

    (1 = most important, 4 = least important).

    I like the language and being able to speak it.   ⌖

    I like the idea of being able to communicate with a French person.   ⌖

    I want to get a credit for it in the Leaving certificate exam.   ⌖

    It may improve my job prospects.   ⌖

    If you can think of another reason please mention it.

    If your answer is "no" number the following boxes in the same way.

    I cannot see the point in learning it.   ⌖

    I don't like learning languages.   ⌖

    I'm afraid I won't succeed. ⌖

    If you can think of another reason please mention it.

2.   What is your present standard of French?

    I'm doing it for the first time.   ⌖

    I have done a little French but not in the Junior cert. exam.   ⌖

    I got a ___ (insert letter) grade in it in the Junior cert. exam.

    I was happy with this result.   ⌖

    *I **could** have done better.* ⌖

    I deserved to do better.   ⌖

    (Tick only **one** of the above 3 boxes)

3.   How much of class time do you think you spend concentrating?

75% or more.   ☐

About 50%   ☐

Less than 33%.   ☐

4.   When do you stop concentrating in class? Please number each box according to their.

Importance. (1 = most important reason, 5 = least important).

When the teacher keeps talking.   ☐

When you don't get the chance to **actively** participate.   ☐

The teacher asks questions but other people seem happy to answer.   ☐

When the work seems too difficult. ☐

When a classmate starts to talk to you.   ☐

Please mention any other.

5.   What do you do when you don't understand something in class?

Ask one of your classmates to explain: sometimes ☐ never ☐

Ask your teacher to explain: sometimes ☐   never ☐

Switch off and stop concentrating. ☐

Hope that someone else doesn't understand and asks the teacher to explain .☐

Start messing so that others won't notice that you don't understand. ☐

(You may tick more than one box if you wish)

Please mention any other.

6.   Which of these ways helps you best in your learning in class?

 Number each box accordingly. (1 = most helpful, 4 = least helpful)

a. The teacher controlling the learning, teaching the class as a group. ☐

b. Doing group work. ☐

c. Working in pairs. ☐

d. Working alone. ☐

A combination of ways. (Mention letters) _____

Please mention any other.

7.   Do you normally do your homework?   Yes ⊙ No ⊙

Do you see it as useful ? Yes ⊙   No ⊙

Explain why.

Do you look over the new work you did in class if you don't get any homework?
Usually ⊙   Sometimes ⊙   Never ⊙

APPENDIX 3

Module 1 Social Relationships - 1

(Learning Chart, number 1)

☑**Key:**

ST	**=**	**Spirale textbook**
SW	**=**	**Spirale worksheet**
RTS	**=**	**Revision Test Series**
TO	**=**	**Tout Oreilles**
JCB	**=**	**Je Comprends Bien**
WWF	**=**	**Working with French**

	Language Acts	Class / homework	Tape yourself	Extra Work 1	Extra Work 2
Salutations	Salut, a va, Bonjour, Au revoir, merci, etc. ST pp. 6,7,9	ST pp.8,10,11,15 SW pp.1,2. Role play	Give a salutation and a response with a friend. Do as many as you can think of.	RTS pp.6,7	RTS Write the beginning of a letter to a pen-pal. Ask how she/he is, his/her family, say how you and your family are.
Pr sentation s	Je m'appelle ….. Et toi? Comment tu t'appelles? Comment vous appelez- vous? (formal version)	ST p.20 Role-play			
Alphabet	Comment a s' crit?	Role-play (Say hello, introduce yourself, ask your partner's name and how to spell it. Reverse the roles. TO pp.1,2. Listen to spelling of regions in France.	1. Tape the alphabet 2. Tape this conversation.	Colour and name the regions on the map of France.	
Habitation	Tu habites o ? O habites-tu? J'habite……..	ST pp.16,18,19 Role-play SW p.4 (countries, gapped letter)		In pairs or groups use blank world map to fill in French-speaking countries.	Find what information you can about any of these countries. (Check the library or Encarta disc in I.T. Information can also be found in Salut 2 in French.)
Nationalit	Quelle est ta/votre nationalit ? Je suis irlandais(e).	ST 23, 24, 27. Role-play	Tape yourself and a friend . Make as long a conversation as possible.	Make up your own wordsleuth or crossword puzzle. Examples: Cantonna est……… Brad Pitt est……… Oasis sont ……etc.	WWF Reading comprehension

APPENDIX 4

Student Evaluations of October 10th

Seventeen of my nineteen students were present on the day of the evaluation. The special research group are numbered one to five.

Student no.	How are you getting on?	What's going well?	What's going badly?	What changes would you like?
1	Getting there, slowly.	French improving - learned more in last month than in the three previous years.	Nothing much.	Nothing.
2	Didn't learn much.	Nothing.	Hard to listen and learn. Teacher talks too fast.	Teacher to talk more slowly.
3.	Well enough - better than last year.	Alphabet.	Work on letters.	Teacher to explain more and listen to us more.
4.	Well.	Words (vocabulary) and tape work.	Class is too loud and I'm too talkative.	Learn more important things.
5.	Not too long at it to know but 'okay'.	Group work.	The days I'm in and being late.	School.
6.	Well.	Alphabet and book.	Writing in student diary.	Like to change filling in my diary.
7.	Not too well.	I understand more in this class. It's explained easier.	I don't like French.	The class to get more exciting.
8.	Not too well.	I like coming to class but not French itself.	French - I'll never understand it.	(Left blank)

9	Not too well.	Book and worksheets.	My tape-work. Working with partner.	Like to study French all year.
10.	Not too bad, but it's very difficult.	Writing.	Language (spoken)	Teacher distracts us. Draws attention to herself.
11.	Alright.	Learning French.	Speaking French to partner.	Like to study French all year.
12.	Okay - not too good and not too bad. I'm too disorganised.	My French is improving. Had a conversation in French with my friend in another school.	Not too organised.	Nothing.
13.	Grand.	I'm learning French. Like group work.	(Left blank)	Nothing.
14.	Well. Class work is helpful.	Organisation of class into groups and tape recording together.	Nothing	None.
15.	My French is going well compared to last year. Ms. Cluskey is great.	Speaking French.	Writing it.	Desks. I'd like everyone to face each other. Ms. Cluskey not to interrupt us.
16.	Okay.	Learning French.	Speaking French to others.	Like French all year.
17.	Okay.	Spoken French.	Studying at home.	Like French all year.

APPENDIX 5

Module 1 Social Relationships - 2

(Learning Chart, number 2)

☑**Key:**

ST	**=**	**Spirale textbook**
SW	**=**	**Spirale worksheet**
RTS	**=**	**Revision Test Series**
TO	**=**	**Tout Oreilles**
JCB	**=**	**Je Comprends Bien**
WWF	**=**	**Working with French**

	Language Acts	Class / homework	Tape yourself	Extra Work 1	Extra Work 2
Numbers	1-16, 17-20	ST pp.32-34. Dice game (group) SW p.9	Count 1-20	1. ST p.36 (work out secret message) 2. Make a secret message for a friend	ST p.37. Work with a partner timing each other saying these numbers out loud. Who wins?
ge	Tu as quel ge? Quel ge as-tu? J'ai __ ans.	Role-play p. 41 ST exer. G			
Famille	Tu as des fr res et des soeurs? J'ai un/deux fr re(s) et une/deux soeur(s) / pas de soeur.	ST p.42 Interview 4 people in your class. Ask them the 4 questions on page 42 plus this question about their family.	Tape one of these people.	Ask some teachers the same questions but use the formal version. Vous avez…….. Vous habitez o ? De quelle nationalit tes-vous?	1. ST p.45, rewrite these sentences correctly. ✎ 2. SW p.12, rewrite the computer's printout correctly, putting in full-stops etc. ✎
Mois (months) Jours de la semaine (Days)	Numbers 1-31 C'est quand ton anniversaire? Quelle est la date de ton anniversaire? Mon anniversaire est le………… Nous sommes quelle date aujourd'hui?	ST pp.86,87,91. Song Role-play ST p. 89,90,91	Tape the months. Sing the song with some friends or tape the role-play.	Ask 5 classmates their birthdays in French. Write their answers. Example: Ann - son anniversaire est le 4 juin.	Game for 3 or 4. Imagine that each of you is someone famous. You must ask each other questions (but not your name). Can you guess who the others are? You may need to ask what their profession is -"quelle est ta profession"? Ans: Je suis chanteur / footballeur / musicien / acteur / actrice / politicien etc. (Check the dictionary)

T 1 phone	1-100 Tu as le t 1 phone? Oui c'est le ……	ST p.199 Role-play RTS pp.10-11 JCB pp.7-8	Tape this role-play or, better still, make it as long as you can. (You can say quite a lot now).	RTS pp 12-13 (leave out section 10).	Tu Parles!, p. 30. Work with a friend.

APPENDIX 6

Mon Journal

(Student Diary)

Date: Le .... [Did I carry out any plan from yesterday?] .... [What I did today] .... [How I worked on this] .... [My learning today - what went well, what was difficult] .... [My plans - any further work?]	Date: Le .... [Did I carry out any plan from yesterday?] .... [What I did today] .... [How I worked on this] .... [My learning today - what went well, what was difficult] .... [My plans - any further work?] ....

APPENDIX 7

Module 1 Social Relationships - 3

(Learning Chart, number 3)

☑Key:

	Language Acts	Class / homework	Tape yourself	Extra Work 1	Extra Work 2
Sports	Tu aimes faire du sport / jouer au foot? J'adore / je n'aime pas / je d teste / ca peut aller Tu fais souvent du sport? Une /deux / trois fois par semaine / mois / an.	Video (Quinze Minutes) Worksheet 6 (A, B, C, D) Travail en Groupe Sondage sur les sports. Aural tests BEF1 pp. 239 + 242	Ask a friend 3 questions about sports. You already have 2. Add this one on. *Qu'est-ce-que tu fais comme sport?*	RTS p.113 Tous les combien? (How often?)	BEF 1 p. 243
Loisirs / Passetemps	Qu'est-ce-que tu pr f res comme passetemps? Je pr f re ……… Souvent / jamais / de temps en temps	BEF1 p.249 (vocab.) Make a wordsleuth Aural tests BEF1 pp. 250 + 251	Work with a friend on tape asking each other's pastimes.	Travail en groupe. Sondage sur les loisirs le weekend.	BEF2 p.137 reading comprehension. How do these people spend their weekends?
Au Fast-food *Manger sur le Pouce*	Qu'est-ce que tu veux? } prends?} Je veux…….. Je vais prendre…	ST aural exercises pp.132 D + 134 F. Role-play p. 135 G. ST p.137 I L'argent fran ais	Tape this role-play.	SW pp. 38 + 39	SW p. 40
Au Restaurant	Qu'est-ce que vous d sirez? L'addition s'il vous plait. Le service est compris?	S + BEF1 menus pp. 2, 4 & 5. Complete conversation p. 3. Aural exercise p. 6 Aural exercise p. 7 Sondage dans un restaurant p. 8 Aural exercises pp. 9-10	Tape a conversation in a restaurant with a friend. Use one of the menus to order from. One of you should play the part of the client, the other the part of the waiter.	P. 7. Organise these words into the correct categories.	P.11. Put the correct letter into the box which matches the picture. P. 12. Mots Crois s. P. 13. Reading Comprehension.

APPENDIX 8

Excerpts from the student interviews on the 14th and 15th of November. Students are numbered S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5. I am referred to as M.

(Interviewing students 1 and 2).

(On their progress and group work)

M: S2, you said on the 10th of October that you weren't learning at all. Has it improved at all since then?

S2: I wouldn't say it's improved much but it has gone up a bit - not much.

M: S1, you were feeling more positive about it then. Are you still feeling okay?

S1: Yeah, okay. I'm feeling okay.

M: S2, …….has anything gone well since?

S2: The learning has gone a bit better.

M: What has helped?

S2: The group work has helped.

M: How does the group work help? What do you get out of it that you don't get out of me at the top of the class doing everything?

S2: You can ask the people if you don't understand something and they can explain it to you.

M: Yeah, and you don't have to have attention drawn on you.

S2: Yeah, shouting it out in the middle of the classroom.

S1: Showing you need help.

M: So, you feel more secure in a small group……………
Is the group work making you talk too much English?

S2: Ah, there is at times too much chat.

S1: Yeah.

(I explain the conflict I create by putting them into groups in order to encourage them to speak French while also exposing them to the possibility of chatting more in English. I ask them if the overall result is one of gain or loss. S2 says he is gaining more.

(Appendix 8 continued)

M: Do you not like anything about sitting in groups?

S2: Can be difficult to concentrate.

(On aural and oral French)

73

M: In what way is your French improving? For example, what about your tape
        work? Can you hear it better?

S2:   No, I don't like that at all.

M: Is that because you have a hearing problem?

S2:   In all subjects - even in English.

M: What about spoken French? When you were doing your tapework with S1
        would that have gone better for you than at the beginning of term?

S2:   Oh, yeah, that was better.

M: What about you S1? I was quite surprised at you.

S1:   I'm catching up now with what we did in first year. I'm doing great.

M: Do you feel that what you did in first year you didn't really do well?

S1:   No, I wasn't really listening.

(On my written evaluation)

M: How, S1, did you respond to the evaluation of your work that I gave you on
        October the 18th?

S1:   I was shocked at the size of it.

M: Did it encourage you to get on with your tape-work?

S1:   Yeah, it was just like getting a kick in the butt, being told to get a move on.

M: But I'm also mentioning a lot of good things that I've noticed about you. How
        does it feel to get praised?

S1:   Very good.

                              (Appendix 8 continued)

(Interviewing students 3,4 and 5)

(On group work and concentration)

M: At the end of September we changed our whole pattern of working - we went into groups and everything.

S4:   Yeah, I find it better now. I think the groups are very effective, Miss, for working.

S5:   I like it but I work better on my own.

M: Does being in a group make you talk more?

S5:   Yeah.

M: You two[to students 3 and 4] seem to think it's because of group work [concentration increasing]. Why is it for you, S5?

S5:   Listening more.

M: Why are you working harder?

S5:   Getting suspended twice.

M: So, fear of getting into trouble has made you listen and learn?

S5:   I didn't want to fall behind.

………………………………

M: S4, you stop concentrating when the work is too difficult?

S4:   Yeah, I just switch off.   I feel stupid. Like, there's a hard question in front of me and I look around and everyone's working and I kinda switch off. I get a bit embarrassed as well.

………………………………..

M: S5, you said [in the questionnaire] that you never ask the teacher questions if you don't understand and sometimes ask a classmate.

S5:   Yeah.

M: But I don't agree. I certainly would have noticed you asking me questions… I appreciate that……………I think it's great to see………………………..

S4:   Well, I'd say I'd prefer to ask a friend as well……………. 'Cause say when you're sitting on your own and you don't know - I'd probably wait till another person doesn't and they'd ask.

<center>(Appendix 8 continued)</center>

M: ………Sometimes in group work you are actually working on your own.

S4:   Yeah, we'd be working away but we'd know we were there for each other.

S3:   Yeah.

(On homework)

M: [S3]You say you normally don't do homework. Would you have done any

        since September? Have you ever done a worksheet at night, done tape-work

or

        stayed late to work?

S3:   Yeah, I stayed late after class and I listened to your tape and we done the tape

        after school.

M: How about you, S4?

S4:   The same as S3.

M: S5, do you ever do any work at night?

S5:   No………..I listened to it [the tape] once. I stayed late once to do tape work.

(On the learning charts)

M: How about the task sheets[learning charts]. Would you say they're any help

        to you in seeing where you're going with your learning?

S4:   Yeah, they're brilliant.

S3:   Yeah, they're good.

M: Why is that?

S4:   'Cause all the other years - I know we were only in first, second and third year

        - but we'd be doing everything and we'd be saying 'but what are we going on

        to next week'? We didn't even know where we'd be going.

S3:   Now we see what we're doing.

M: Do you feel a sense of satisfaction when you colour in a section you've done?

S4:   Yeah, you can see what you've learned. 'Cause the other times I'd be saying

        'what did I learn'? And then I'd see 'oh, that's shaded in, I learned all that'.

(Appendix 8 continued)

(On keeping a student diary)

M: Is the journal any help to you in seeing where you're going in your learning?

S4:   The one [question] that really helps me a lot there is 'what was easy, what was difficult'? But the rest of the questions I don't think really matters.

S3:   Yeah, 'cause like if you said 'this was hard' then you know that you have to work harder at it.

M: Would you work on it again, though?

S3:   Ah, yeah, probably not that night but the next class I'd ask 'how do you do that'?

(On my performance and their progress)

M: You said you would like me to explain more and listen more. Am I listening any better?

S3:   Ah, yeah, it's all right now, honestly. Last year I used to hate being in French but now I don't mind. I like coming to French.

M: Yeah, yeah, but you feel more in control of it this year, it seems to me.

S3:   'Cause I understand it now.

M: You seem to be working harder to me in class.

S4:   It's because you have your friends around you……………the fellows tend to mess more but, like, we have our little chats but we still get our work done.

M: Does it make you talk more, S5?

S5:   Yeah, but quietly.

M: In what way has your French improved since September?

S3 and S4:   All the simple things like saying your age and where you live and the months and days.

M: How about numbers?

S4:   Yeah, I used to be only able to count to twenty, now I can count to a hundred.

(Appendix 8 continued)

(On tape-recording)

M: Did taping yourselves make you feel more confident?

S4:   Yeah, playing it back and knowing that we done it.

S5:   I'd have to look at it [the text].

(On my written evaluation)

M: How did you feel when you got my evaluation?

S4:   I was pleased with it, but just at the end bit there - 'keep up the hard work and even complete. A little bit at home would make all the difference' - I felt I had to get it finished.

M: Did it feel like it encouraged you enough to keep going?

S3:   Yeah, 'cause, like you're more confident then when you said I'd done well.

S5:   It shows you're working as well as us - that you don't get paid for nothing.

S4:   No, it shows that you have an interest as well in us - that, like, you're not just coming in to class and teaching us but that it's more like you're more interested to teach us.

APPENDIX 9

Colleague Evaluation

December 11th, 1996.

I was impressed by the enthusiasm shown by the students. All of them spoke French whenever they were able to - there was no laughing or jeering others. An air of helpfulness prevailed - more able students were more than willing to help weaker students. Weaker students seemed to feel no embarrassment when they didn't get something right. I was particularly impressed by students new to the subject who are academically very weak and previously lacking in confidence. Their responses were quick and enthusiastic - they obviously felt proud of themselves and their achievements in the last two months.

All of the students succeeded in completing their tasks - all partook in the exercise and all understood and partook in the oral questioning at the end of the lesson.

Signed: Ursula Duggan

APPENDIX 10

(Reading comprehension given to student 5 on our final interview)

MON PROFIL PERSONNEL

Je m'appelle Michel. J'habite Paris. Je suis français. J'ai seize ans. Mon anniversaire est le neuf juin. J'ai deux frères et une soeur. Mon numéro de téléphone est le 868,39,45.

Comme passetemps j'aime la musique, la danse, la télé et les sports. J'adore le foot et la natation. Au restaurant j'aime manger les frites, un sandwich au fromage et les gâteaux. Je déteste les escargots.

APPENDIX 11

Questionnaire completed by students at the interviews of the 4th/5th February, 1997.

In which of these ways has your French improved? How much?

a)   Listening skills.   _____

b)   Spoken skills. _____

c)   Reading skills. (Recognising vocab.) _____

d)   Spelling.   _____

What has happened in French class to help this improvement?

In what ways do you consider yourself a good learner? (tick)

1.   Concentrate well in class.   ☺

2.   Prepared to do some homework. (Extra work)   ☺

3.   Work well with your friends when set a task.   ☺

4.   Reliable - carry out the task.   ☺

5.   Carry out your work on time.   ☺

6.   Don't give up when it becomes difficult.   ☺

7.   Admit when you don't understand or need help.   ☺

8.   Listen well.   ☺

9.   Curious and enjoy learning - enthusiastic.   ☺

10.   Able to work alone.   ☺

Which of your qualities as a learner (which you ticked above) did you use in your French class? (Use the numbers)

_____

Did the organisation of the French class give you enough scope to use these learning strengths?

Did it help make you more aware of these strengths of yours as a learner?