

**"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.*

**1. Introduction**

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]. 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].

This study investigates students' perceived outcomes and reported patterns of use of an online discussion forum. We first briefly present a discussion forum task which is integrated in a language course. We then report on qualitative data collected from feedback comments, questionnaires and interviews completed by the Irish participants following their experience of CMC with their French partners. Our findings indicate that most students perceived online discussion as an appropriate



platform for building cultural knowledge, fostering critical thinking, improving language accuracy and encouraging further study. Finally, we explain a number of pedagogical choices that were made to accommodate students' needs and preferences in environments like CMC and further exploit the potential of a discussion forum.

## **2. Online discussion forums: theoretical background**

### **2.1 The use of technology to mediate communication in second language learning**

Asynchronous online forums have become a common component in both distance and blended courses in higher education [2]. Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC) gives students the opportunity to take part in learning experiences beyond traditional classroom settings [6] as they can join the asynchronous online discussion at any time, from any place, and have (instant) access to information and experts.

With the increasing use of CMC, a new type of learning environment is emerging that generates meaningful interactions amongst learners and encourages students' strong involvement in the learning process [3]. The discussion forum offers a platform where students can brainstorm, disseminate information, analyse course material etc. The asynchronous or "delayed" nature of the discussion allows time for critical thinking [7] which is necessary for making connections between new and old information, engendering new ideas from existing information and deeper learning [8].

In language courses, CMC is considered an innovative way to expand students' use of second language and improve students' reading and writing skills while exchanging messages [9]. On line forums generally provide a framework for text or topic discussion through the target language. Such activity requires students to organize their thoughts, challenge others' views, and take linguistic risks. SLA research has shown that by facilitating the combination of two main language functions, interaction and reflection, CMC can promote language learning [10] as students need "to stretch their linguistic resources in order to meet the demands of real communication in a social context" ([11], p.83).

### **2.2 The pedagogical factors affecting the outcome of online discussion forums**

How best to use CMC to support language learning beyond traditional didactic approaches?

On the strength of previous findings on students' perceptions of both synchronous and asynchronous CMC as well as tutors' direct observation of students' behaviour in CMC settings, it can be argued that the authenticity of the learning task is essential to engage students. This implies students selecting their own topics of discussion rather than working from a teacher-determined list of topics [12]. Another means of adding authenticity to CMC is to include experts or "real people" who are brought virtually into the classroom to assist students' inquiry [13]. The role of teachers (i.e. their guidance and monitoring) is perceived by some students to be the most critical in improving and supporting CMC in face-to-face courses [14]. In terms of course design, the careful structuring of the online task, the clarity of the marking criteria, and the ease of participation should serve to promote students' self-regulated learning [15].

## **3. Methodological overview**

### **3.1 Project outline**

The online discussion forum is part of a larger project carried out by a group of undergraduate students. The project is based on task-based [16] and blended learning [17] approaches. Language learners have to select a current French socio-political issue, retrieve information from the Internet on this topic and analyse it with a view to producing a piece of work demonstrating thorough understanding of the topic. This individual project has the potential to deepen students' knowledge of Francophone current affairs, increase their reflection on the target culture and improve their target language (see Appendix 1: project outline).



The online task starts mid-way through the project (week 6 of a 12-week course). Each L2 learner submits his/her assignment on line and is paired with a native speaker who has expressed an interest in his/her topic. Students then have to engage in debate with their respective partners. In addition, at the end of the project, they have to reflect and report on their learning experience.

At every stage of this project, the use of new technologies is fully integrated to the language teaching and learning pedagogical approach as advocated in recent CALL and ICT in SLA research [18]

### 3.2 Participants' profile

A total of 24 Irish students and 12 native speakers of French participated in the project.

The students (15 females and 9 males) were enrolled on a Fourth Year undergraduate Business and French course at the third level institution where this research was carried out and the majority of them had taken part in a collaborative Blog the previous year. They were all between 20 and 22 year old.

The native speakers came from varied backgrounds (students or professionals) and were based either in Ireland or in their country of origin (France and Dom-Tom). Their age ranged from 20 to 50. The majority of them were unknown to the learners or their real identity was kept from the learners (in the case of current tutors in the institution for example). Their participation in the forum was totally voluntary and their involvement was not rewarded in any way. They accepted to interact with two Irish students and were asked to post a minimum of three messages (per partnership) over the course of their exchanges.

At the start of the online activity, it was very hard to predict how well the L1/L2 pairings would perform because of discrepancies in profiles, goals, and motivations between the Irish students and their NS partners.

### 3.3 An online discussion forum on Sulis: Task description

For this task, the L2 learners were required to interact on a one-to-one basis with a native speaker on the discussion forum. The latter was set-up on the Learning Management System (LMS) of the institution for their specific module. In this case, the LMS is called Sulis and is powered by Sakai. Prior to the start of the exchanges, a discussion thread was created for each topic to facilitate both students and native speakers' assignment and not to burden participants with irrelevant information. Students were given a 20 minute training session on how to use the forum whereas the native speakers were sent written instructions (including their username and password if needed).

The asynchronous communication task was open and not prescriptive, the only clear requirements being that the learners' target language (French) was used at all times in the exchanges and that a minimum of three messages were posted by each participant over the course of the exchange with no constraint of frequency.

As previously mentioned, the Irish students had to post their project work on the discussion forum and start the exchange by asking their partner a (controversial) question on their chosen topic. Participants were free to express their views and opinions and the dialogue was not restricted to the topic selected. In the closing stages of the project, the Irish students were asked to give their overall impression of the online exchange and explain whether or not they had changed their views on the topic after their interactions with a native speaker.

It is important to note that even though the teacher and the tutor involved in the project had full access to students' postings, they never directly intervene in the exchanges. Any communication with the participants (technical support, gentle reminders etc.) was carried out via email.

### 3.4 Positive changes made to the overall project

This type of project has been running for the last three years. The researchers have been guided by the methodological principles of action research which promote the development of understanding and the improvement of practice through the cyclical process of action and reflection [19, 20]. To inform further action, students were required to fill in a feedback questionnaire at the end of their learning experience. Analysis from the data collected the two previous years led to a series of changes to the latest cohort of students' project work:

- The timing of the online exchange: The exchange used to take place at the latter end of the project (the last three weeks), but is now introduced mid-way through the project in order to

extend the period of interactions with the foreign partner and to give students more time for reflection.

- The simplification of the analytical task: The first task of the overall project has been shortened to ensure that students are ready to post it on the forum at an earlier date and engage more actively in the discussion forum task.
- The choice of topics: Students used to have to write about a town or a region where they had sojourned during their Erasmus experience. This made the pairing with a native speaker more difficult (i.e. the necessity to find a NS who knew the town/ region picked by the L2 learner). In addition, the choice of a current French socio-political issue should spark more controversy between exchange partners.
- The adoption to a new platform: This time, the discussion forum of the institution LMS was used as students are familiar with this platform (i.e. they visit it for other courses). This change might impact on their level of participation.
- The reflection task: Students were asked to reflect and report on the exchange with the native speaker as part of their overall project.

All these changes were implemented to stimulate the exchange between the L2 learners and the native speakers. Besides, as the online task was considered central to their learning process, a higher proportion of the overall project grade was allocated to this final task.

#### 4. Data analysis and discussion of findings

The data analysed in this paper was obtained through student feedback collected from three sources: i) student comments on the exchange (as part of the overall project and completed by 21 out of 24 students), ii) student questionnaire (filled two weeks after the end of the project and completed by 16 out of 24 students), iii) student interview (to which 3 students agreed to take part as a follow-up from the questionnaire).

Both quantitative and qualitative data were examined with the aim to highlight salient patterns of behaviour adopted by students to complete the on-line task and to determine what they perceived as the benefits of the Franco-Irish exchange.

##### 4.1 Students' coping patterns of behaviour

While a majority of the students (62.6%) stated that they undoubtedly enjoyed the online discussion task, they underlined the fact that they found it quite challenging.

The challenges as well as the actions taken to solve these difficulties are listed below.

- Technical challenges: A few technical glitches occurred on the onset of the project. They were mainly due to the complicated way of accessing the institution VLE of the native speakers and the time delay for a few postings to appear on the forum. They consequently made the beginning of the exchange difficult for a few students. However, once the tutor (who acted as technical support for the project) was made aware of these problems by students, she intervened to solve them. Some students also complained that they did not receive any email alert when a new message was posted on their thread and had to log on the forum to check it. This will be looked at before the next undertaking of the project.
- Communication challenges: These were linked to the particular challenges posed by the lack of interaction. From the Irish student perspective, the reason for their problems was twofold: a lack of queries from the French partners (making it difficult to sustain a lively discussion) and a

lack of responses to their questions (limiting the opportunity to get a "French viewpoint"). In both cases, students coped by adopting a new strategy: when faced with a lack of queries, they introduced a new claim to revive the discussion, and when confronted with a deficit of information, they researched the requested topic themselves.

- Personal challenges: The task was a challenge in itself for some students. They had to overcome the anxiety to write to a French-native speaker whom they did not know for a 'real' purpose. A few of them stressed that they were self-conscious about their level of French and were afraid that their language ability would impede the depth of the discussion. Interestingly, they affirmed that their fear lessened with usage and with new learning strategies: they observed the native speakers' argumentative style, picked up some useful vocabulary and expressions, read other threads of discussion to assess their own contribution etc.

From the above we can contend that, when faced with a new task, students had to learn to overcome new challenges. In doing so, they developed a new set of learning and communicative strategies and consequently new patterns of behaviour.

#### 4.2 Students' perceived benefits of the online discussion task

In their feedback, students identified the various diverse benefits they have drawn from their participation to the online exchange. We have grouped these benefits under four headings, each category displaying several students' comments to illustrate their views.

Students stated that they have become:

- more knowledgeable on their selected topic: In the comments section of the project, over two thirds of the students said that they had vastly improved their understanding of the current issue studied. Moreover, 68.8% of the questionnaire respondents selected "to get information on the topic" as one of the main benefits of the exchange, while another 68.8% added that their "interest in the topic increased during the exchange". They particularly valued having access to a different (sometimes new) viewpoint on the topic, especially from a French native speaker as they believed that it gave them an 'authentic' socio-cultural perspective.  
 "C'était inestimable aussi d'avoir l'occasion d'apprendre la perspective française" (Student S – Reflection task)  
 " Mes échanges avec A. sur SULIS pendant ce semestre m'a donné l'occasion de voir les pensées et les idées des gens en dehors de l'Irlande." (Student Y – Reflection task)  
 "It [the exchange] gave a more realistic account rather than reading about it in a newspaper" (Student F - Questionnaire)
- more assertive about expressing opinions: In the questionnaire, the majority of the respondents (75.1%) declared that the exchange often challenged their initial beliefs. They mentioned in their comments that they found the discussion demanding because they had to present a clear line of reasoning and integrate the others' viewpoints in their argument. It would seem that the exchange provided them with a platform for critical thinking.  
 "La discussion a vraiment contesté la validité de mes opinions préconçue" (Student A – Reflection task)  
 "Cet échange a été intéressant car il a permis d'opposer nos opinions sur l'attitude de Nicolas Sarkozy" (Student M – Reflection task)  
 "Once you had made-up your own mind on the topic, it was good having the other side of things" (Student J – Interview)
- more fluent and accurate in the second language: All the students who filled up the questionnaire claimed that they paid more attention than usual to their French and in the reflection task, many of them referred to the linguistic gains of the exchange. They particularly highlighted the amount of writing produced, the access to authentic language -vocabulary related to their topic, expressions and phrases, sentence structure etc- as well as the fact the efforts they made to produce better French than usual to be understood by their partner.  
 "(...) très avantageux pour moi parce qu'il aide mon niveau de vocabulaire" (Student K – Reflection task)



“I learned about sentence structure etc. from partners’ postings” (Student F – Questionnaire)  
“(…) idioms and things like that that I read from my partner [...] I used them in other areas as well, like in my exams and orals, that I thought was really handy” (Student L – Interview)

- more autonomous and more responsible for their own learning: One third of the students indicated that the discussion forum had made them more autonomous in their work and more inclined to take initiatives to carry out extra work, either by reading other students’ postings, or by undertaking extra research on the topic. This extra work always came as a strategy to compensate for a deficit such as a lack of information provided by their partner, a lack of knowledge on their behalf to produce a valid argument, or as previously pointed to, a lack of appropriate vocabulary or expressions.  
“J’ai reçu seulement une réponse mais ça ma poussé de faire plus de recherche indépendant” (Student N – Reflection task)  
“I read other articles and postings on French websites to help get some ideas” (Student B – Questionnaire)  
“I did a lot of researches on the topic to get new ideas and I followed regularly the French news” (Student M – Questionnaire)  
“It motivated me to work harder and read further.” (Student R – Interview)

## 5. Limitations and conclusion

The discussion of findings presented in this paper has some limitations. First the number of students participating in the online discussion was relatively small (24). Second this study was based on self-reported perceptions by students rather than direct observation of their behaviour. These findings should therefore be considered only indicative of patterns that might be found with other online discussion L2 users.

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## Appendix 1: Course project outline

### FR4928 Recherche sur l'actualité française via Internet 30%

#### 1. REGARDS SUR L'ACTUALITE (Semaines de 2 à 5 / Travail individuel / 15%)

-Vous rechercherez plusieurs articles traitant d'un même sujet d'actualité et tirés de journaux/ magazines de différentes tendances -Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération, l'Express, la Croix, le Nouvel Observateur, etc., les lirez, et les référencerez.

-Vous sélectionnerez un seul de ces articles pour l'analyser.

-Vous rapporterez succinctement l'information/ les faits (75 mots environ / 5%)

-Vous analyserez –sous forme de commentaire- certaines prises de position du journaliste (2 au minimum/ 250 mots environ / 10%)

**2. ECHANGES D'OPINION SUR L'ACTUALITE 3 contributions minimum (Semaines de 6 à 9 / Travail en tandem avec un(e) francophone sur SULIS / 10%)**

-Vous mettrez votre commentaire sur le forum de discussion

-Vous choisirez l'un des points controversés que vous aurez abordés pour en discuter avec votre correspondant(e) et, pour lancer la discussion, vous soumettrez une question qui sera postée sur le forum, à la suite de votre commentaire.

-Vous lirez les réactions –à vos affirmations- de votre partenaire

-Vous défendrez vos arguments et en avancerez de nouveaux.

**3. AUTRE PERSPECTIVE SUR L'ACTUALITE/ VALEUR DE L'ECHANGE (Semaines de 10 à 12 / Travail individuel / 5%)**

Suite à vos interactions –en ligne- avec un(e) francophone, vous expliquerez, d'une part, si et de quelle façon, votre regard/ perspective sur la question d'actualité étudiée, a changé (150 mots environ) et d'autre part, vous évaluerez la valeur (ajoutée) de l'échange en ligne.