

Real life tasks using Web 2.0 technologies - Rethinking the role of the teacher in order to promote action and communication

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Abstract

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages distinguishes between two main types of classroom tasks: tasks that reflect 'real-life' use and tasks which are essentially 'pedagogic' in nature. Real-life tasks with situational and interactional authenticity are not intended. Even newest publications on tasks and on the action oriented approach on the Web rarely propose to present language learners with real-life tasks which have to be completed in the framework of a real social interaction.

This paper presents the core results of the analysis of interactions between Irish students and their French partners on a dedicated forum. It shows that the presence of the teacher as initiator of the task, owner of the forum and evaluator of the students' contributions contributes to modify the way students interact with their partners and can even inhibit communication.

Therefore we promote the implementation of an interactional approach to language learning on the web 2.0 with real-life tasks in which the teacher is neither addressee nor evaluator, but facilitator. Finally, we give two concrete examples of this approach: the publication of articles on Wikipedia and the Babelweb-project (<http://www.babel-web.eu>).

1. Different kinds of tasks

Only a few researchers work on real-life tasks in the language learning process. Research and important publications mostly promote scenarios which *prepare* students to be able to accomplish specific tasks in real-life outside the classroom. The language class remain a place for training and rehearsal. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* distinguishes between two main types of classroom tasks:

- “‘real-life’, ‘target’ or ‘rehearsal’ tasks” which should be “chosen on the basis of learners’ needs outside the classroom” [2, p. 157]. Note that even if these tasks are first called “real-live” tasks, the CEFR explicitly defines them a few lines further as “reflecting real-life” [2, p. 158] and
- “‘pedagogic’ tasks” which “have their basis in the social and interactive nature and immediacy of the classroom situation where learners engage in a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ and accept the use of the target language rather than the easier and more natural mother tongue to carry out meaning-focused tasks. These pedagogic tasks are only indirectly related to real-life tasks and learner needs, and aim to develop communicative competence based.” [2, p. 157f.]

Real-life tasks are clearly not intended. Most classroom tasks only “simulate the kind of communicative acts that learners will experience in real-life contexts” [3, p.334]. Even researchers working on the Internet promote tasks which should be “vraisemblable[s] en termes de similitude avec

la vie réelle", i.e. reflecting real-life, and guarantee interactional authenticity so that they are "interactionnellement justifiée[s] dans la communauté où elle se déroule" [8, p.38]. Mangenot and Penilla [9, p. 83] speak of "plausibilité" which depends on "la pertinence et de la vraisemblance de la mise en situation [...] proposée".

Real-life tasks even seem to be an illusion and not desirable. Ellis [3, p.334] acknowledges that it can be asked "if it is ever possible to achieve full situational and/or interactional authenticity" in instructional context. Mangenot and Penilla [9] even warn against real-life tasks arguing that students need protected places for training and that too much reality could put them in danger [9, p.89].

We agree with the argument that language learners need to get the chance to use language in a "protected environment", but we will show that real-life tasks are necessary if we want to provide the learner with opportunities to experience the full dimension of communication and action in various situations.

2. The full dimension of communication and action

Communication always occurs in interaction with other persons. Language philosophers, e.g. Grillo, assert that communication is an act determined by the social interaction it takes place in. Following this point of view, the communicative competence is the competence to guarantee the appropriateness of communicative acts to the social interaction: "À y regarder de près, l'aptitude à la communication [...] réclame encore et surtout une compétence communicationnelle qui garantit l'adéquation des actes accomplis relativement à la relation engagée." [4, 257]. The social relationship does not only determine the communicative acts but also the communicative intention: "la spécification du vouloir-dire [...] s'effectue elle-même sous contrainte relationnelle." [4, 257]

Not only communication, but also action in general can be regarded as a social act which is determined by the relationship between the people involved in the action, especially between the doer(s) and the receiver(s). Christian Brassac and Nicolas Gregori [1, p.5] in an article on project management put forward that « il est nécessaire de les [human actions] considérer comme des activités contextualisées dans des situations authentiques, interactionnelles ».

This essential aspect of action and communication (as a form of action) is often largely ignored in language learning. And this leads to a fatal paradox explained with the 'postcard example'. In the CEFR the A1 level for written production is partially defined as follows: "I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings." Teachers who want to train their students often ask them to write postcards to a friend. The BBC site proposes for example the following instructions for Irish (http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/irish/writingf/postcard_rev1.shtml):

Write a postcard to a friend and include the following information. (approx. 90-100 words).

- Say where you are on holiday
- How you travelled
- Where you are staying
- Mention two things you have done so far
- Say when you will be back

It gives the feeling that writing a postcard mainly entails to provide information while, in reality, writing a postcard is first a social action. The writer might give some details on his/her holidays but the intention is to greet – as the CEFR mentions it –, to tell the receiver one thinks of him/her... The instructions try to consider the social aspect and define the relationship as friendship which is not especially precise as the term "friendship" is surely one of the most difficult ones to define. Is a friend someone one knows well and regards with affection and trust, is it a person with whom one is acquainted...? In reality, the actual relationship will determine the intention and content of the postcard. In a classroom situation, the student is aware that he/she is writing a text which is likely to be read only by the teacher. Thus the learner will address the teacher according to the hierarchical teacher-student-relationship: he/she will especially ask him/herself what the teacher expects when he/she gives the instruction to write a postcard to a friend. Finally, the student writes a text to the teacher pretending he writes to a friend and the text is a postcard (most of the time it is even written on a normal piece of paper!).

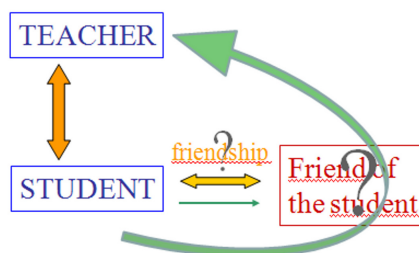


Fig. 1: Writing a post card: interactions in instructional context

We do not claim that this kind of tasks as they are defined in the CEFR should be given up, we argue that real-life tasks should also be proposed to students in order to give them the opportunity to experience the full socio-interactive dimension of communication and action in different situations. The Web 2.0 appears as a place where this interactive approach can be put in practice since it offers a wide variety of opportunities to perform tasks in the framework of real social interactions with native speakers.

In recent years, researchers and practitioners have started to take full advantages of the opportunities offered by online communication and have opened their learning / teaching scenarios to include native and non-native speakers (cf. [6] and [7]) but most of the time the native speakers have been selected by the teacher for the specific task to perform and communication occurs on a platform (mostly virtual learning environments (VLE)) where the teacher remains very present.

We will now analyse the impact of the presence of the teacher as evaluator and indirect addressee in an online task taking place on such a VLE. We will show that the presence of the teacher modifies the way learners are writing and interacting and can even become a barrier to (genuine) communication. We will show that if we want the language learners to practice authentic communication with different native speakers we have to rethink the position of the teacher and design real-life tasks.

3. The experiment

The experiment took place at the University of Limerick with 24 students who were asked to choose a newspaper article on a current topic, to write a short summary of the article and to discuss it online with a French speaking partner who had been selected by their teacher. For this purpose, a dedicated forum had been opened by the Language Support Unit on the Virtual Learning Environment of the university. In order to complete the assignment, students had to exchange three messages with their designated partner during the term.

Following the theory of communication and action, our hypothesis was that the presence of the teacher as evaluator made him an indirect addressee of the students' contributions and had an impact on the way students used the language and interacted with their French partner. Thus, we have analysed the content of the posts written by the students and their partners as well as the answers to a questionnaire students were asked to fill in at the end of the term.

In a previous paper [5], we were able to highlight the differences between the behaviour of the French speaking participants and the Irish students. We will here present only two essential differences and present some explanations based on the partial analysis of the questionnaires. A further publication will analyse the remaining data.

In their messages, the students gave less personal information than their French partners. We considered as personal information details the authors of the messages gave about themselves, their friends and family, their experiences as well as expression of feelings. We could find an average of one (or more) personal information per post in the contributions of the French partners while personal information was present in only 40% of the students' posts.

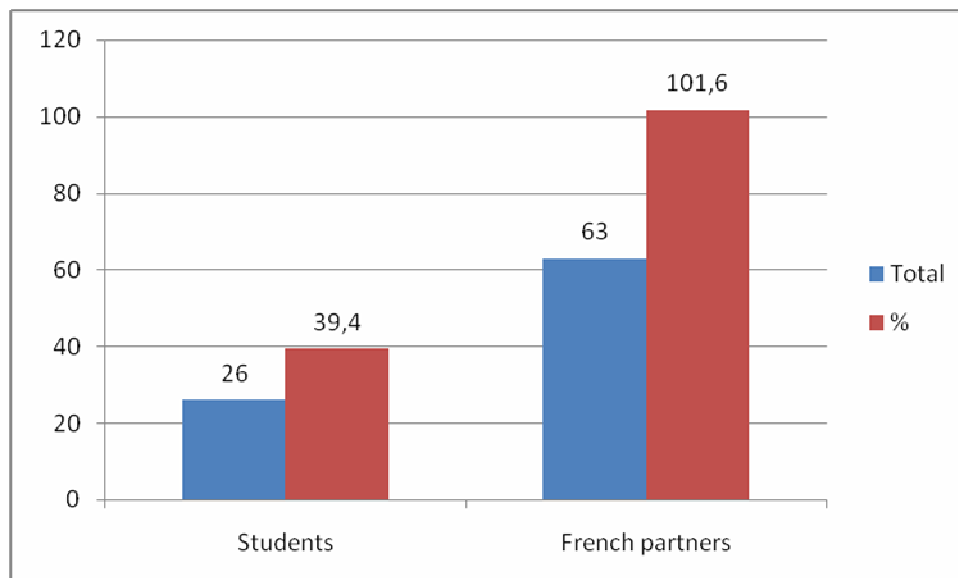


Fig. 2: Personal Information in the posts

We particularly noticed a huge difference in the use of emoticons to express feelings. While we could find 24 occurrences in the post of the French speaking partners, we only found 4 in the texts of the students although we could have expected the contrary since students were generally much younger than their partners.

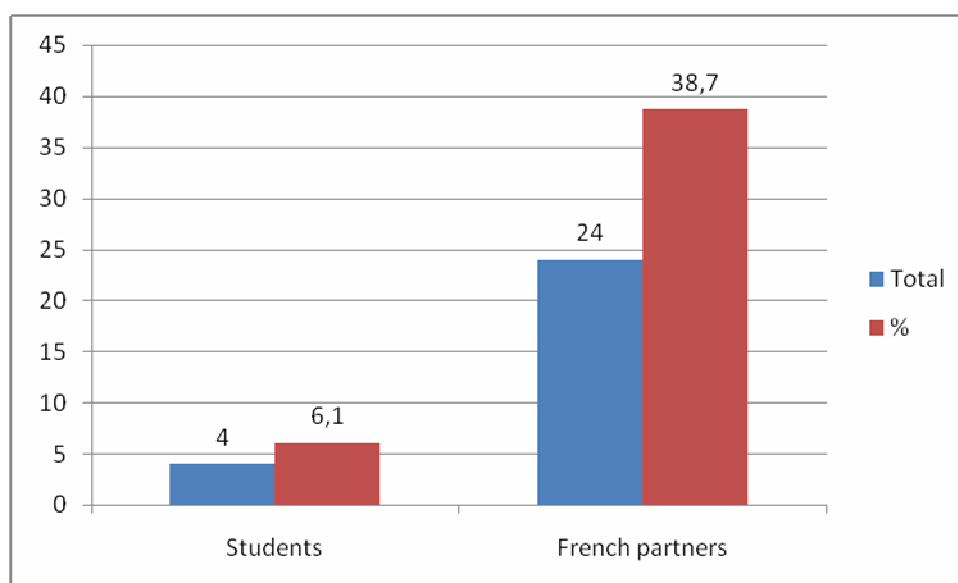


Fig. 3: Use of emoticons in the expression of feelings

The analysis of the answers to the questionnaire gives us interesting clues as to how to interpret these differences.

In the limited space of this paper, we will concentrate on the question of quality of language and on why students didn't perform specific actions. One of the questions the students had to answer was: While posting messages on Sulis, did you pay particular attention to your French? If yes, why? All the students answered yes to the first question. The explanations given in the second part of the question are extremely insightful: the most important reasons were that students aimed for a good grade (answer given by 14 of 16 students), that they were aware a French person was reading the messages (13) and that they knew that their teacher would read the postings (12).

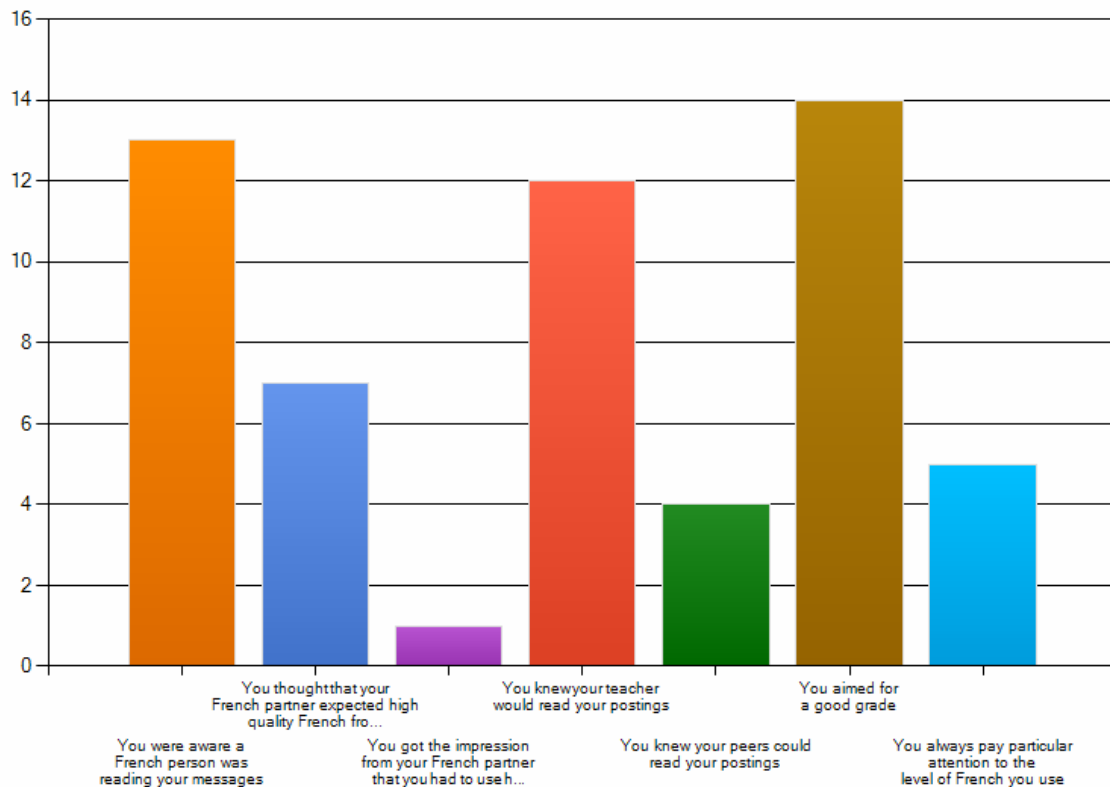


Fig. 4: While posting messages on Sulis, why did you pay particular attention to your French?

These results manifestly show on the one hand that the students had not only their French partner but also their teacher in mind when they were participating on the forum, and on the other hand that the linguistic quality and, we can suppose, the style and the content of their messages was co-determined by the presence of the teacher and the fact that the participation to the discussion would be evaluated by the teacher. So, even if the messages were directly addressed to the French partners, the way they were written was highly co-determined by the social interaction between the student and the teacher as evaluator. The students also indirectly addressed the teacher in their posting.

The fact that the teacher was the evaluator of the task meant that the students had two points of focus, the French partner and the teacher, and didn't communicate with the French partner in a way we can assume that they would have done if no teacher had been reading their messages.

The fact that the teacher also gave the instructions had an impact on the actions of the students on the forum. 86.7 percent of the students mentioned that they read some entries from other students', but none of them posted a single message in these discussions. When asked why, they mainly answered that they thought it was not desirable/allowed (12 of 15 answers) or that it was not expected from them (7). Lack of time, interest or competence was not the decisive argument.

**10. Why did you choose not to take part in others' exchange(s)?
 (select as appropriate, more than one answer possible)**

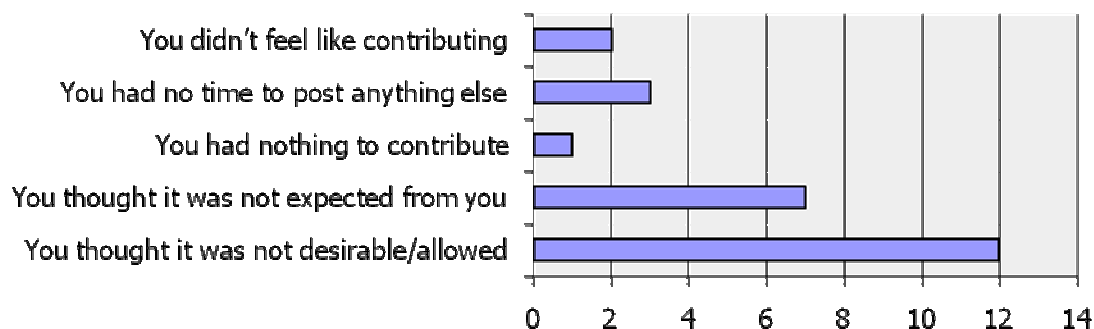


Fig. 5: Reasons for not taking part in others' exchange(s)?

The comment of one student is extremely interesting: "I actually had a discussion with a number of the class members on whether or not it was allowed as some of us had not received many replies and would have enjoyed discussing each others. However everyone seemed unsure whether or not this was an option and it certainly was not mentioned in class."

The teacher was obviously considered by the learners as the owner of the forum and the one who establishes rules - even unexpressed ones. This led here to the fact that the teacher as initiator of the tasks and owner of the forum inhibited communication since students, who would have "enjoyed" taking part in other's discussions, refrained from doing so.

In short, we can say that the presence of the teacher as evaluator and therefore addressee of the messages modified the interaction between the students and their French partners and that the fact that the teacher is regarded as the owner of the interaction space can inhibit communication.

4. Implementation of an interactional approach and design of tasks

If we want to provide students with genuine opportunities to use language in an authentic way with different partners, tasks should be designed in which the teacher is neither the indirect addressee nor the owner of the used platform. The Web 2.0 offers a lot of website where this can be implemented.

In a paper published in the proceedings of the EPAL 2007 conference [10], we give the results and analysis of an experiment carried out at the University of Salzburg with future teachers of French. We asked them to publish articles about their towns of origin on the French version of the online encyclopaedia *Wikipedia*.

By analysing the texts published by the students, we could find out that all the texts had a high quality level in terms of language and content because students were aware of the necessity of excellence when one writes for an encyclopaedia. The real-life task led them to produce texts according to the requirements of the encyclopaedia, i.e. they used the language in an appropriate way considering the social interaction.

By analysing the answers to a questionnaire, we established that motivation was extremely high for the students: the median value ticked by the students was 6 on a scale from 0 (not motivating at all) to 6 (very motivating). But the most interesting part was the explanations given by the students: they felt this experience was motivating because they did not write "for the teacher", it was something "real", "that makes sense", "that can be read by everyone"...

We think that this was possible because the students worked on a website that was not set up by the teacher, because instructions and rules for publication were laid down by the Wikipedia community and not by the teacher and – last but not least – because the teacher informed the students from the beginning that the articles would not be assessed with a grade. This led even to a new student-teacher-relationship since several students involved in the experiment sent their texts to the teacher

asking him to go through and correct them before publication. The teacher was considered as a facilitator rather than an evaluator and addressee of the articles. Evaluation has been done – as always in real communication - by the authentic addressee of the texts, in this case the Wikipedia community. The majority of the texts have been fully accepted by the Wikipedia members (they have been amended, pictures have been added...), only two texts were marked as drafts because they were too short and/or not structured well enough.

Real-life tasks using opportunities that the Web 2.0 offers seem to be a valuable opportunity to make students act according to a social interaction which is not modified by the presence of the teacher whether as owner of the interaction space nor as evaluator and co-addressee.

5. Babelweb and invisible didactics - an example of interactional approach

Even if the web 2.0 offers a multitude of opportunities for real-life tasks in which the teacher can be a helpful facilitator for the students, not all learners can participate in the online forums or wiki-based websites which are present on the web 2.0 because their level or the topic is not appropriate. That is the reason why we decided to develop BABELWEB (<http://www.babel-web.eu>), a European project (*Life Long Learning* programme – Key activity 2) which aims at designing tasks which can be completed online by language learners from level A1 to level B2. The tasks are all Web 2.0 based and we tried to create websites which look as a-pedagogic as possible so that learners never have the feeling they are performing a learning task. We want them to consider the website as a "normal" Web 2.0 site and not to see their participation as pedagogical but as a communicative act with the visitors of the website who might comment their posts. The a-pedagogical look should also have for effect that native speakers can consider the Babelweb website as a normal website and feel like participating in the tasks. The idea seems to work since native speakers are using Babelweb and the language learners show a high level of authenticity in the use of language [5].

We call this concept: "invisible didactics": the tasks are designed on the basis of pedagogical reflection and in order to promote language learning, but should not look like instructional tasks so that real communication and action can take place in their full dimension. Thus, Babelweb offers teachers opportunities (10 blogs, wikis and forums with different topics and tasks) to implement an interactional approach to language learning if they decide to be facilitators rather than evaluators and want their students to practice genuine communication.

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