

# **“Comme tu l’as dit” : how an online Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA) conferencing forum can challenge and transform the second language learning experience**

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## **Abstract**

*The potential afforded by Web 2.0 technologies has opened the teaching and learning environments to new digital spaces. Blogs, discussion fora, Wikis etc. allow learners to engage in the learning process while increasing the human and communicative aspect of their learning [1]. This in turn motivates students to negotiate meaning in the target language. Such levels of interaction demonstrate that online communities of learning carry a vital role in SLA [2].*

*Our paper will first briefly present a teaching and learning project (e.g. learners' profile, task objectives) that is integrated into a French language course for Fourth Year Irish undergraduates [studying Business and French] and which combines research on the Internet with access to the conferencing feature of an Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA)*

*It will discuss some of the practical issues involved in the implementation and running of the project in order to assist language teachers who may be considering the introduction of computer mediated communication (CMC) into their pedagogical approach.*

*Then, on the strength of students' postings, collected from a cohort of approximately 20 learners, this qualitative study will examine how this academic space fosters creative thinking and writing. It will also look at how it challenges student identity and cultural awareness. In the final conclusion, it will be highlighted that the success of the project relies on authentic language production in the CMC space.*

## **1. Introduction**

Over the past two decades, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has gradually found its way in the language classroom. Following the advancement of this technology and the emergence of the World Wide Web (WWW) and more recently of web 2.0 technology, language teachers are presented with an increased number of opportunities enhance their students' language learning process.

The advent of computer mediated communication (CMC) has provided language teachers with new options for collaboration and interaction inside and outside the language classroom [3],[4]. This paper presents and discusses some of the learning outcomes of CMC for language teaching and learning in a project which combines two tasks: data retrieval and analysis via the Internet and exchanges of opinions via the conferencing feature of an Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA). After dealing with the practical issues involved in the implementation and running of the project, this qualitative study will concentrate on how the ICA Nicenet promotes interactions with native speakers and, in doing so, fosters creative thinking and writing. It will also look at how this academic space challenges student identity and further their cultural awareness through the integration of the native speakers' point of view. Finally, it will be highlighted that the success of the project relies on authentic language production in the CMC space.

## **2. Background to key concepts**

### **2.1 Computer mediated communication**

Davies and Riley [5] define CMC as “the use of the Internet as a means of fostering teaching and learning, especially the use of Email, Conferencing and Social Networking”. In providing opportunities for interaction in a foreign language environment, CMC promotes SLA. It also “facilitates collaborative and comprehensible interaction” [6] (p.163) and allows for varied types of communication.

Various modes of CMC can also be defined [3]. Synchronous CMC refers to real-time communication (the type which occurs in chats) and implies that actors in the communication are present online at the same time, whereas asynchronous CMC is subject to a time delay and does not necessitate the presence of the participants at the time (as it is the case on discussion fora or, for the purpose of this study, on the conferencing feature of an ICA.). Many researchers have noted the advantage of asynchronous CMC, such as email and discussion lists, because learners can interact in their own time and place and also because learners can write messages reflectively [4].

## **2.2 New technologies and intercultural learning**

As previously mentioned, CMC provides language learners with rich context for interaction with native speakers at a distance and access to native culture. Many CMC projects aim to promote the culture learning experience (see [7] for a review). For example, in the O'Dowd's study [8], students in their email exchanges with their partners were challenged to explain the significance of practices in both the home and target cultures (C1 and C2). In addition, a number of studies reporting on E-mail based exchanges and projects between groups of language learners ([9], [10]) point to the potential benefits of network-based interactions for developing intercultural competence and emphasize the value of dialogue with others for bringing about a change in students' perspectives. For Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen [11] dialogue is an "interaction between self and other and the incorporation of the latter's conceptual horizon to one's own perspective" (p. 13).

## **3. The study**

### **3.1 Project outline**

The overall project, in which the CMC task was integrated, was centred on task-based [12] and blended learning [13] theories. Language learners had to retrieve data from the Internet and to analyse this information with the view to produce a well-argued document. The aim of this individual project was for students to deepen their knowledge of a town in a French-speaking country (learners typically chose a town they have spent time in, either during a study-abroad period or during work experience) and to reflect on the target culture. (see Appendix 1: project outline)

The CMC task was introduced at the end of this project (week 9 of a 12-week course). It required learners to submit their analysis to native speakers familiar with the town the students had selected.

This project adhered to a recent trend in CALL and ICT in SLA research which advocates the need to fully integrate new technologies to the language teaching pedagogical approach [14].

### **3.2 Participants**

A total of 18 Irish students and 14 native speakers of French participated in the project. The Irish participants were all Fourth Year undergraduates studying Business and French at the University of Limerick, Ireland and had all been involved in a collaborative Blog the previous year. In their feedback questionnaires, they had expressed the wish to renew the experience of using new technologies in their French course. Out of the group of 18, 4 learners did not get NS partners and 4 did not respond to their NS messages.

The native speakers were from varied backgrounds (students or professionals) and were based either in Ireland or in their country of origin (France and Luxembourg). They were unknown to the learners and had no specific interest in language learning. Their participation in the project was voluntary, so their contributions had to be kept minimal. In general, they interacted with the learners only on one or two occasions.

At the start of the study, it was very hard to predict how well the exchanges would work because of variation in goals and motivations from individual to individual.

### **3.3 Setting-up of L2 exchanges**

The medium selected for the exchanges was the conferencing feature (discussion forum) of an Internet Classroom Assistant. It allowed for asynchronous communication, which, beside its value for reflective work, was also favoured for practical reasons. Due to the varied profiles of our native speakers, we needed a tool which was easy to access and easy to use. After setting-up a class on Nicenet (group-space which is password protected), we trained our students on using this space. The training was organised at the start of a class for a period of

30 minutes: learners were shown how to join the class and generate postings, and asked to create a discussion thread specific to the town they had chosen to investigate.

A group of 22 native speakers of French, considered appropriate on the strength of their links to a town selected by the Irish students, were invited by email to join the project (see Appendix 2). 14 of them responded favourably and were subsequently sent a second email with explanations on the use of Nicenet (log-on and posting creation). Some NS partners received a gentle reminder to encourage them to react to Irish students' project work.

### 3.4 Task

The computer-mediated task involved one-to-one interactions between L2 learners and native speakers on the discussion forum of an ICA so as to accommodate individual learners' topics and not to burden other participants with irrelevant information. It was intended to support the language learners, in the sense that they were somewhat protected in an environment that was designed to be sympathetic to them (members of a virtual "class" with their own discussion thread to produce a "bubble" effect). Besides, the task was designed not to be too demanding and time consuming for the native speakers. It is important to note at this point that learners' target language (French) was used at all times in the exchanges.

The task itself was open and non-focused. As previously stated Irish students were asked to post their project work to an assigned NS partner. It was hoped that this would serve as a springboard for discussion. Language students were expected to respond at least once to their NS partner. It was understood that in their pair group, both partners would be relatively free to express their views and opinions as they wish and that the dialogue could lead to deeper reflection on culture. Once students were paired off, there was no more teacher support or intervention thus learners took responsibility for the exchange. This in turn explained the fact that 4 Irish students did not complete the CMC task (i.e. they did not reply to their NS partner's posting).

Due to the exploratory nature of the project, it was not deemed appropriate to set more prescriptive tasks. It was also hoped that this CMC experience would generate ideas for suitable tasks to be carried out in the future.

## 4. Data analysis and discussion of findings

The data -the electronic transcripts that students and partners created during their interactions- were retrieved from the discussion forum at the end of the project.

A total of 6 000 words were analysed with the aim to find some salient patterns.

For the purpose of this paper, it was decided to concentrate mainly on the data produced by Irish students which consisted of NNS responses to NS reactions.

The posting below serves to illustrate the various features of Irish students' creative writing:

**Irish student M** (05/04/07) 7:59 AM

*Bonjour Lorène et merci pour votre remarque!*

*Je suis ravi que vous partagiez mes propos sur Luxembourg. J'ai considérée Luxembourg dans un premier temps a travers un œil touristique mais comme toi, au fur et a mesure que je m'intégrais dans la vie quotidienne et que je m'éloignais de la perspective purement touristique, les réalités Luxembourgeoises se distinguait.*

*C'est vrai que il y a un grand manque des jeunes natifs mais la municipalité ne semble pas s'investir totalement pour juguler ces problèmes. Je propose que pour trouver les fonds pour améliorer le système éducatif supérieur dans le pays, ils augmentent le taux pour les impôts sur les sociétés. Pendant les années ils ont fleuri en Luxembourg et ont gagné beaucoup d'argent mais le taux reste en bas á 23% ! J'ai l'impression aussi que les mentalités sont difficile a changer mais peut être cet afflux des immigres peuvent transformer les conditions bientôt.*

*Qu'est ce que vous pensez ?*

Amitiés, M

#### 4.1 L2 students' development of communication strategies

A strictly linear analysis of the data revealed that Irish students tended to use the same interactive strategies to compose their posting(s). These common strategies were easily identified, classified and quantified. They are listed in Table 1 below:

Irish student...	Number of NNS (12 in total)
<b>greet NS partner</b> <i>bonjour/ salut + prénom</i>	7
<b>thanks NS partner</b> <i>merci pour ta réponse / votre remarque</i>	6
<b>expresses his/ her agreement with NS viewpoint</b> <i>je suis (complètement) d'accord avec vous/ votre point de vue</i>	8
<b>states that he/ she is glad to share NS viewpoint</b> <i>je suis très content/ ravi que tu partages mon point de vue</i>	3
<b>reiterates his/ her own perspective on discussed topic</b> <i>selon moi, personnellement, je pense que</i>	5
<b>further his/ her argument</b> <i>on espère que, il est très possible que, il faudra que</i>	6
<b>integrates NS viewpoint into his/ her message</b> <i>comme tu (l')as dit, vous dites que, c'est vrai que</i>	9
<b>offers another angle to the discussion</b> <i>cependant, néanmoins, en revanche</i>	5
<b>asks NS partner for his/ her opinion</b> <i>qu'est-ce que vous (en) pensez/ tu (en) penses</i>	5

Table 1: Interactive communication strategies used in Irish students' postings

The data in Table 1 indicated that the most common strategies that Irish students used were the following two:

- to agree with partners' viewpoint
- to integrate of partner's viewpoint

#### 4.2 L2 Students' assimilation of L1 text

Focusing on the second strategy mentioned above (i.e. "the integration of partner's viewpoint"), we were interested to see how Irish students included NS viewpoint into their own message: did they simply repeat or did they rephrase partner's text?

Firstly, data showed that language learners rarely repeated word for word NS text and when they did, they included it within a quote or as reported speech:

*Je ne connais pas bien les Cranberries mais comme tu l'as dit, il y a toujours des mélanges culturels dans leur chansons.* (Irish student L)

The majority of L2 learners opted to rephrase partner's text (either partially or fully):

Rephrasing of a word :

NS : *on y gagne bien sa vie* NNS : *on gagne un bon salaire* Irish student J

NS : *l'absence de jeunes natifs* NNS : *il y a un grand manque de jeunes natifs* Irish student M

Rephrasing of a phrase :

NS : *Il suffit de mettre un pull pour baisser le chauffage*

NNS : *[...] il suffit de mettre plus de vêtements pour remplacer le chauffage* Irish student K

Rephrasing of a whole sentence:

NS : *les avantages fiscaux dont bénéficie cette entreprise en Irlande ne sont pas négligeables.*

NNS : *Comme tu dis maintenant nous avons un bas taux sur l'impôt des sociétés et les entreprises comme Dell profite.* Irish student N

This integration of NS text demonstrated how Irish students were receptive and willing to take on board NS viewpoint. Their positive attitude seemed to have led to an "assimilation" of NS language and more importantly of NS cultural conceptions. These findings would match Tella and Aaltonen's definition of constructive "dialogue" in online interactions (see quote in Section 2.2).

#### **4.3 L2 students' construction of C2 knowledge**

As highlighted earlier, Irish students were encouraged to reflect on the target culture (C2) during their project work. It would appear that they used this CMC exchange to test their ideas of the target culture. Indeed their assumptions on C2 were often followed by an exclamation or a question mark which would signal to the partner the need for him/her to either confirm or deny these "informed suppositions" [15]:

NNS: *la diversité dans un quartier défavorisé "met un peu de piment" dans la vie!!*

Irish student H

NNS: *cette "paix sociale" au Luxembourg est un peu superficielle, c'est une question difficile, oui?* Irish student J

In addition, most students felt the need to refer to their home culture (C1) and to contrast C1 with C2 practices:

NNS: *Peut-être le vente d'alcool n'est pas autorisée en France, mais en Irlande c'est la norme pendant le match de rugby.* Irish student B

NNS: *En Irlande, il n'existe pas une seule nuit pour "faire la fête" comme la fête de la musique en France* Irish student L

NNS: *Je sais qu'il y a des problèmes avec la circulation mais le problème est pire sur la M50 à Dublin tout les matins.* Irish student K

Irish students seemed to have resorted to C1 with a view to persuade partners of their viewpoint (as exhibited in O'Dowd's study [8]).

Findings in this section underline the impact of an interactive "dialogue" on Irish students' cultural awareness not only to construct their C2 knowledge but also to justify C1 values.

### **5. Limitations and conclusions**

The discussion of findings presented in this paper has some limitations. Only a selection of the data analysis results has been examined, the one associated with the Irish students and linked to cultural reflection. Further research should be carried out on NS postings and on general linguistic aspects (NNS writing skills). Nevertheless, the present study confirms the value of CMC for the enhancement of students' (inter)cultural learning. It also shows that Irish students were enthusiastic towards the authentic use of their target language and were fully engaged in their L2 learning process.

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## Appendix 1: Course project outline

### **RECHERCHE INTERNET (FR 4928 - Printemps 2007)**

#### **NOUVELLES D'UNE GRANDE VILLE/ D'UNE REGION**

*\*Vous choisirez une ville/ une région où vous avez séjourné, travaillé ou étudié*

#### **A. Analyse d'un article de journal**

***Qu'est-ce qui fait l'actualité de la ville/ la région ?***

*(sur le plan politique/ économique /éducatif / culturel / social etc.)*

Grâce aux sites variés de la presse française, disponibles sur Internet -voir

<http://www.presseradiotv.com/>, vous devrez tout d'abord

- **sélectionner un article** dans l'une des rubriques susmentionnées (*vous privilégieriez un article qui s'appuie sur une critique/ qui lance un débat*).

Votre travail sera ensuite de

- **présenter** l'information dans sa version originale (extrait de 150 mots environ)
- **remettre** l'information dans son contexte (historique, social, culturel politique ou autre) (150 mots environ)
- **réagir et commenter** 2/3 idées-clés de l'article en vous appuyant sur  votre expérience personnelle. (500 mots environ)

**rendre le commentaire au prof - fin semaine 8**

#### **B. Echange sur le forum (à partir de la semaine 9) avec un francophone**

En dernier lieu, votre travail sera de

- **mettre** votre commentaire sur le forum (FR4928) en faisant une entrée portant le titre de votre ville/ région étudiée
- **lire** les réactions -à vos affirmations- de votre partenaire
- **défendre** vos arguments lors de vos échanges sur le forum

## Appendix 2: Email to Native Speakers

Chers internautes!

Accepteriez-vous d'apporter votre contribution à un projet que nous avons mis sur pied avec nos étudiants de 4eme année?

Si je fais appel à vous, c'est que vous vivez ou avez vécu dans une ville/région sur laquelle nos étudiants font un projet.

Votre participation consistera à réagir (brièvement à leur commentaire (de 500 mots) sur la ville/ région en question.

Votre travail sera ponctuel (deux à trois fois maximum dans les 3 semaines à venir).

Pour avoir accès aux commentaires des étudiants et apporter vos remarques, il vous faudra accéder au site <http://www.nicenet.org> qui est en fait un forum d'échanges.

Si vous nous donnez votre feu vert, ma collègue Catherine, vous enverra par retour de courrier, les consignes et instructions d'emploi du site (facile à utiliser).

Merci d'avance!

Marie-Thérèse

PS: Ci-joint les grandes lignes du projet (Module FR4928). Seule la seconde partie du projet vous concerne.