English by phone

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Pedagogical context

ICT was used in a language course that combined teacher-taught intensive courses, self-access and phone sessions
The target groups were personnel (scientific, technical and administrative staff) of several scientific research centres in France
The aim of the course The aim of the course was to provide learners with effective ways of maintaining and improving their English within a structured framework that nevertheless allowed them the freedom to choose when and where they wanted to practice.
The **target language** was: English **What was the purpose of each language?** English is the main language for scientific communication (publications, congresses, etc.). In addition to scientific English, learners also need social English to communicate.
Further remarks There are two schools of thought concerning the learning of 'professional' (in this case scientific) English among our learners. Some feel if they can understand, speak, read and write everyday English, they will be comfortable with 'scientific' English. Others feel they need special courses for scientific communication. Most research centres provide both types of training courses. The main problem for these professionals is their limited availability; a large number of people are unable to follow regular courses. Telephone sessions not only provide an opportunity to practice speaking regularly, but also play a very important role in keeping up motivation, as the trainer regularly checks what they are doing (TV, films, Internet, books, radio, etc).

Organisational context

Size of a typical target group: 15		
Apart from the target group - were **other people** involved? If yes, who?	How many?	To what purpose?
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Teaching period		

Fifteen 30-minute phone sessions were financed over a 9-month period.
Was distance learning combined with face-to-face instruction? How many hours were dedicated to each?
DL: 7 1/2 hours   Face to face: 3 x 3 days = 63 hours
Comments: -

Motivation for the use of ICT

The phone is the easiest IC tool to use, at the same time it is one of the most efficient in that the learner has more focussed speaking time than in a conversation group and in the caste of many other IC tools, the learner has no opportunity to speak.

Because the phone is easy to use, this doesn't mean the sessions themselves are easy. Communication is made more difficult by the fact the listener can't see the speaker's face, as well as by background noise on the phone line and the likelihood of interruptions if the learner is calling from his/her work station. But that's life, and once the learners feel comfortable talking to the trainer on the phone, most of the stress of speaking in English on the phone to anyone else will also vanish.

The phone could advantageously be replaced by a web-cam once this technology allows continuous picture transmission.

Description of the course

The **aims** were to:

give learners regular conversation practice

correct mistakes by sending a list of main errors by e-mail after the phone session

keep up learner motivation for self access during the periods between the three 3-day intensive courses

check the self-access activities chosen by the learners during the intensive courses were appropriate for the desired learning objective, not too easy, not too difficult, and enjoyable, and, where necessary, provide alternative solutions.

Teaching methodology used:

A mixture of careful listening, stimulation, advice on learning materials and learning methodology and written correction.

Teaching materials used:

Learners who could already speak reasonably fluent English rarely needed any written support. They liked to talk about topical events, their hobbies, etc. Sometimes they told the trainer what they would like to talk about net time, and sometimes the trainer suggested a subject to enable practice with problematic structures or difficult tenses, etc.

Learners who didn't feel comfortable 'chatting' had a choice of written texts that had been distributed during the intensive courses that they could talk about on the phone.

These texts might be a series of chapters in a suspense story, or a text they had read on the Internet, or a newspaper article. Many learners who enjoy reading talked about the book they were currently reading (novels, structured readers, etc.)

A few learners enjoyed having grammar exercises they had done explained and corrected by the trainer (units from 'English Grammar in Use' for example).

Some scientists wanted to practice presentations by phone. They would send their PowerPoint presentation to the trainer by e-mail, the trainer would display each screen in turn and the learner would then comment it in the same way they would when giving a paper at a congress.

The **technologies** used:

Hardware: phone / computer for practising presentations

Software: PowerPoint for presentations

e-mail to send corrections

What was successful

After this type of module had been organised with three different groups over the period of a year, a detailed questionnaire was distributed to see if the learners felt the sessions were effective and if not, how they could be improved.

One question asked was "Before your first phone session, how did you think the phone sessions would help you?" The learners said they needed be **forced** to speak, to **practice speaking**, that they expected to feel **more confident** afterwards, to be able to **speak more fluently**, to speak **more spontaneously**, to have the opportunity to talk to a **native English speaker**; that they **didn't want to lose the benefit** of the teacher-taught classes, they wanted to **practice newly-learned vocabulary**, to **understand** more easily, to stay motivated. **All these objectives were achieved**.

Some learners said they were happy because they could choose what they wanted to do.

The majority were very pleased and had no suggestions to make when asked how they would like to improve the sessions in future.

What was less successful

A couple of learners said they needed to think more about what they were going to day before the session.

A couple of learners said they had the impression the trainer didn't correct all their mistakes (this is a common criticism of English language trainers in France; at school a lot of time was spent pointing out learners' errors, consequently many learners feel they're not progressing unless the trainer picks up on every mistake.)

Some said the gap between sessions was too long (this is something the trainer cannot control, as it depends on the education budget).

A few wondered if they were progressing.

A few wanted more 'exercises'.

Feedback

90% positive feedback on the phone session evaluation sheets.

All the learners underlined how important it was to have the trainer monitor what they're doing to integrate English into their everyday lives (one of the main objectives of the phone sessions); knowing they would have to justify what they had been doing forced them to do some English between phone sessions (a big problem for busy professionals).

What I would change next time

Several problems arise in connection with phone lessons, some of which can be solved, others not:

Getting learners to remember they have a phone appointment (if fact this is hopeless, like some people are ALWAYS late, some people never remember to phone. This leads to the trainer sitting around wasting time – very frustrating when it happens several times in a row).

Exhaustion: 6 hours of phone sessions (12 learners) is too much. It's important to schedule breaks and leave a little time between sessions to update individual files and e-mail mistakes and comments.

Confusion: every learner has a personal relationship with the trainer and expects him/her to remember all the details about their professional and personal life, likes and dislikes, hobbies, tastes etc. This isn't always easy when you only use first names and 4 of your learners have the same first name!

Running dry: it's important to get the learner to speak (that's the main aim of the session), but in addition it's hard to find things to say after a few hours of conversation. Preparation is the solution to this problem, either getting the learner to prepare the session or you providing material to work on, asking them to identify / send you a copy of a text on the Internet to discuss (for example) but you have to allow yourself the time to read it in that case.

Keeping track of mistakes: some learners can tolerate the sound of the trainer taking notes on the computer while they speak, others can't, but otherwise there is not enough time to write up the mistakes between sessions (at least not for free-lancers!).

Making sure the learners are progressing: not easy when you have about 50 different people calling at irregular intervals.

What would you recommend to other professionals in the field

Make sure you know what you want to achieve. Make sure you know what each learner wants to achieve, because it's not always the same objective as yours (even more important if you're dealing with professionals).

Make sure you know what kind of feedback you're going to give and allow yourself the time you need to produce it. Otherwise you won't remember the details after you've spoken to a number of different people, and if the learner doesn't get the feedback immediately, it's less effective.

The best solution would be to allow 10 minutes between sessions to up-date each learner's personal file and to write the e-mail.

Personal data concerning the author

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Professional background

Profession:
Language teacher, communications trainer, consultant (audits, expertise, teacher training)
My current occupation is teaching graduate students and members of the scientific re-search community scientific and technical English and communication techniques.
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