

INTERNATIONAL ELECTRONIC LINK-UP TO PROMOTE INTERACTION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

For two academic years, students of French at UCLan and students of English at the IUT (University Institute of Technology) in Lannion have taken part in an electronic exchange programme designed to promote and extend the practice of their linguistic skills. In the year under review here, students interacted with each other on a one-to-one basis, using any form of electronic communication available to them. There were also several group sessions set up via Skype or video-conferencing. The current paper seeks to explore the implementation of such an electronic exchange from the English students' perspective, its role in encouraging interaction and its advantages and disadvantages from the students' and the lecturers' point of view. Findings will serve to further develop and enhance the project in future years and provide guidance for other practitioners.

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that current students in higher education make extensive use of electronic media in their everyday lives and therefore it would appear pertinent to explore the use of digital communication tools in the context of foreign language courses, as a means of encouraging interaction and thus developing linguistic skills. This article forms a follow-up analysis of an electronic exchange project which commenced in the academic year 2011/12 about which an initial paper was published, from a French perspective, by the current author and Véronique Charriau in *Cahiers d'ApliuT*, Vol. XXXII No1/2013 under the title *Langue de spécialité et TICE au cœur d'un projet pédagogique international: Using ICT and ESP in an international pedagogical project*. The purpose of the present discussion is to consider findings incorporating a further year of the project and to examine results this time from the English students' point of view and on the basis of more extended

data, providing an overview of the implementation of the electronic exchange and an evaluation of it from both the students' and lecturers' standpoint. An opening section offers an overview of the current student context.

1.1. Context

The students in our classes today aged around 20, form part of what has been come to be labelled generation Y, a term first used in the American magazine *Advertising Age* in 1993. According to Olivier Rollet (2012, 1) the expression relates specifically to young people born between 1981 and 1999. For this same age group Mark Prensky notes the terms N-gen and D-gen but favours 'digital natives' (2001, 1). It is also sometimes referred to as the Echo Boom Generation, or the Millennials (Gardner and Eng 2005). Julien Pouget (2010a, 21) affirms that the most significant element linking the members of this generation, whatever its designation, is their close relationship with information and communication technologies and the omnipresence of internet in all aspects of their daily life, whether personal or professional. Moreover, generation Y is the first to test what Rollet (2012, 6) entitles the 'internet civilisation' which he defines as a virtual and global civilisation in which borders and knowledge find new dimensions.

In an article in the weekly news magazine *Le Point*, (Dorian 2011), the director of the *Ecole Supérieure de Commerce* in Grenoble, Jean-François Fiorina, is reported as noting a radical change in student behaviour. The case of Grégoire is cited. He organises a screen-based meeting with three friends all in different countries in different time zones. Via what he terms an instant response mechanism, Julien Pouget (2010b) collected the viewpoints of French teachers in relation to such practice. He remarks that pupils are much more connected and capable of using a large number of tools with ease; the format of lessons is evolving as a consequence. Gardner and Eng, on the basis of their research, underline the notion that generation Y believes in the necessity of 'integration of technology into learning' (2005, 416). To sum up:

In higher education as with life more generally, it's practically impossible to get by without technology in the 21st century (Porter 2012, 2)

2. The Project

We too wanted to join the ranks of those university educators making increased use of digital technology and extending learning outside the confines of the classroom. Given that modern students increasingly (if not always) have access to laptops

and/or mobile phones and not only desktop computers, the project could be regarded as straddling the notions of both e-learning and m-learning, where m-learning focuses on learning via portable electronic means and e-learning is reliant on fixed electronic tools. In addition, the project also draws upon the phenomenon of Mobile Assisted Language Use, where this is designated by Achilleos and Jarvis as

non-native speakers using a variety of mobile devices in order to access and/or communicate information on an anywhere/anytime basis and for a range of social and/or academic purposes in an L2 (2013)

The notion of 'language use' in Achilleos and Jarvis's definition, does not preclude employing electronic tools for study purposes but equally is not limited to this activity and further takes into account social interaction in the L2 in both formal and less formal learning. Pasfield-Neofitou notes the claim that computer mediated communication offers

unique opportunities for language learners. These opportunities include the ability to communicate relatively cost-effectively with native speakers, despite geographic separation, both from inside the classroom and from home (nd, 43)

She highlights the advantage of this for Japanese as a Foreign Language students, but it is also a plus for English learners of French and French learners of English. Whilst French mother-tongue speakers may be theoretically relatively accessible to students at UCLan (there are, for example, numerous French exchange students on campus in Preston) it is not necessarily easy to forge links. For the students at the IUT in Lannion, geographic isolation is certainly an issue, as the institution is located in a far western corner of Brittany.

2.1 Students Involved in the Project

This project developed out of a desire for collaborative working between the University of Central Lancashire and the university technical institution, IUT-Lannion in Brittany, a part of the University of Rennes. In both 2011/12 and 2012/13 it involved 10 students of French at UCLan and 10 students of telecommunications at

the IUT-Lannion. On entry at UCLan the level of expertise in French is expected to be at B1 or 'independent user: threshold' able to operate in straightforward situations according to the Common European Framework for languages, rising to C1/C2 level at the end of the final year of the degree programme, after three or four years of study. C1 and C2 equate to 'proficient user' with 'mastery' at the top level (CEFR nd, 23). French cannot be taken as a single honours subject, thus is always studied in conjunction with another discipline and, for some students on the project, was a free choice option. For the students following the two-year telecommunications course in Lannion, it is compulsory to take English, considered to be indispensable to their professional practice (Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche 2013, 9), and to have achieved B2/C1 at the end of their programme of study. B2 is described as 'independent learners: vantage' (CEFR nd, 23). Most of the students involved in the project at UCLan were at a similar level as their IUT peers as they were in the second year of mainstream language study or in an equivalent class of optional language study. However, some were in their final year and therefore had higher linguistic competency.

2.2 'Commonality', 'Situatdness', 'Interdependency' and 'Infrastructure'

In initially setting up our project we adhered to the principles proposed by Hung and Chen summarised in their table (2001, 8) namely 'commonality', 'situatdness', 'interdependency' and 'infrastructure'. 'Commonality' was achieved in that the students had a share desire to improve on their linguistic skills. Clearly this increase in capacity was dependent on learning through social interaction and collaboration. We responded to the needs of 'situatdness' by creating tasks which involved reflection on authentic practical tasks such as creating texts of introduction and developing web pages. All work could be carried out anywhere but students also had access to fixed computers on campus. The condition of 'interdependency' was met by the fact that the students of a foreign language were being paired with mother-tongue speakers of that language and thus could benefit from their partner's advanced linguistic knowledge. Finally, the 'infrastructure' was put in place in advance and communicated to the students, with clear goals set and dates for more formal interactive sessions.

2.3 Organisation of the Project

The main objective of the project was to encourage oral and written interaction in the relevant foreign language (French or English). To this end, a 'rule' was that the students of French would make use only of French whilst the students of English, English. They could communicate on a one-to-one basis by whatever electronic means available to them, whether this be blog, e-mail, Facebook, texting, Twitter or other. In addition several group sessions were organised via Skype or video conferencing. Whilst students themselves were encouraged to correct each other, lecturers did not play a part in this (not least since most of the interaction took place without their involvement). Clearly formal pieces of work arising out of the project were marked and errors highlighted.

The project started with the preparation of bilingual texts of introduction on the basis of which, in some instances (depending on timings) students chose their partners. In the first semester discussions were expected to result in the gathering on information on a day in the life of a student in Lannion (for students of French) or Preston (for the students of English). This formed the basis of a compulsory report written in English for the IUT-Lannion students whilst UCLan students could, if they wished, include a similar report in French as a task in their language portfolios. In the second semester the pairs of students worked collaboratively on the creation of web pages. When the project ran in 2011/12, the choice of topic was left open whilst in 2012/13 the web pages were intended to reflect areas of relevance to student life in France. Again, this was an integral part of assessment for the Lannion students, whilst a commentary on the exercise in French could form a language portfolio task for the UCLan students.

3. Results

3.1. Means and Frequency of Communication

Given that the officially organised sessions were predominantly reliant on Skype and that students were encouraged make use of the means of communication as it allows for spoken interaction, it is possibly to be expected that Skype proved popular across the two academic years, as indicated in Table 1 overleaf. However, email was employed the most overall over the two periods under review. This is somewhat more surprising as, for Kredens (cited in Cousin, 2010), digital natives consider email

to be verging on the out-dated and a communication method best suited to writing to their grandmothers. It is to be supposed that it was the asynchronic nature of emails which proved attractive, as a message could be sent and picked up at a later time. The university- and study-related nature of the interaction could also be a factor. Facebook was also indicated as a regular means of communication. Its position 'at the center [sic] of the social media ecosystem' (Cavazza, 2013) is thus reflected here too.

Table 1 Means of communication used by students (More than one means could be chosen)		
	2011/12 (8 x 2 pairings)	2012/13 (7 x 2 pairings)
Blog	4	0
Email	7	5
Facebook	6	4
Skype	7	4
SMS	1	0

According to Table 2 below, students mostly contacted each other once a week in 2011/12, whilst in the academic year 2012/13 three students interacted on a more regular basis. However, in 2012/13 there were also three students who were in touch only infrequently (less than once a month).

Table 2 Frequency of communication		
	2011/12 (8 x 2 pairings)	2012/13 (7 x 2 pairings)
More than once a week	1	3
Once a week	4	1
Once every two weeks	1	0
Once a month	2	0
Less than once a month	0	3

3.2. Examples of Interactions

Below is an example of part of an initial introduction (in English and French) provided by a UCLan student. Interesting here is that fact that the student has matched the information provided to her (perceived) expertise in French rather than attempting a translation of what she might have said in English. This is a good strategy for avoiding error (although some have crept in) and could relate to an awareness that the tutor would see this before it was sent off (even if she was not going to comment on it).

Salut! Je m'appelle [English student], tu peux m'appeler [x] si tu veux. J'ai dix-neuf ans et j'habite en [town] dans le nord-ouest de l'Angleterre près de [town] et [town]. Cependant, en ce moment j'habite en Preston pour mes etudes. J'etude français et [subject] à l'université de central Lancashire (UCLan).

Hi! My name is [English student], you can call me [x] if you want. I'm 19 years old, and I live in [town] in north west England near to [town] and [town]. However, at the moment I live in Preston for my studies. I study French and [subject] at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan).

The following is an extract from a typed Skype interaction showing adherence to the notion of the English student interacting in French and the French student in English (translation into English in square brackets).

French student	hey
English student	<i>salut :)</i> [hi]
French student	you finish late!
English student	<i>C'est tot!</i> [It's early]

French student	I say that because I finished at 12h
English student	<i>En lundi j'ai une lecon jusqu'a 18h</i> [On Mondays I have class until 6pm]
French student	I understand it's the same case for me
[...]	
English student	<i>Je bois un the en ce moment. Comme une anglaise typique.</i> [I'm drinking tea at the moment. Like a typical English girl]
French student	I hope it's a good tea
English student	<i>Tres bien merci, un vrai the anglais</i> [Very good, thank you, a real English tea]

There is a series of errors apparent in both languages, which neither student corrected, such as spelling (including missing accents, capitalisation), incorrect use of preposition, confusion of adverb and adjective. However, later on in the exchange, the students agree to correct each other and proceed to do so:

French student	about my English language, don't hesitate to correct me ☺
English student	<i>pas probleme, et tu peux faire le meme pour mon francais ?</i> [No problem, and you can do the same for my French ?]
French student	yes! No problem ☺ I begin?
English student	<i>Oui</i> [Yes]
French student	just between the word ' <i>pas</i> ' and ' <i>probleme</i> ' you forget the word ' <i>de</i> ' but it's nothing

In the next conversation, students are clearly correcting each other on an ongoing basis. Note how, in this case, corrections are made in the students' main language.

English student	<p><i>Salut [name], c'est [name]</i></p> <p><i>Ca va?</i></p> <p>[Hi [name], it's [name]</p> <p>How's it going?]</p>
French student	<p><i>Je vais très bien merci et toi?</i></p> <p>[I'm fine, and you?]</p>
English student	<p><i>Ca va... je dois apprendre beaucoup de francais et [subject] et ca me rend fou parce que c'est trop deroutant.</i></p> <p><i>Est-ce que tu as des freres et soeurs?</i></p> <p>[OK ... I have to learn a lot of French and [subject] and it's driving me crazy coz it's too confusing</p> <p>Do you have any brothers and sisters?]</p>
French student	<p><i>(Fou c'est masculin c'est plutôt " Folle ")</i></p> <p>['Fou' is masculine. It's more 'Folle']</p> <p>Ah okay you aim to learn two [subjects] in one year ?? That must be hard !!</p> <p>Yeah i have three siblings two sisters and one brother How about you ?? And tell me about your hobbies</p>
English student	<p><i>Oh, merci</i></p> <p>[Oh, thanks]</p> <p>(I is always a capital letter)</p>

Finally, in this last extract, confusion regarding English customs is ironed out:

French student	<p>In a group of friends if it's the first time you meet a person you say hello with a kiss, but it's not with friends or family you hug his hand but I think it's similarly in England no?</p>
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English student	hug his hand? erm I think with family in some cases it's a hug and a kiss sometimes but mainly hugs, anyone other than family or partners we don't tend to greet with a kiss
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3.3 Student Evaluation

Students were asked to feedback informally during the project and a questionnaire was distributed at the end of each academic year.

Students felt that their linguistic competence had increased as a result of participating in the project: 'I improved both my oral and writing skills.' In addition, they affirmed that they had benefitted greatly from the chance to be corrected by their peers and to highlight their partner's errors. Although they did work together on study-related activities, students were also able to interact on a wide variety of less formal topics, an opportunity which they welcomed. This gave them access to 'more familiar language which is used on an everyday basis'. Not only did students involved in the project learn new items of vocabulary, they also developed their pronunciation skills. Interaction with mother-tongue speakers of their own age was an important factor, with reference being made to the fact that they were in contact with 'actual French students' or had the chance to 'communicate with foreign students', gaining knowledge 'from the viewpoint of someone [their] age'

Students not only gained on a linguistic level but also acquired knowledge of the others' country. For students who had never had the chance to travel to England/France (as relevant) this was a definite plus: 'I thought it would be good way to [...] to learn more about French culture, as I have not been to France and therefore do not know as much'. However, even those that had previously travelled abroad welcomed the chance to gain wider cultural knowledge. Students were able to help not only in relation to language but also 'in other modules'.

On a more general level, students noted that this project gave them the chance to 'gain a friend'.

Negative comments related particularly to those pairings where students had not developed a rapport and thus had not communicated on a regular basis. Lack of

interaction was attributed by several to gender: 'Slightly more difficult with a boy. Can't talk about the same things as you can with a girl.' For one student: 'the fact that [they] did not know each other' was a factor, 'topics to talk about had to be found which was sometimes difficult'. Lack of commitment on the part of some participants in the project was noted: 'Some of the English students may have lacked involvement which was depressing for some of my mates'.

One student was impatient to get to know their partner better: 'The only negative aspect is the fact that by getting to know people abroad, you are itching to go and meet them but time goes by too slow'.

3.4 Lecturer Evaluation

In terms of the organisation of the project, the introductory texts provided a sound basis on which the students could build their relationship with their partners. Furthermore, the mix of group sessions organised by the lecturers and informal link-ups set up by the students proved successful. At the start of the year the group sessions gave the students the chance to 'meet' their partners before embarking on one-to-one interaction. In the latter stages of the year, the group sessions offered those whose partners were proving unwilling to participate, the opportunity to engage in additional discussion.

In relation to language skills, students had the opportunity to acquire more informal expressions and structures via the one-to-one interactions as well as developing formal linguistic capabilities through working on set tasks. Although the importance of the quality of interaction cannot be denied, it is also relevant to evaluate the quantity, which for some students was (reportedly) considerable. It is only through producing language that students can lose their fear of making mistakes. This risk taking is a valuable skill in relation to learning a language. On a more general level, the ability to make themselves understood in written and spoken interactions has been highlighted.

On a cultural level, participation in the project brought students into contact with (an)other culture(s). The nature of the content of reports and websites has been of direct relevance to UCLan students who are required to spend time in a French-speaking country. In addition to giving students access to information, the project has also offered them the experience of intercultural collaboration.

More general employability skills were brought to the fore such as working in pairs, developing a mutually beneficial working relationship, organisation, time management.

Although a few of the partnerships were highly successful others were less so, with some students demonstrating little commitment to the project. Clearly, personality has a part to play in this and it would not be possible to guarantee a continued desire to interact, despite the fact tasks for each semester were explicitly outlined and designed to be of practical use to the students. To mitigate this it was felt that, in the future, interventions should be more closely defined for both the French and English students. In relation to their first on-line session, for example, it could prove beneficial to suggest to students a series of questions they could employ or work with them (potentially as part of class sessions) in developing suitable questions.

As far as more formal outputs were concerned, no UCLan students handed in any work relating to the project, although they collaborated on the obligatory tasks required from the Lannion students. It was therefore decided that the following year, outputs would be required homework pieces for the UCLan students as well as being recommended portfolio pieces for their core language work.

Involvement of UCLan students at any level from B1 or above, and therefore attending any one of several classes, precluded focussing on project-based tasks in class time. Thus, in order to better integrate the electronic exchange into the teaching programme, it was concluded the project should form an integral part of work on the year 2 French degree, rather than being offered to any student of French across the university.

4. Conclusion

Although our experience relates to a relatively small number of students we have been able to see that, thanks to the project, students have had the opportunity to develop their linguistic expertise through less formal means. Whilst some of the outputs have been more formal/academic in nature the very fact of being able to collaborate with a mother-tongue speaker has contributed to reducing artificiality. This has also allowed them to discover or rediscover the pleasure of communicating in a foreign language. For us, the satisfaction expressed by the students is an initial measure of the success of the project.

An element which has contributed to the positive outcome of this initiative has been the fact that students have been given a good reason to want to communicate in terms of defined outputs. In addition to providing a partnership for informal, authentic interaction the students have been asked to complete specific tasks. As indicated, in future years it is hoped that these tasks can be integrated more fully into the UCLan language assessment diet in the same way it has in at the IUT-Lannion.

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