

"It motivated me to work harder and read further."
**Insights into students' learning and behaviour
in an online discussion forum.**

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Abstract

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become a primary medium for personal reflection and group interaction. Due to their ease of use and flexibility, discussion forums are one of the most popular CMC tools introduced in second language teaching [1]. They provide a venue for thoughtful discussion in both distance and blended courses [2]. More importantly, previous studies have shown that asynchronous online discussions can promote student engagement and reflection and consequently facilitate deeper learning [3]. As highlighted by Felix [4], these forums rely on a student-centred approach which is pedagogy driven rather than technology led. Thus, to maximise the efficiency of CMC in language learning, students' attitudes toward, as well as preferences for online learning should be taken into account when designing, planning and teaching online activities [5].

With the literature concerning student satisfaction and perceived learning as a base, this study endeavours to investigate students' perceived outcomes and reported patterns of use of an online discussion forum. These findings have implications for the strategies used to better support students' learning process.

We first briefly present a discussion forum task which is integrated -as a 6 week learning component- in a language course for fourth year undergraduates studying Business and French. Irish students are required to analyse and debate current French socio-political issue with Native French speakers. We then report on qualitative data collected from feedback comments, questionnaires and interviews completed by the Irish participants -a cohort of approximately 25 students- following their experience of CMC with their French partners. The results indicate that most students perceived online discussion as an appropriate platform for fostering critical thinking, building cultural knowledge, improving language accuracy and encouraging further study. In light of these findings, we suggest a number of pedagogical choices to accommodate students' needs and preferences in environments like CMC and further exploit the potential of a discussion forum. Particular emphasis is placed on a framework for performing the task, and on clear criteria for grading the CMC assignment.