

Lingua “Opening the Door to Language Learning” Project UK Phase 1 Report

Written by: Paula Davis
Email: pd2@soton.ac.uk
Telephone: 0044 (0)23 80593970

1. Context

1.1 Names and roles of project participants:

Alison Dickens (Project Director)
Paula Davis (Project Manager)
Marie Weaver (Project Secretary)

1.2 Institution:

Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies, based at the University of Southampton. The Subject Centre is a publicly funded service, providing UK-wide support and services for higher education.

1.3 Model:

Open learning: providing independent language learning opportunities to non-traditional learners by giving them access to university language resource centres and support from language advisors.

1.4 National collaborators:

- University of Durham Language Centre: Mary Fender
- University of Greenwich Language Centre: Paula Romero López & Cecile Laval
- University of Hull Language Institute: Marina Mozzon-McPherson
- University of Manchester Language Centre: Sandra Truscott & Jocelyn Wyburd
- University of Portsmouth School of Languages and Area Studies: Miguel Arrebola & Jean-Bernard Adrey
- University of Southampton Centre for Language Study: Marta Crosby & Laura Diez Cobo
- University of Westminster Institution Wide Language Programme: Michelle Laufer & Anna Miell

1.5 Organisation and management:

The project director selected potential collaborators from institutions known to have experience in independent language learning. Initially 8 collaborators were selected and, together with the project's external advisor, were invited to attend a focus group meeting in London on 10th February 2003. Following this meeting, one collaborator was forced to withdraw due to lack of staff to implement the project, leaving 7 participating institutions.

At the focus group meeting, the project director presented the national collaborators with a general brief but they were free within this brief to devise an open access scheme most relevant to their strengths and local conditions. Following the focus group meeting, national collaborators were required to submit a letter of intention and individual work plans, on receipt of which project agreements were issued. The project secretary summarised the work plans and circulated the summary to all participants. The project director designed a learners' pack (attached), which was distributed to national collaborators to use or adapt as required. Participants then worked within their own institutions to develop and implement the open access model. Although support and guidance was available from the project management team, national collaborators mainly worked independently. We therefore decided to hold a telephone conference on 15th July which served the dual purpose of enabling participants to share ideas and experiences, and gave the project management team the opportunity to monitor progress. All national collaborators reported that the telephone conference was particularly useful.

At the end of the trial period, national collaborators were required to submit a 2000 to 3000-word evaluative report using a proforma devised by the project management team.

The remainder of this UK phase 1 report is a summary of the 7 national collaborator reports.

1.6 Learner profile:

A total of 122 learners were recruited for the project, with numbers in individual institutions ranging from 10 to 25. Just under 50% studied French and approximately 30% studied Spanish. Italian and German were the next most popular languages and the other languages studied were Greek, Portuguese, Danish, Nigerian, Chinese and English. (Nigerian, Chinese and English are not officially allowed under Lingua rules but for an open access scheme we had to give learners a choice of language.) Learners came from a broad age range: some learners at Durham were still at school (14-16 year olds) and most institutions recruited a number of mature and retired learners (one learner at Manchester being over 66 and Hull had learners over 70). A variety of walks of life were represented, e.g. professional people, administrative staff, manual workers, restaurant staff, housewives, pensioners, the unemployed and children.

The project was targeted at “non-traditional” language learners. The majority of learners recruited by the national collaborators were people outside the traditional student body who had little experience of formal language learning or who had been deterred by previous “bad” experiences. In the case of Westminster, participants were already competent language learners but, in the main, had not previously tried a non-traditional approach to learning languages. A number of the Westminster learners had reached “A” level standard or above (although not in the language they studied for this project). At Hull, learners covered the full range from beginners to advanced although most had learnt one or more languages in the past. Learners from other institutions were either beginners (although national collaborators reported several “false beginners”) or people who had studied languages at school with varying degrees of success, i.e. reaching GCSE/O level standard or gaining no qualifications. A few learners had language experience gained through living or holidaying abroad while others had attended evening classes.

Learners were asked to identify their needs and reasons for learning the target language at the start of the project and while the responses were diverse, they can be broken down into the following broad categories:

- To live abroad. A number of learners had bought or were considering buying property in the target language country. Portsmouth reported that some learners went beyond expressing a wish to merely function in target countries and mentioned integration into the target society as their ultimate objective.
- To develop “everyday” language to be able to communicate when on holiday
- Business language to enhance professional lives and job prospects
- To help children with homework
- To learn more about the culture of the target language country
- For pleasure and/or the challenge of learning a new language
- To improve grammar and vocabulary
- To develop listening/reading/speaking/writing skills
- To learn through online and audio-visual means rather than book-related study
- To find an effective way to maintain a language acquired in an adult education course.

2. Delivery / implementation

2.1 Methodology:

All national collaborators devised and implemented an independent learning programme supported by a language advisor, learner pack and access to resource centres. Durham added language “activating” sessions to this model, whereby learners were given the opportunity to practise in a group what they had learnt independently. The reasoning behind these sessions was that learners need face-to-face contact in order to validate learning and help with language retention. Hull implemented a similar idea by encouraging their learners to join a learning circle based on a common language, e.g. French circle, or interest, e.g. PGCE circle.

2.2 Aims and objectives:

- to implement and test a number of approaches to providing access to language resource centres for non-traditional learners
- to provide and support independent/autonomous language learning
- to monitor learner progress (choice of language, learning materials, learning strategies, etc)
- to collect feedback on how the experience has impacted on the learners' motivation, perception of progress, attitude to language learning, future ambitions, etc.

Individual institutions added their own aims to the broad aims defined by the project director, including:

- to develop and test independent learning packages
- to establish links with the local community
- to understand how best to reach non-traditional language learners and serve their needs
- to gauge demand for language learning in a non-conventional mode

2.3 Publicity and recruitment:

National collaborators employed a variety of methods of advertising the project in order to recruit learners: local press and radio, institutional web site, and publicity leaflets/posters placed in strategic locations or distributed to known contacts. Greenwich tried several approaches and found that while posters, leaflets and attempts to contact learners who had dropped out of evening classes were not very successful, there was an overwhelming response to an advertisement placed in the local paper (160 responses from which 100 actually applied for the programme). Durham also received an overwhelming response to an advertisement placed in the local press. Although this may not be the cheapest advertising option, it proved to be very effective in this trial.

2.4 Learning and support resources:

Learners were provided with a number of learning and support resources including:

- learner packs designed by the project director and adapted to fit local needs. Durham devised a textbook-based learner pack for the project while Greenwich offered their French learners a portfolio of evidence to complete.
- existing language learning resources available in university language resource centres, e.g. books, videos, audio cassettes and CD-ROMs, online materials
- language learning tips and resource lists produced by the participating institutions
- advice and support from one or more language advisors (see **2.7 learner support** below).

2.5 Venue:

Learners were encouraged to divide their time between studying in the self-access/language centre of the participating institutions and studying at home. However, where it was not permitted to remove materials from the self-access centres, some activities were restricted to the centres. This caused difficulties for learners whose free time did not coincide with the centres' opening hours.

2.6 Timetable:

The project brief suggested a test phase of three months between April and July 2003 but allowed for the test to be carried out over any three-month period between April and September 2003. In practice, most of the national collaborators carried out the activity during the summer vacation in order to avoid competing with full-time students for space in the Language Resource Centre, and also to allow more time to plan the activity. However, the summer vacation was far from ideal as many learners wanted to join the scheme in order to develop their language skills in preparation for going abroad during the summer, so the start date was too late for them. Also, many learners who took a two-week holiday during the summer found it difficult to return to the programme on their return in spite of its flexibility. Southampton commented that these two-week breaks had

a negative impact on progression and continuity, and severely affected attendance and retention rates. Further problems were caused by language centre staff taking annual leave in the summer and learners' lack of motivation to attend sessions due to the heat wave.

2.7 Learner support:

In addition to the resources mentioned in **2.4 learning and support resources** above, learners were supported by:

- Advisory sessions – all institutions offered an induction session, which was followed up by drop-in sessions or pre-arranged individual or group appointments. Some advisors offered language-specific advice while others offered generic language-learning advice. Durham also offered group “activating” sessions facilitated by the fact that all the Durham learners were studying French and using the same textbook-based learner pack.
- Some institutions offered individual email communication and guidance
- Extra support with IT skills where necessary.

2.8 Learner monitoring:

Learners were monitored via:

- Questionnaires/feedback forms from the learners' pack
- Observations and verbal feedback from advisory sessions
- Attendance records
- Telephone and/or email contact and in one case SMS text messaging
- Learning logs

Hull reported some “indirect resistance” when they tried to introduce formal methods of monitoring, with many learners considering the task of writing about their progress to be a time-consuming activity which distracted them from their language learning. Their learning advisors therefore adopted a more informal, discreet approach to monitoring, e.g. logging verbal comments.

3. Outcomes

3.1 Attendance rate:

As only three institutions have given a detailed breakdown of attendance rates, precise figures are not reported here although it has been possible to detect patterns of attendance. In general, the induction sessions were well attended with fewer people attending the follow-up advisory sessions, although a few individuals attended all or nearly all of the sessions on offer. Some learners made regular use of the open access centre but entirely autonomously without attending any follow-up advisory sessions. Others did not attend the follow-up sessions but studied at home. Besides the initial induction sessions, the main success story in terms of attendance rates was Durham's activating sessions which were regularly attended by between 8 and 17 of their 25 learners. Although it is not possible to draw firm conclusions from such a small sample, this finding supports Durham's supposition that learners need face-to-face interaction with other learners in order to progress.

3.2 Retention rate:

Retention rates varied greatly between institutions and were particularly high at Durham (80%) and Westminster (73%). Possible reasons for this success are the motivating language activating sessions in the case of Durham and the fact that Westminster's participants were already competent language learners. At the opposite end of the scale, the retention rates at Manchester and Southampton were closer to 30%, although these figures are based on people who attended the advisory sessions and do not include those who may have continued to study autonomously through other means. Durham reported that learners who had not attended advisory or activating sessions but who had used the materials had the perception that they had “dropped out” or “failed.” Overall, learners gave various reasons for not completing the project, of which lack of time and/or family/work commitments were the most common. Several learners dropped out because they recognised that this model of language learning was not suited to their needs and that they preferred a conventional class.

3.3 Products/materials developed for the project:

- Learner pack designed by project director and added to/adapted by participating institutions
- Durham – textbook based independent learning pack for French with suggested week-by-week progression
- Greenwich – student learning log

3.4 Dissemination:

The results of this pilot test will be disseminated to the project partners at their next transnational meeting in November and disseminated to the wider community via the final project handbook, the project website (<http://www.lang.soton.ac.uk/door/>) and at the next Association of University Language Centres (AULC) conference in January 2004, where national collaborators will be invited to present their findings.

4. Evaluation

4.1 Learner feedback:

Learners were asked to provide feedback under the following categories:

Language learning gains

Comments in this area were generally positive with most learners feeling they had gained most in terms of confidence. Some reported gaining an insight into a different mode of language learning, a greater understanding of available resources and an increased level of independence. Just a few mentioned gains in particular aspects of language, e.g. pronunciation.

Particularly enjoyed

Accessing a variety of university resources (particularly multi-media, interactive materials) and the support offered by the language advisor were the most popular aspects of the trial. Learners at Durham particularly enjoyed the group activating sessions, which they found motivating. One learner appreciated the lack of pressure and absence of deadlines while another learner felt they had achieved less because of these factors.

Progress

Many learners were mainly satisfied with their progress although some felt they could have done better. Learners' perceptions were that their progress was mainly in the areas of developing confidence and independent learning strategies rather than in the area of specific language content. Those who felt their progress had been limited mainly blamed themselves and cited lack of time as the main factor hindering progress.

Language difficulties

Understanding grammar was a common difficulty while learners who didn't have the benefit of the group activating sessions found pronunciation and speaking difficult without others to practise on.

Meeting targets

Opinions differed on whether targets had been met. Some felt they had completely met their targets and/or learnt to focus on realistic targets. Others felt they had partially met their targets, while those who felt they had not met their targets attributed this to lack of time, transport problems or illness.

Useful/interesting resources

Language advisors were often cited as being friendly, helpful and motivating. Of the non-human resources, multimedia, interactive materials were the most popular, e.g. CD-ROMs, TV, radio, Internet and audio cassettes.

Problems using resource centre

Learners at two institutions reported no problems at all. Elsewhere, problems were generally of a technical nature, e.g. computers crashing and lack of technical support

staff. A few learners reported problems in accessing the centre due to inconvenient opening hours. Another difficulty mentioned was that the range of materials and methods was overwhelming.

Support

The majority of learners who completed the programme found the support adequate or excellent. A few commented that they would have liked more contact time with the advisor and fellow students, and in one case learners reported that they would have preferred more explanation in the early stages as the induction session was too much to take in at once.

Would have liked to have done but were unable to

A recurring comment was that learners would have liked more contact with fellow students and/or native speakers. Several people would have liked a formal session on grammar at the beginning of the programme. Others commented that they wished they could have attended more sessions but were unable to do so because of transport problems or the incompatibility of the opening times with their availability, e.g. where evening opening was not available, learners reported that this would have been useful. Some learners reported that they would have liked to have been able to borrow materials from the open access centre to work from home. Indeed, one person complained that if the course was designed to be as flexible as possible, then why couldn't he use the materials at home?

The future

The majority of learners who completed the programme expressed an intention to continue with their language learning. Most of these people said they would either continue through conventional classes (daytime or evening) or through a combination of conventional classes and independent learning. Several intended to continue using the resources they had discovered during the project. When asked, learners stated that they would be prepared to pay a small, affordable fee should the opportunity to join a similar programme arise in future.

4.2 Tutor feedback:

Most tutor/advisor feedback reiterated the learner feedback, e.g. some advisors commented that the fact that learners require advice on particular aspects of grammar means that more attention should be paid to this area in future schemes and that a language-specific advisor is best placed to deal with such queries.

Southampton commented that experienced learners made more progress than new learners and that new learners seemed to find that time spent on learning strategies rather than on specific language learning was time wasted. However, these learners felt that the individual advisory sessions were not the appropriate forum to discuss time/motivation concerns and strategies.

Manchester reported that they had to re-evaluate some of the materials they recommended as they didn't suit all types of learner. This was a difficult task as there was limited appropriate material to meet some needs. Manchester also found that the older learners who were true beginners were quite slow and found things more difficult than they expected although one of them, who was a rather nervous newcomer, surprisingly took to CD-ROM with great enthusiasm.

Durham was interested to see how young learners would react to a different way of learning and reported that they found the experience more enjoyable than school and learned more in a shorter time (mainly through the activating sessions rather than through independent study).

Where tutors/advisors reported on their own experience of the project, they commented that providing language learning opportunities to non-traditional learners and motivating them was very rewarding and that learners were very grateful for this opportunity.

All national collaborators commented on the high degree of staff time required to successfully plan and implement a scheme such as this. More advisory time was needed than initially anticipated with Portsmouth commenting that advisors were “victims of their own success.”

4.3 Evaluation of model:

How far have we come towards meeting our aims and objectives?

- *to implement and test a number of approaches to providing access to language resource centres for non-traditional learners*
All UK collaborators approached the project slightly differently and successfully completed the test phase. Judging from the timesheets and individual reports submitted, it seems that the more time and effort individual institutions devoted to the project the better their results, e.g. the collaborator at Durham who had little experience in this area spent a lot of time devising the textbook-based learner pack, researched into the area of group activating sessions and decided to include them in the trial, and ended up with the highest retention rate of learners and some of the most positive learner feedback.
- *to provide and support independent/autonomous language learning*
This aim was achieved in all collaborating institutions through the advisory sessions and learner support materials, including the learner pack.
- *to monitor learner progress (choice of language, learning materials, learning strategies, etc)*
All UK collaborators have recorded the choice of language. There was a question on particularly useful materials on the feedback questionnaire and Durham based their course on a particular textbook, but other than that collaborators were not asked to report on choice of learning materials. There was a section on learning strategies in the learner pack but again collaborators were not asked to report on this. The nature of the trial and the limited timescale made it difficult to monitor and report on individual progress in the target language in a conventional way. Hence, assessment of progress is largely based on the learners’ own perception rather than formal assessment.
- *to collect feedback on how the experience has impacted on the learners’ motivation, perception of progress, attitude to language learning, future ambitions, etc.*
This aim has been successfully achieved largely via the feedback questionnaire in the learner pack (see **4.1 learner feedback** above).
- *to develop and test independent learning packages*
The learner pack designed by the project director has been successfully tested in a number of institutions. Durham have also designed their own learner pack and report that although they will probably add to it, they are satisfied that they have a template which they can develop for other levels and languages. They report that tests of the pack were promising but the fact that the scheme was small-scale and free makes it difficult to make predictions about validity.
- *to establish links with the local community*
Greenwich who stated this as one of their aims reported that the project has helped them position themselves in the community.
- *to understand how best to reach non-traditional language learners and serve their needs*
As the project was on a small-scale and we have tested a flexible model rather than a fixed one, we have not come up with a definitive answer. However, we can say there appears to be no single “best” way as all learners have individual preferences and needs and all providers have differing resources to offer. Following the trial, we are now in a position to recommend different open access scenarios for particular learner circumstances, e.g. if learners prefer a structured approach then Durham’s highly directed model with dedicated materials would be most suitable, while learners who prefer the opportunity to engage virtually with an advisor would find the email correspondence element of the Portsmouth French programme particularly suited to their needs.
- *to gauge demand for language learning in a non-conventional mode*

Again, this is difficult to gauge from such a small-scale project. However, Westminster who listed this as one of their aims reported that demand for this mode of language learning is high. As previously mentioned, Westminster's learners were already competent language learners. Durham and Greenwich had far more applicants than available places which shows that demand for language learning opportunities is fairly high. In general, UK collaborators have reported that the concept of the traditional class is still very strong, as evidenced by the fact that some learners dropped out when they found that this mode of learning didn't suit them, while only a few of those who completed the course said that they would continue to learn independently without the back-up of traditional classes.

What worked?

Advertisements placed in the local press seemed the most effective method of recruiting learners. University press offices are often able to help with this.

UK collaborators commented in particular on the success of the group activating sessions (Durham), the learning circles (Hull), the email feedback (French at Portsmouth) and the learner pack, in particular the learning log and needs analysis (Greenwich). The multimedia materials available in the resource centres were well liked by learners who found them motivating.

In terms of managing and organising the project, the initial focus group meeting was an invaluable forum for explaining what the project was about and to share and develop ideas. The telephone conference provided a good opportunity for everyone to update each other on progress and to feel part of a group effort.

What didn't work?

There was little common ground about what didn't work as invariably something that didn't work for one individual learner would work for someone else, e.g. the lack of pressure and deadlines made it difficult for some learners to motivate themselves whereas others found this inspiring.

Manchester reported that some of the recommended materials were not appropriate for their learners so had to be re-evaluated.

What changes would you make?

Several participating institutions indicated that they would like to take the trial forward in some way, e.g. developing more independent learner packs, and offering language centre membership and advisory support to the general public.

The main change suggested by the participating institutions was to bring forward the start date so that the bulk of the sessions fell before the summer vacation. In the project brief the suggested timescale was in fact April-July, but none of the institutions were able to complete the trial within those months. Manchester points out that to use this open access approach during the summer period requires more advanced planning and publicity.

Another change suggested by several institutions was to make the nature of the learning experience clearer as a number of people dropped out when they realised that formal classes were not on offer.

As managers of this project, we should have requested more detailed feedback and included more specific questions on the reporting template as it has been difficult in some cases to compare results where only general comments were solicited.

We are satisfied that asking collaborating institutions to devise and implement their own model within the general brief was the correct approach for this trial as we were working with people who already had experience in the area of independent learning. However, if we were to do a second trial, we would select one model (possibly Durham's as this

seemed the most effective) and would trial that one model in several institutions. In this way, we would hope to obtain more comparable and valid data.

4.4 Impact:

The open access trial has been successful in:

- Widening and increasing participation: there was broad range of occupations and ages amongst the learners, many of whom had little or no previous language learning experience.
- Increasing awareness: learner feedback indicates that many participants have developed an insight into a different mode of language learning, a wider range of independent learning materials, how to find relevant resources and make effective use of them, and how to self-evaluate. Of particular interest was an apologetic letter from a Manchester learner who had “dropped out” because he had come across a different course which “*I feel is more me*”. In the letter he went on to list the reasons behind his choice indicating that he had benefited from the programme in ways that he perhaps hadn’t realised, i.e. he had recognised his own learning style.

4.5 Working with national collaborators:

Our work with national collaborators was successful in that all 7 institutions planned and implemented an open access model relevant to their own situation and needs. We have obtained useful feedback from these tests, with all the national collaborators submitting their evaluative reports. In addition to the test results, we gained the following from working with national collaborators:

- Experience of working with people we had not worked with before
- New ideas
- Achieving the Subject Centre objectives of networking, collaborating and widening participation

4.6 Working with partners from other European countries:

In addition to the three points listed under **4.5 working with national collaborators** above, we have gained the following from working with partners from other European countries:

- Insight into how people approach language-learning provision which meant we all had different starting points and tailored the project to fit our individual circumstances.
- The knowledge that things we take for granted as being easy to achieve are not easy in countries less open to the idea of public access to learning institutions and with different demographic circumstances.
- The notion of a “beginner” in multilingual countries such as Belgium appears to be different (i.e. more advanced) than our notion of a beginner.
- The reassurance that the “English handicap” is not unique in Anglophone countries: several partners report that take-up for other major EU languages is poor.
- The realisation that participating in this project is making a real difference to partners’ abilities to develop new approaches to language learning and resources. This will be reflected in partners’ own national reports.
- Benefiting/learning from partners’ experiences and sharing ideas during this phase – lessons we can apply in the next phase.
- Meeting some great people.