TURNING A MULTIMEDIA LANGUAGE LAB INTO A POWERFUL LEARNER-CENTRED TOOL

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Abstract:

In a learner-centred approach, lecturers constantly adapt their teaching methods to better suit their students' goals and needs. Ideally, the gathering of information relies on three channels: questionnaires and surveys, learners' log book and course evaluation. However, these methods can be time consuming or even impossible considering the nature and size of the class or even the constraints of limited contact hours.

Keywords: Computer assisted language learning, individualisation

In this paper, we will describe and analyse how a multimedia language lab proved to be a powerful and enjoyable investigation and teaching tool (Stepp-Greany, 2002). The experiment was conducted with a multi-ethnic group of 21 learners in their second semester of a B.A. French Degree.

How could we assess learners' progress, strategies, motivation and inhibitions as well as provide suitable individual learning solutions in just 42 contact hours? With these objectives in mind, we used the technology provided to create a virtual space within the course where each individual, learners and lecturers could interact. The project relied on five components: French as the language of communication, Internet access for support resources, the Dokeos e-learning platform, Sanako Lab 300 and Media Assistant Solo. The answers to the earlier questions were obtained through students' feedback during their participation in forums and lab discussions. These findings were further consolidated with interviews and data.

Turning a multimedia language lab into a powerful learner-centred tool

Ideal versus Real

In a learner-centred approach, lecturers constantly adapt their teaching methods to better suit their students' goals and needs. Therefore, one of the keys to a successful learner-centred pedagogy is data collection as investigating learners' expectations, inhibitions and achievements throughout the learning process provides guidelines and constant feedback on the popularity and efficiency of courses. To remain consistent with this pedagogy, learners should ideally be guided during a preliminary interview or questionnaire enabling both the institution and the learner to determine which methods and environments would be the most suitable. They would subsequently be oriented towards a successful and fulfilling learning experience. "Offering learners a chance to introduce themselves and voice their priorities and concerns would also encourage them to take an active part in the learning process from the beginning" (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004).

The perfect enrolment would offer every pedagogical combination and media at the disposal of learners and lecturers. In an ideal world, one would not suffer from lack of budget, equipment or staff and good-will would be as natural as motivation and dedication. So, how do we, language lecturers living in the real world, cope with our complex situations for better learning? This article could not and does not

intend to find a solution to all limitations lecturers or learners may be facing but rather give an example of how technology, namely a computer lab and forums, can help alleviate some difficulties.

Our reality

In our case, we conducted an experiment with a multiethnic group of 21 learners in their second semester of a B.A. French Degree. Among other requirements, they had to attend a 10-hour per week intensive language course based on *Connexion* 1 over 14 weeks. We were to teach this course 3 hours a week in partnership with two other lecturers. It was our first contact as lecturers with this study group and we wished to enter or establish a learning community (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; White, 2003): a crucial step known to facilitate language exposure and skills.

At this stage, students were in a transitional academic phase which prompted them to reflect on their learning experience and objectives. After two semesters, the system allows students to drop out of the French program and to enroll in another major if their results are not satisfactory, a situation which, on average, concerns two learners out of a maximum of 25 per intake.

It is also at that time that learners have to choose a minor program. This represents a turning point forcing all learners to reflect on what they have learned so far and on how this knowledge may help them in their lifetime. Which field combined with their skills in French would prove to be worthwhile in the job market?

Furthermore, starting from the third semester, more content and specialty French courses are added to the curriculum. From our experience, we could not help but notice a strong anxiety towards these new courses which needed to be addressed if not completely solved.

Since learners were all thinking about their achievements we could not miss this opportunity to investigate and share their ideas and concerns. The strategy adopted was to initiate a dialogue among and with learners which could enlighten us on their learning perceptions while assessing and developing language skills merging both Piaget's and Vygotsky's perspectives.

Our objectives through the creation of this environment were to assess learners' progress, strategies, motivation and inhibitions as well as provide suitable individual or collective learning solutions. Could we manage this ambitious goal in 42 hours and stay in line with the course learning outcome? (Bennet, Marsh, & Killen, 2008; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004)?

The digital language lab:

Our limited face-to-face hours naturally led us to seek a virtual environment in a blended learning framework where all learners and lecturers could meet and interact at any time to discuss the course content or any topic they wished to develop. It was agreed that learners would have access to the course e-learning platform for one hour once a week in a multimedia language lab. The e-learning environment would probably be new to learners and this experience would also provide opportunities for its discovery with both in-class and distance tutorials (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004).

The project relied on five components: French as the language of instruction, Internet access for support resources, the Dokeos e-learning platform, Sanako Lab 300 and Media Assistant Solo.

The multimedia language lab consisted of the teacher's master-computer along with 28 student stations all equipped with a computer connected to the Internet and with Microsoft Office 2007. Students' stations were arranged in seven oval tables of four. Because the Sanako Lab 300's program connected all computers and acted as an internal network, activities or programs could be launched and monitored from the teacher's desk using an active window graphically representing the classroom (figure1). Coupled with Sanako Media Assistant Solo (figure 2), a sophisticated laboratory program installed on all computers and headsets with microphones, learning configurations were endless. Individual or collaborative learning either through pair or group discussions or telephone conversations could be carried out with learners being partially or completely controlled, guided or let free to complete an activity.

Figure 1

http://www.logikelectronic.com

Figure 2

http://www.its-educational.biz

For this project, we also relied on the Dokeos e-learning platform; managed by the faculty's ICT centre. The platform featured course description, links to external sites, document sharing, tests, forums, chat, as well as access monitoring tools. The on-line course was configured to be in French. Forums were chosen for their interaction-friendly environment and their popularity among learners (Gerbic, 2005; Tu, 2001). Self- support resources such as online dictionaries, translators or the reviewing tools of the word processor were also made available to learners, thus acting as a safety net in which the lecturer would also synchronously tutor the learners' message postings during lab contact hours (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004).

The initiation of a dialogue in the target language about issues such as the language itself or the learning process combined with the introduction of self- learning tools would, so we hope, lead to more active and resourceful learners. We were also seeking learners' perceptions toward learning French. What in their opinion was difficult? Which questions did they have concerning their future courses, career prospects?

Data and learners' feedback collected during their participation in forums and lab discussions were consolidated with questionnaires distributed at the beginning and at the end of this course as well as with questionnaires and observations obtained during content and specialty courses which the same learners subsequently attended.

Steps toward interactivity
The first step was to verify that learners knew about the e-learning platform managed by the faculty. We launched the project in the first week by showing them the platform's home page with the log-in and password fields. Surprisingly, they were discovering it. We started with a tour of the features of the online environment showing them its potential for learning and communicating. A rationale explaining what we would be doing and its purpose was given to better associate learners to the learning process (Geer & Au, 2002). What amazed them the most was the notion that we would upload our teaching documents to the course portfolio. Excitement grew even bigger, when we explained that we would use the multimedia language lab to communicate within the forums during the first hour of the Thursday class. The novelty and reality of the activity was appealing. They were going to be involved in practicing their French for the first time. This was a new experience due to the scarcity of opportunities to speak the target language in Malaysia, especially in the context of learners not confident enough to explore beyond the campus or their learning group (Palloff & Pratt, 2005).

Presentation

Bonjour, je m'appelle Clara. […] J'apprends le francais à l'université. J'apprends le e-learning aujourd'hui. C'est intéressant pour moi. *(Hello, my name is Clara. I learn French at the university. Today, I am learning about e-learning. It is interesting for me.)[1]*

Auteur:Clara - 2008-01-11 11:25	**Répondez sur ce message**

The second step was for learners to register on the platform. We guided them by showing each phase using the LCD projector and the interactive whiteboard while they logged in on their own station. Even with a face-to-face and synchronous tutorial, registration was not so simple and it was easy to spot learners with technical inhibitions. Immediate help from the lecturer or their friends was encouraging. During the course, few technical problems were encountered but none of them prevented the activity to go on. Some learners had forgotten their ID or password to log in and when no reply came from platform administrators, learners simply created a new account to the platform and to the course. Sometimes documents would not open directly from the site so learners had to download them on their desktop prior to accessing them. Most questions related to inserting French accents, internet links or pictures were addressed by the lecturer.

re: Valérie

Madame, je ne sais pas comment télécharger l'image dans ici. T___T *(I don't know how to download the picture here.)*

Auteur: Valérie - 2008-01-17 10:33	**Répondez sur ce message**

Learners managed fairly well with the lab learners' interface. The lecturer would launch all computers from his or her desk and the learner's lab assistant program would automatically open. Once learners had understood how to navigate within the course on the platform and how to use the help provided such as internet websites with on-line dictionaries, translators, self-grammar learning drills and lessons or the language reviewing tools of the word processor, they simply called the lecturer whenever they needed by pressing one button. The lecturer could assist them by speaking using the headset and also by controlling their keyboard and mouse to point to specific parts of their written production.

Learners are usually afraid to speak in front of the whole group. They are shy to express themselves in the target language or they are afraid to ask questions pertaining to specific material taught because they dare not be seen as criticising the lecturer or slowing down the group (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Macintyre, 2007; Gerbic, 2005; Hu, 2002; Chan, 1999). In the lab, learners gradually built confidence with one-to-one discussions with the lecturer or during group discussions.

The third step was the launching of the forum activity. Two forums had previously been created, "Présentations" where learners had to post a self introduction message and "Questions" where they could ask any questions about the course. Later on, toward the end of the course "Coqalane", a recreational forum where everyone could discuss about anything was also launched. The lecturer always posted the first messages in each forum acting as sample messages to initiate and trigger interactions, encouraging learners to follow the path created (Holmes & Gardner, 2006; White, 2003; Geer & Au, 2002).

In the "Présentations" forum, learners had to introduce themselves by creating a new thread using their names in the title. They could also reply under someone else's presentation. This was the most successful forum in terms of interactivity and learner-centred data collection. The forum analysis provided us with

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[1] English translations and notes whenever necessary were added to learners' messages in the forums for the purpose of this article.

valuable information pertaining to learners' level, progress, feelings of joy or distress as well as concerns. It allowed us to reach the group and each individual establishing a unique relation of proximity with learners which led to accurate guidance whether they needed help, advices, and revisions or to be pushed forward.

We synthesised 335 messages over 14 hours into three research perspectives: perceptions of learners about the creation of a virtual community in French, knowledge gains in terms of language and cultural acquisition and finally an insight on the building mechanism leading to their anxiety.

Potential of a virtual community
The perception of roles in the Malaysian academic learning environment tends to isolate the lecturer by placing him or her on the knowledge pedestal. Hence, learners would not utter a word unless encouraged to do so. This attitude can be misleading and is often distressful for a native lecturer (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Language teaching and learning methodologies are embedded within cultural behaviours. In our case, we were in the murky waters of an estuary where a western turbulent river met the eastern sea of wisdom. On one hand, the lecturer wanted learners to speak, to voice their opinion, to be able to play any simulation for the sake of competence-driven language teaching as described by the European framework for languages (CEFR). Furthermore, in western thinking, one learns from one's mistakes. This is what we, as lecturers are here for, to guide learners' steps and make them stronger. On the other hand, our audience will tactfully utter a comment only once they are completely sure of the answer in order not to disappoint the lecturer but also out of respect.

The first contact hour is disorientating for both sides. This is when the lecturer meets 21 pairs of eyes following his or her every move, listening and recording his or her every word when all he or she craves for is a word. This is the time to create a community of knowledge where all cultural barriers can be lowered to allow interactions based on understanding each other's difficulty in adapting to this new context. Learners need to accept being destabilised for the sake of learning the target language because speaking a language is based on cultural codes.

We wanted to see if participating in a virtual community would accelerate the transitional phase process. Since learners felt more comfortable with writing we decided to instigate interactivity through forums (Gerbic, 2005; Meskill & Anthony, 2005; Tu, 2001).

Results were amazing. The first messages were carefully prepared using the spelling checkers or on-line translators with learners seldom asking for direct help from the lecturer. Every week, improvement on speed and on spontaneity could be observed as if learners were getting carried away and forgot about the class context. They would post messages to their friends and to others in the class whom they did not know very well, seeking new relationships or teasing each other. The lecturer would reply with a few lines under each presentation asking questions or precisions to keep the discussion going following the learners' interests and progress. Learners would also directly communicate with the lecturer by sending messages to his or her presentation thread. Popularity grew because interaction never ceased and because the lecturer would always reply immediately during or right after class. During the week, the lecturer would also have to check for late or additional messages. Learners expressed themselves freely even if the environment was public to everyone in the course. In the following message, Isabelle explains how her timidity prevented her from saying hello to her lecturer outside of the class. She would have enjoyed meeting her lecturer and deeply regrets her fear.

Bonjour,madame
 Madame, je vous ai vus avec monsieur aux Mines vendredi dernier où je suis allé voir le film avec mes amis. J'étais timide pour vous saluer. (*Madam, I saw you at Mines Shopping Mall last Friday where I went to the cinema with my friends. I was too shy to say hello.)*

Auteur: Isabelle- 2008-03-06 10:33   **Répondez sur ce message**

Learners who seemed out of reach and totally absent or left out from the class appeared on the forums as active as the rest. When we took the course we had been informed about two learners experiencing difficulties and being on the borderline. As it turned out these students appeared very competent and their participation certainly did not reflect their previous marks. Had forums succeeded where traditional teaching and assessment had failed? Forums tend to encourage silent learners and give everyone an equal opportunity to participate (Tu, 2001).

After a month, as early as the fourth class, learners felt so confident and at ease that they were using the course "Présentations" forum to communicate freely among themselves. They would send memos and reminders to each other regarding college or campus activities. The real world completely entered the virtual world transforming what could have remained a simulation into a full potential communication tool (Yang & Chen, 2007; Montada, 1999). The following exchange occurred on the 14th of February and involved message posting about the organisation of a university show between learners involved in the event. Stéphanie sent a reminder to Clara who then contacted Clément about the meeting. The time gap between interactions can be explained with learners being also busy sending Valentine's Day messages.

re: macaz meeting
Clara reçois-tu le mémo aujourd'hui? (Clara, have you received today's memo?)

Auteur: Stéphanie - 2008-02-14 10:33	**Répondez sur ce message**

cc
peux j'avoir une discussion avec vous avant notre réunion ce soir? (Can I see you before tonight meeting?)

Auteur: Clara - 2008-02-14 10:43	**Répondez sur ce message**

re: cc
d'accord... mais apres réunion avec Soon ... Environ 11 heures de la nuit... d'accord? çava? (Ok. But after the meeting with Soon… around 11 pm. Ok?)

Auteur: Clément - 2008-02-14 11:03	**Répondez sur ce message**

re: re: cc
non..comment 10h à front kiosk? D'accord? (no, how about 10 pm in front of the Kiosk?)

Auteur: Clara - 2008-02-14 11:27	**Répondez sur ce message**

re: re: re: cc
non parce que il y a une réunion avec soon à 10 heures dans aspirasi za'ba... (no because we are meeting with Soon at 10 pm in Aspirasi za'ba.)

This discussion clearly shows learners wishing to use French on a daily basis thus increasing their exposure to the language. In this conversation, learners are able to pass information, to make an appointment and to negotiate in the target language in line with the CEFR recommendations.

Learners' perception of language and cultural acquisition
Everything being in French, exposure to the target language was greater than during a traditional language class (Nissen, 2007; Cha & Myint, 2006; Meskill & Anthony, 2005; Germain & Netten, 2004; Blignaut & Trollip, 2003; Atlan, 2000). Learners were pushed to write as well as to read in French. Interactions with the lecturer through the headsets also involved oral skills. Discussions rapidly moved from self introduction towards broader topics such as language and cultural differences. Learners really got involved and took an active part in discussions. They were curious and dared to ask many questions (Hung & Chen, 2001).

re: re: re: Malaysia

Pourquoi les français aiment-ils manger du pain ? et parler du temps ? *(Why do French people eat bread and speak about the weather?)*

Auteur: kevin - 2008-03-06 10:23	**Répondez sur ce message**

bonjour madame, comment vous allez?

bonjour madame, c'est bien apprendre français avec vous...ha ha ha ha ha ha ha...... […] je suis étudiant et j'apprends le français. je le prends parce-que je veux apprendre un autre langage. je l'aime beaucoup. Madame, j'ai question pour vous... -- comment augmenter mon français?? *(Hello. I like learning French with you…My name is Alex. I am a student and I am learning French. I took French because I want to learn another language. I like it a lot. Madam, I have a question. How can I improve my French?)*

Auteur: Alex - 2008-01-11 11:30	**Répondez sur ce message**

re: Oh là là

Je ne peux pas me prononcer comme le tigre gémissant des mots comme quatre, anniversaire. Je confonds avec la prononciation française qui joint les mots beaucoup, c'est difficile*….(I cannot pronounce words like a crying tiger such as "quatre", "anniversaire". I am confused with the French pronunciation which links words, It's difficult."*

Auteur: Andrée - 2008-01-17 10:41	**Répondez sur ce message**

re: Valérie

Bonjour Madame! Comment améliorer le français pour écouter? Je peux à peine comprendre ce qu'il a dit. Ma compétence écoutante est très mauvaise. Quelle voie peut améliorer la compétence écoutante et la compétence à l'oral? Merci Madame. =) *(How can I improve my listening comprehension? My listening skills are bad. Which way can I improve my listening and oral skills?)*

Auteur: Valérie - 2008-02-21 10:11	**Répondez sur ce message**

They also asked for help regarding learning strategies. Most requests pertained to pronunciation and grammar. Learners were more concerned about perfectionism than communication, a tendency which reflected the high grammatical content of the French 1 and 2 courses. Even though the textbook was of the communicative trend, tests and exams were still almost solely assessing grammar with tricky exercises focusing on the main points studied. Competence in communication only accounted for 30%. Because of lack of contextual practice, learners tended to rely on memorization when they could not understand notions. A 10-hour course a week is intensive and it is easy to become confused. As a result, learners felt they could not cope with grammar.

Apprendre le Français efficacement?

Comment apprendre le français efficacement ? Mon français très faible particulièrement ma grammaire L *(How can I learn French efficiently? My French is weak particularly my grammar.)*

Auteur: Lydie - 2008-01-31 10:36	**Répondez sur ce message**

vacances...

Bonjour Madame....

Je suis allé à Hadyai, Surat Thani, Had Rin, Sri Thanu and Thong Sala. Avez-vous été à Bali? Madame, Je suis très lent dans l'étude du français et oublie toujours la grammaire, avez-vous une idée en étude de

cela vite? Et comment parler couramment français ? j'espère vraiment que je peux parler le français. *(I went to….. Have you been to Bali? Madam, I am slow to study French and I always forget the grammar, do you know how I could study this faster? How can I speak French fluently? I really hope to be able to speak French?)*

Auteur: Lydie - 2008-02-28 10:27	**Répondez sur ce message**

The grammar content of these messages was very good for the course's level; however Lydie was obsessed with her grammar. Other learners expressed the same inhibition toward grammar but Lydie's case was different. Others would successfully memorize grammar points and logically come up with the correct answers in test exercises whereas Lydie would make some mistakes. In a communicative context, Lydie would have done very well as demonstrated in the forums. Her test results did not correspond to the quality of her participation in class. She thus felt somehow frustrated and blamed her inability to master the grammar. Through forums, she became more confident and asked focused questions whenever she could not understand something in the course and tried to practice within the forums. In the message below, Lydie summarised how she understood the system of tense formation and applied it in some sample sentences.

expliquez moi ..madame
Bonjour madame…
Structurer une phrase pour présent: Je vais aller à cinéma. Je conjugue seulement **VAIS,** c'est correct ?
Structurer une phrase pour passé composé: Nous avons fait du vélo à Melaka. Je conjugue **AVONS et FAIT.**
Structurer une phrase pour futur : J'irai à Penang le mois suivant. Je conjugue seulement **IRAI ?**
Je ne suis toujours pas vraiment sûre pour le conjuguer.

Auteur: Lydie - 2008-03-27 10:30	**Répondez sur ce message**

Forums encouraged learners to use structures and vocabulary studied in the textbook by sending messages about related topics.

The lecturer's presentation and postings would follow the course synopsis and be adapted to each learner's interests so as to trigger messages where key notions would be used (Nissen, 2007; Meskill & Anthony, 2005; Germain & Netten, 2004; Atlan, 2000). For example, conversation about holidays or Malaysia would bring learners to use space related prepositions and pronouns. Expressing themselves about what they liked or hated would enable the lecturer to verify that the infinitive was being correctly used. Questions on what they did during the weekend or what they would be doing for Chinese New Year would imply conjugating verbs with the right tenses.

Correcting methods differed according to learners.   Some learners clearly asked to be systematically corrected.

Bonjour...
Bonjour…
Je'mappelle Lydie. […] J'aime manger des speghatties à la bolognaise, la cuisine japonise, la cuisine coreen et la cuisine de mon père ☺. J'aime le français ☹ mais ce difficile. Je n'aime pas les chat, mais….j'ai un chat, il s'appelle Paco ☺.
P/S: Mme Cécile, correct ma grammaire et ma phrase, s'sil vout plaît. ☺ Merci…(Madam, please correct my grammar, thank you.)

Auteur: Lydie - 2008-01-17 10:25   **Répondez sur ce message**

re: Bonjour...

J'aime beaucoup ta présentation. Ton français est bien. Voici les corrections. Si tu ne comprends pas, pose-moi des questions. *(I really enjoyed your presentation. Your French is good. Here are the corrections. If you do not understand, ask me questions.)*

Je'mappelle (m'appelle) Lydie. […] J'aime manger des speghatties (spaghettis) à la bolognaise, la cuisine japonise (japonaise), la cuisine coreen (coréenne) et la cuisine de mon père ☺. J'aime le français ☹ mais ~~ee~~ c'est difficile. Je n'aime pas les chat(s), mais….j'ai un chat, il s'appelle Paco ☺.

P/S: Mme, corrigez ma grammaire et ma phrase, s'il vous plaît. ☺ Merci…

Quelles sont les spécialités de ton papa? *(The lecturer finishes with a question related to the learner's message to keep the conversation going and not to end up with corrections.)*

bonjour!!

Bonjour. Mon prenom français est Clément. J' habite à Klang, Selangor. J' ai vingt ans. Je suis chinoise de malaisie.

Auteur: Clément - 2008-01-11 11:52   **Répondez sur ce message**

Bonjour Clément!

[…] Tu es <u>chinois</u> (chinoise, c'est pour les filles). *(chinois… chinoise is for ladies).*

Auteur: Cécile Gabarre - 2008-01-11 13:09   **Répondez sur ce message**

Others preferred to be indirectly guided. The lecturer would then reuse the same structures or words in the correct way. Tutorial was also given by guiding learners with headsets and by controlling their mouse or keyboard. For learners with pronunciation inhibitions, the lab was the perfect tool as they could directly ask the lecturer whenever they had any doubt or needed practice. Links to self on-line help addressing grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation were also uploaded to the platform which learners could access anytime. Games or karaoke dictations were particularly appreciated.

huhaha

Bonjour à tous...je m'appelle Océane..[…] J'aime manger le **chocolate**. [..] Ma mére est **une ménagère**.

Auteur: Océane - 2008-01-11 11:21   **Répondez sur ce message**

Bonjour!

Je mange beaucoup de **chocolat**. Quel est ton **chocolat** préféré? J'aime le **chocolat** noir avec beaucoup de chocolat par exemple 70% ou 75%. Quand tu dis que ta maman est ménagère, tu veux dire qu'elle est **femme au foyer? (housewife?)**

Auteur: Cécile Gabarre - 2008-01-11 13:38   **Répondez sur ce message**

At the end of the course, learners were more confident and could interact on the various topics required by the curriculum. They could also use what they had studied in other contexts and demonstrated more autonomy. They were still relying on the lecturer for advice to find some learning materials but could manage on their own to communicate with others using translators, dictionaries or correctors (Germain & Netten, 2004; Atlan, 2000).

When interacting on forums, learners seldom mechanically copied and pasted content from the Internet. Instead, they would rather adapt the content to their situation. Copying complete web pages is a common observed practice for assignments such as PowerPoint presentations. This could be interpreted as a sign that learners were not scared or stressed in forums interactions to lose points because of their mistakes which is encouraging in terms of anxiety management.

Anxiety's building mechanisms
We have already mentioned some academic inhibitions regarding language acquisition. Simply being asked about their fears already helped learners to feel better. As for lecturers, they could redesign their approach to address most of the problems. A few lines on learning strategies or materials, such as how to improve reading or listening skills were sufficient in most cases.

Yet, for some learners, their fear of being scolded for making a mistake prevents them from taking part in class activities. Motivation tends to proportionally decrease as they become left out of the group. These *satellite learners* because they learn outside the group, trying to manage on their own did quite well in the forum activity. It gave them an opportunity to start afresh with a new lecturer and through a new project. Unfortunately, affective and practical inhibitions (Liu & Jackson, 2008; White, 2003) were too great and they did not continue with the program. However, we do hope that they gained in self-esteem realizing they could communicate in French and thus, that they had not lost a year as they did manage to learn a new language. The message below illustrates perfectly the dilemma for learners with low marks. Should they try harder or should they give up in favour of a more strategic program where they could obtain better grades?

Malaysia
Pour votre avis quels sont les avantages si nous, des Malais apprenons la langue française ? Pouvez-vous dire que les occasions nous attendent-elles si nous avons étudié la langue française dans ce pays*?* *(According to you, what are the advantages for us to learn French? Do we have opportunities in this country?)*

Auteur: kevin- 2008-03-21 10:24	**Répondez sur ce message**

re: re: Malaysia
Mais j'a entendu dire que la plupart des sociétés se déplacent à d'autres pays comme la Thaïlande et le Viêt-Nam. Quel est votre commentaire de cela ? *(I heard that most companies were moving to other countries like Thailand or Vietnam? What is your opinion regarding this matter?)*

Auteur: kevin- 2008-03-26 15:41	**Répondez sur ce message**

The bulk of anxious messages were about learners' fear before and after exams. In fact, the majority of learners are terrified by exams. They are exhausted with all the memorization and during examination periods, they suffer from practical inhibitions. They cannot cope with their academic duties such as exams, college activities and personal life as illustrated in the following messages.

re: je vais aller mourir!!!!
[…] je ne vais pas bien, parce-que je n'ai pas le temps de finir mes devoirs...... j'ai beaucoup d'activities dans cette semaine et je suis tellement fatigué.... alors, j'ai dormi toujours dans la classe...... SAVE moi!!!!!!!! je suis tension..... (*I am not feeling well because I don't have time to finish my homework. I have a lot of activities this week and I am so tired… so I always sleep in class. Save me. I am stressed.)*

Auteur: Alex - 2008-01-24 10:23	**Répondez sur ce message**

re: Haiz.....
Madame, comment vous vous résoudez le stress? je suis stresse récemment parce que il y a beaucoup d' animation dans ma résidence... Aujoud'hui est le jour de valentine, Je ne célébre pas parce que j'ai beaucoup de cours et aussi animation dans ma résidence... :(... C'est mon premier jour de valentine... Mais bon... *(Madam, how do you manage stress? I have a lot of activities in my college. Today is Valentine's day but I cannot celebrate because I have a lot of classes and activities in my college. It is my first Valentine...but well...)*

Auteur: Clément - 2008-02-14 10:29	**Répondez sur ce message**

Learners keep building stress once the exam is over waiting for results afraid of low marks and of disappointing their lecturers.

Je m'appelle Géraldine
Bonjour. […] J'ai horreur les examens mais j' espère pouvoir obtenir '''1e bon résultant dans l' examen. *(Hi, I hate exams but I hope I can have good results.)*

Auteur: Géraldine - 2008-01-11 11:39	**Répondez sur ce message**

re: re:
Oh là là! Je ne sais pas le résultat d'examen encore mais je pense que ce n'est pas bon. *(I don't have the results yet but I think it is not good.)*

Auteur: Gabrielle - 2008-03-06 10:39	**Répondez sur ce message**

Initially learners were anxious about the new specialty and content courses. Answering their questions and explaining what they would learn and achieve reassured them. Those courses were designed in accordance with their level of French and they would gain the required skills progressively. Showing them sample material or the manual also helped. Open discussion alleviated their stress and questionnaires distributed at the beginning of these courses showed no sign of anxiety. Learners were also quite calm before the final exams compared to their seniors. Having initiated this dialog and knowing the better learners did have a positive impact of the preparation of the course planning on several aspects such as the choice of approach, materials and methods of assessment. Consequently, learners felt prepared and ready. As can be seen in the following examples, almost all learners asked the lecturer for advice regarding their minor courses.

re: madame
Je ne sais pas le résultat parce qu'il est ne parait pas…Madame, est-ce que Français du tourisme et de l'hôtellerie et aussi Français pour les sciences et techniques sont difficiles ? J'ai peur de tout. *(I do not have my results yet. Madam, are French for hospitality and French for sciences difficult? I am scared of everything)*

Auteur: Stéphanie - 2008-03-06 10:34	**Répondez sur ce message**

re: Océane
Alors, c'est la fin du semestre. Merci madame pour des leçons intéressantes. Si vous voulez me parler pendant les vacances, vous pouvez m'appeler .=D A semestre prochain ;D *(So it is the end of the semester. If you want to talk to me during the holydays you can call me. See you next semester.)*

Auteur: Océane - 2008-04-16 11:15   **Répondez sur ce message**

re: re: re: Bonjour!
[…] Madame, j'ai une question. Après nous graduate, quel travail nous pouvons faire? Je suis inquiéte. hehe.... (*I have a question. What job can we do after we graduate? I am worried.*)

Auteur: véronique - 2008-01-24 10:24   **Répondez sur ce message**

Competence is today's keyword meaning knowledge is no longer measured in terms of memory capacity but rather in terms of adaptability to new situations and environments. Thus, the ability to speak a language would be determined by the accuracy and speed an individual might demonstrate in a given situation. Therefore, assessment should follow the trend and offer real task-solving where learners could use their thinking and planning skills as well as their cultural and language skills.

As some learners pointed out, the lab activity taught them how to use forums, platforms and computer software. Incorporating ICT in the curriculum gave learners the experience of real communications in the target language which would definitely be useful in the working world. They have done it for 14 weeks so they could do the same in a working environment. Hopefully, all these strategies combined with real practice will contribute to better prepare them for the job market.

Questionnaires pertaining to the learners' appreciation and knowledge of French language were given before and after the course. They were asked to rate their appreciation on a scale of 1 to 4, where 4 represents a high understanding and 1 a low one. The pre-course score was 3.3, while the post-course score was 3.5 which shows only a small increase, as the students already had an above average liking of the language. Regarding their knowledge of the language, using the same scale, a score of 2.6 was obtained prior to the course while a score of 3.1 was reached after the 14 weeks of instruction which denotes a marked increase. Learners gained assurance in their knowledge in French which is a crucial step towards autonomy as confident learners tend to hesitate less and engage more readily in active learning.

Conclusion
The objectives of this research have been met. Learners' progress, strategies, motivation and inhibitions were indeed assessed from the first week onwards. This combination of on-line forum discussions and digital lab face-to-face tutorial allowed lecturers to evaluate learners' levels, strategies and inhibitions without any anxiety or work overload as compared to a test or a log book.

Data was also immediately available and the statistical tools of the platform provided immediate feedback. Hence, adjustments for each individual were rapidly made according to their interests, level and learning strategies. Motivation was enhanced by the popularity of ICT and by learners' willingness to communicate with each other. Learners were also happier to finally be able to talk to the lecturer. They felt more motivated to learn and developed communicative skills in the target language.

This research was carried out in a fully equipped digital language lab. However, the same experience can be conducted in a regular computer lab connected to the internet. Courses and forums can be created freely with open source CMS providers such as Moodle. Tutorials can be provided on-line through forums and face-to-face interaction, with the lecturer assisting learners in a traditional way. In a blended learning mode, tutorials during lab hours and forum moderation could also be carried out by senior learners.

Finally, one may wonder what happened to the forums once the course was over. Well, with the end of the semester, all learners went back home where most of them did not have any internet access. The community was a learning community and from previous research we did observe that learning stopped during the holidays (Gabarre & Gabarre, 2007). The element keeping forums alive was the fact that interactions happened face-to-face when learners were in the lab. Once learners had left the campus, only one learner continued to send messages to the lecturer. The positive side is that 19 of them came back all eager to start the new semester and ready to study for their new content and specialty courses with an open mind, confidence and no fear.

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