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ARTICLE

PROTOTYPE OF AN ONLINE COURSE, FRENCH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Introduction

This paper highlights the possible contribution of second language (L2) teaching and learning theories and practice to distance education (DE) and discusses the problematic of a web course designed for French Immersion graduates from the designers point of view.

It constructs the theoretical framework of the design strategies drawn from andragogical and didactical concepts, describes the learners needs and course objectives and discusses the impact of organizational academic culture on design.

Theoretical Framework Underlying the Design Strategies

Andragogy has been for many years a recognized area of study in the general field of education and builds upon various accepted philosophical perspectives.

For example, Elias and Merriam (1983) propose six major perspectives in adult education, five of which can be related to L2 education: classical humanism, progressivism, behaviorism, radicalism and contemporary humanism. In L2 education, classical humanism is illustrated by the traditional method in which the learners are presented with lists of words to memorize and texts from major authors to translate. Progressivism has led to the creation of famous language schools such as Berlitz that emphasize oral skills for practical performance outcomes in everyday life situations. Behaviorism has led to the implementation of audio-visual techniques and the practice of oral skills in a controlled and acultural environment. Radicalism is expressed by accelerated L2 learning and suggestopedia (Demers, 1996, Lozanov, 1978). Contemporary humanism is expressed by the communicative approach that has inspired many contemporary trends such as L2 immersion programs. The latter approach has been retained as the most significant for this online L2 DE course prototype.

Contemporary humanism focuses on the learners' needs. In this perspective, the task of the teacher in a traditional (face-to-face) context is to provide the learner with all the material that learning necessitates. In this approach, the learner uses his L2 in a communicative and meaningful context.

Contemporary humanism can be linked to humanistic psychologists such as Rogers (1969), linguists such as Chomsky (1957), modern educators such as Knowles (1980), philosophers such as Popper (1971) and cognitive psychologists such as Piaget (1967). For all these thinkers, the learner plays an important part in the learning process. In fact, the learning process takes place when the learner and the world meet, the learner already having an innate disposition to appropriate the world. As Stern (1984, p.302) puts it: "An innate disposition to process linguistic data, a faculté de langage, or language acquisition device (LAD), was postulated, thus reopening the old debate about innate ideas and the relative importance of biological or environmental factors in the growth of language. Moreover, the principle of linguistic creativity in transformational generative grammar suggested that the customary explanatory concepts of language developments imitation, practice and habit formation had to be critically re-examined."

Until recently, it was problematic to even think of applying the contemporary humanism paradigm in a L2 DE online course setting which would integrate communication and interaction because of the limitations of the technology and because there lacked a solid framework to link methods and techniques that worked in L2 teaching and learning to DE. This paper suggests that it is now possible to teach and learn L2 online in keeping with the contemporary humanism paradigm. To do so, it proposes a Vygotskian socioconstructivist conceptual frame where the teacher not only provides a rich learning environment but is also someone who is an active, communicative participant in learning. Indeed, as Jones and Mercer (1993, p. 22) point out: "Vygotsky did not construe the learner as the lone organism of the behaviorists or Piagetians acting on and adapting to some impersonal environment. Instead, human learning presupposes a specific social nature."

In fact, Chomsky, Piaget and Vygotsky could all be seen as constructivists (in line with Kant) and in relation to L2 teaching and learning they all oppose the behaviorist approach of Skinner (in line with Hume). But they do not say the same thing. For Piaget, language learning is an integral part of the development of intelligence while for Chomsky, the language acquisition device (LAD) is not in direct relation with the general development of intelligence and only for Vygotsky (1978) is the social aspect of language so important (of course Chomsky says that the LAD will develop according to the environment but he does not insist on that). In that respect, the communicative approach that is so important today (although it is possible to see in Comenius an early representative of that approach) is best seen and understood in Vygotsky's socioconstructivism. For that approach, it is important to learn or more specifically acquire a language not only in context but also in interaction with others. That is why the building of a good and pleasant atmosphere is of the utmost importance in a face-to-face L2 class and that is why the creation of a community of learners, including the teacher seen as a guide or a facilitator, where the transactional distance is low.

Many techniques do exist in L2 face-to-face teaching to facilitate exchanges among students without impairing the conversational/communication flow that could inspire DE as technology permits: for example, the use of gestures to correct speech errors without impairing the speech flow or of brainstorming and dreams to inspire creativity or even relaxation and role playing techniques to lower inhibitions and anxiety level. On the subject of facilitating exchanges, Carver (1995, p. 203) says that: "Language teaching and teacher education for language teaching are professional areas that have a lot to offer the specification of quality in this sense; I am thinking of well established concepts such as learner strategies, collaborative learning, individual differences, collaborative assessment, process syllabuses, authenticity, integrative testing, self-access, group activities, critical reflexion, classroom-based research. These concepts constitute not only a current research agenda but also a coherent set of values. So as distance education has impacted in a major way on traditional higher education, so perhaps, in a less dramatic way, language teaching might contribute to the emerging reconceptualisation of distance education.

All these techniques are not easily replicable in an online context, particularly those regarding speaking and listening skills (Murphy-Judy, 1997). However, alternative ways of using technology available to the greatest majority can be adapted to an online environment to enhance communication and interaction. As Jones and Mercer (1993) postulate, if we accept Vygotsky's assumption of learning as communicative, the implications for our conception of the role of the computer in the learning process as a medium through which the learner and teacher can communicate offers tremendous possibilities not only for the use of the computer in the classroom as they propose but indeed in an online L2 course environment. For instance, a writing activity using email can be designed to enhance communication and interactivity between learners and facilitators (each participant having the opportunity to add to the story). In a L2 online context, synchronous or asynchronous exchanges (CMC, email) promote authentic exchanges as opposed to textbook reading and writing (Desmarais, 1998). Based on research on the use of telematics in L2 teaching and learning, Desmarais (1998, pp. 80-81) lists benefits to the learners such as: 1) increases motivation to produce not only because the writer anticipates feedback on his work but also because he anticipates authentic responses from the monitor or other learners; 2) increases motivation to produce higher quality material (syntax, style, structure) because the writer (learner) wants to be understood; 3) increases the complexity of written material as opposed to oral production; 4) increases time on task; 5) improves vocabulary; 6) enhances in-depth reflexion on the subject matter; 7) alters the role of the teacher who then becomes an equal collaborating member of the group; 8) develops reading skills because the learner must understand the message before he responds; 9) enhances the learner's responsibility for his learning. Indeed, in a L2 telematic environment, the learner must develop strategies and must communicate in his L2 without relying on his maternal language.

These factors related to L2 teaching and learning explain why an important component of this online course prototype is aimed at the construction of a virtual community of learners because it sees L2 language teaching and learning as a social action based on communication and interaction - well established concepts that have been common to L2 teaching and learning for decades - but most importantly, reflect an approach that is in keeping with Vygotsky's socioconstructivist assumption of learning as communicative. Using asynchronous CMC for brainstorming, reactions to assigned readings or as a space for telling tall tales would benefit the learners in many ways as listed previously. In this social context, the computer becomes a medium for expression where the rules are known to all as it is customary in a face-to-face L2 class and where

the activities are not competitive but collaborative and interactive. The importance of awareness of the rules for learners in a C M C environment is also underlined by Henri and Lundgren-Cayrol (2001). They argue that in order to achieve a collaborative environment it is of the utmost importance to inform the learners of what is expected of them, the role they have to play in their own learning, the objectives to be achieved. These authors also explain that too often, the C M C environment is mistaken as a place for idle chat while other studies (Rouzie, 2002; Fahy, Crawford and Ally, 2001; Lyman, 1996) note that this virtual learning space is not immune to flaming or aggressive behavior. It would be informative to see whether flaming still occurs in an environment that encourages communication, interaction and sharing as opposed to "a common culture that tolerates and values aggressiveness" as Lyman (1996, p. 44) suspects.

Learners' Needs and Course Objectives

Since 1965, French immersion programs have produced a considerable number of graduates in Canada .

These students have a functional knowledge of the French language but their French is sometimes full of mistakes (Demers, P. and G. Bérubé, 1996), some of which thought to be fossilized according to other researchers (Hammersley, 1989) in the field of L2 teaching and learning. Moreover, the philosophical, linguistic and educational perspectives underlying these French immersion programs emphasize the use of the language but not necessarily the study of grammatical rules or even of the language itself.

Therefore, even if immersion students can use the target language, sometimes very effectively, they lack accuracy. The mistakes they make are not unique to these students but common mistakes for English speakers learning French. These mistakes are generally predictable (whether they come from the target language, French, or the dominant language, English), identified and can be categorized and corrected (Allain, 1996).

At this point, there are no known grammars or exercise books whose goals are specifically intended to correct these mistakes. However, there are some manuals focusing on diverse aspects of the language such as Pardo's (1999) *Vive le subjonctif*: This manual presents, in a Vygotskian perspective, a variety of exercises on the use of the subjunctive (a major problem for French immersion graduates). Indeed, in his manual, Pardo (1999, p. xxxi) says that " L.S.Vygotsky (1896-1934), Soviet psychology pioneer, understands learning on the basis of a subject/social environment interaction. Among the four options seen (environmentalist: Skinner; innest: Chomsky; constructivist: Piaget; sociocognitive: Vygotsky), Vygotsky's is the only one giving a major role to the social factors in language development " (authors' translation from French).

The fundamental goal of the prototype discussed in this paper is thus to provide the French immersion graduates (and even intermediate learners of French whose dominant language is English) with the means they need to improve their accuracy in French by giving them exercises designed to correct targeted mistakes they make when using French. In this optic, the prototype provides a grammatical recall, exercises aimed at improving skills introduced by the grammatical recall, a link to the correct answers, to the exercises as well as another recall and more exercises should the learner have encountered difficulties with the initial exercises. This particular aspect of the course focuses mainly on the self-correction of targeted errors. This approach to the correction of errors is in keeping with Calvé's (1992) assumption that the most effective techniques are thought to be self-correction, correction by other learners and indirect clues (the prototype offers trigger images and texts to that effect) and systematic correction by the educator. Calvé's assumption about the correction of errors being equally important in a DE context, explains why the learners in this prototype are directed only at the end of the exercise to verify their answers (as opposed to a design involving instant correction by the computer). In a face-to-face context, the idea is to avoid over-reliance on the teacher whereas in a DE context, the idea is to avoid over-reliance on programmed computer answers provided by hyperlinks or other means.

Furthermore, French immersion graduates are also adult learners and, as demonstrated by many studies, they need a rich experiential environment (Henri, F., K. Lundgren-Cayrol 2001) that will enable them to learn by themselves (Krashen, 1981). An attempt to provide such a rich experiential environment in this DE context has been made by providing interactive components (poetry and creative writing) which offer the opportunity for contacts with others and a forum to express views derived from life experiences. In this optic and in keeping with Vygotsky's socioconstructivism, the design of the prototype rests on an approach that seeks intentionally to create a community of learners " that embody the ideal conditions of learning insofar as possible, including rules regarding equal opportunity to participate, role reciprocity, focusing on issues, hearing alternative arguments" (Mezirow, 1991, p.207).

Providing a rich experiential environment is therefore the second goal of this prototype. This goal is reached by guiding students in accessing a number of French sites where participants will be able to find a variety of authentic documents they might need to improve their knowledge of the language, either by gathering information about French and French culture in general, or simply by using French as a tool to acquire knowledge about the world in general or to communicate and interact with other French users, including native speakers or other French L2 learners.

Since interaction with others is equally valued as individual needs, decisions were made to accommodate individual needs as well as the needs of learners in interaction with others. That required maintaining a delicate balance between the two since the learners can move at their own pace throughout the modules. Indeed, whereas the use of hyperlinks for the correction of errors might be expeditious, they can also be used more adequately to provide definitions, synonyms, translations, access to dictionaries or digital texts so that learners are directed to a greater variety of activities individually or in groups.

In addition, the prototype also includes didactic material which may be useful to both FL2 teachers and learners. This facet of the course is intended to broaden and enrich the community of learners in interaction. The added touch for the learners is that they are aware of the aims and objectives of the course as well as the underlying approach (described before each exercise and activity are undertaken) and the added touch for L2 teachers is that it provides them with a useful guide.

The Impact of Organizational Academic Culture on Design

Although there are some limitations to overcome in L2 online teaching and learning, careful planning in pedagogical design and the integration of communication technologies, it is possible to provide quality education at relatively low costs. However, as Jennings (1995, p. 112) was stating seven years ago "in many cases, organizational structures and systems have lagged behind the range of possibilities in telematics-based distance teaching." This remains true in 2002. The barriers to the development of online courses in a traditional university have to do with institutional culture, organizational structure, funding, staffing, learner support facilities and a misunderstanding of DE in general: for example, over reliance on technicians to design courses, lack of awareness of the impact of design or of the changing role of the teacher in a DE context and all that it implies. Some of these factors, if not resolved, can seriously compromise the success of online courses, particularly L2 online courses where pedagogical strategies with a focus on communication and interaction between teacher and learners and learners with other learners are weaved in by design.

At present, there is a lack of incentives or rewards to devote time and energy to the development of online courses. Indeed, online course development is not considered as academic research and the time allocated to online teaching is not considered as a teaching task. Indeed, as Henri and Lundgren-Cayrol (2001, p. 75) point out : "the moderator must rigorously plan the various steps and, with very precise directives inform the learners of the rules of participation applied in each forum; this represents an additional task already burdened by the added psychosocial animator and cognitive and organizational supportive roles assumed (authors' translation from French)."

As far as the issue of funding for DE is concerned, it seems that traditional universities are getting increasingly involved in the production of online courses. However, even though funding is available for the design of online courses, there seems to be minimal attention paid as to how the course is to be sustained over time (Hallam, B. 1995) once it is implemented and the initial funding allotted for design has been used.

Issues of learner support (administrative or technical) need to be discussed, elaborated and refined in order to provide assistance in a timely and seamless fashion. These issues if not resolved can seriously undermine all the efforts being made to produce a course that aims to offer quality and flexibility to DE learners.

Conclusion

In this paper, a theoretical framework underlying the design of an online FL2 course prototype has been elaborated: that framework relies on Vygotsky's socioconstructivism. The learners' needs and course objectives have been stated: the learners need to focus on the correction of specific mistakes in a rich cultural, communicative and interactive environment and the objectives of the course are to provide them with the necessary material that supports and encourages skilled performance experienced as play. The possible contribution of L2 teaching and learning theories and practice to DE has also been discussed.

Until now, L2 teaching and learning in a DE environment was very difficult to achieve for those who value a communicative and interactive approach. As this is now increasingly feasible with the advances of technology and telematics, this area of knowledge and practice will grow as barriers to online course development disappear as will research in this new area.

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