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Grappling with grammar on a virtual learning platform: the case of first year French students at the University of Wollongong

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Grappling with grammar on a virtual learning platform: the case of first year French students at the University of Wollongong

This paper reports on an online discussion forum that was created on the University of Wollongong's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to aid and support the learning of French grammar at beginner/false beginner level. The aim was to provide a blended learning situation which combines face to face teaching with online learning using multimedia resources. The key objective of the online forum is to encourage undergraduate students take an active role in their language learning through interaction with peers. Methodology draws on educational practice influenced by a constructivist approach, particularly on the importance of building one's knowledge and linguistic skills through interaction and cooperation with others. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of data show examples of peer exchanges acting as activators in the meta-learning that was occurring outside class hours including reflection and independent language learning awareness.

asynchronous online discussion, collaboration, cooperation, mixed proficiency

Introduction

A continual decline in student numbers in modern foreign languages at secondary and higher education levels in the United Kingdom (The Guardian 19 August 2011) and Australia over the last two decades has forced universities to restructure and rationalise their language departments and language provision.

The University of Wollongong faced with having to cut costs while coping with greater numbers of language beginners in year one, responded by adapting its curriculum and teaching methodology to suit large classes so the same number of contact hours (six hours of instruction per week) could be retained (McCarthy 2004).

Currently, the first year of French studies is the entry point to a French major or a French minor. It assumes no previous knowledge of the language, and the syllabus focuses on communication skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) and a solid foundation in French grammar. Students frequently come from various Faculties and educational backgrounds and have different levels of proficiency, which can vary between zero and five years. As a result, the first year of French language studies includes students with mixed proficiency.

One of the key challenges faced by first-year Australian students enrolled in French language studies is the lack of grammar knowledge and awareness. In the majority of cases, Australian students starting a languages degree at university have not been formally taught English grammar at secondary school. Consequently, even those with a high mark in French at the Higher School Certificate level (equivalent to the Advanced level in the UK and the baccalauréat in France) often do not have a good enough understanding and knowledge of French grammar to enter directly into the second year of study, where accuracy in the foreign language in written and oral communication is required. The students who enter directly into year two have to take a placement test in the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). These students have often spent some time in France or a francophone country, studying abroad or staying with a French or francophone family.

In the last few years, language teaching at university level has taken another challenging turn as a result, first, of recommendations made by the Bradley Review in 2008 that 40% of young Australians should possess a degree by 2020, and, more recently, decisions by the current Federal Government to fund up to 10% above the set enrolment targets for each university (The Times Higher Education Supplement 21 July 2011, p36). Consequent increases in the number of students coming to university with a range of language abilities, compounded by limited resources in the university sector, are encouraging a rethinking of approaches to teaching and learning. The aim is to develop a teaching and learning environment in a creative manner to cope better with the means available.

A most appropriate strategy, based on our previous experience in the United Kingdom, appears to be in a successful integration of information and communication technology into the curriculum to support, complement and extend the teaching and learning experiences (Bissonauth-Bedford and Coverdale-Jones 2002).

Online discussion, collaboration and active learning

As we are aware, the current generation of students comes to university with a sophisticated knowledge of technology tools and habits, and many of them are conversant with and committed

to communicating through social networking sites (Godwin-Jones 2009; Lockyer et al. 2010). At university level, students use the online environment (for example, discussion boards) to interact with peers and teachers (Ellis et al. 2006, p245). Although "little is known about learning through discussion" (Ellis et al. 2006, p254), research has shown that active learning through discussions is linked with the feeling of being connected to other members of a learning community (McNamara & Burton 2009), and with the ability to make links between online contributions and the aims of the course task (Ellis et al. 2006). Moreover, research into the quality of student learning has revealed that encouraging or requiring students to interact and support each other on course content deepens their cognitive understanding (Biggs 1999).

Drawing from Vygotsky's (1978) principle of the Zone of Proximal Development, Gibbons and Hammond (2002, p3) have argued that scaffolded learning in the form of social interaction and guidance by a more experienced learner is key to cognitive development and successful learning. In his literature review of technology choice in language teaching, Stockwell (2007, p110) points out that the focus in most studies on aspects of grammar has been on practice quizzes, teaching new grammatical expressions and improving accuracy. Researchers have either developed their own materials or incorporated free sources or commercial courseware applications for online activities. There is a relatively small number of studies into undergraduate language classes that have used online discussions to enhance the grammar knowledge and awareness of students to complement traditional methods of teaching. One example that can be cited is from Van Deusen-Scholl et al. (2005), who combined online chat with in-class activities to improve accuracy in German at beginner and advanced levels at the University of Pennsylvania. Another study is in the curriculum design area, where results of diagnostic grammar testing at first- and final-year undergraduate levels have helped teachers improve the grammar syllabus in modern languages at the University of Ulster (Barr & Gillespie 2003).

Instruction in aspects of grammar is being increasingly integrated in the form of self-study in online language courses (Cushion & Hémard 2002; Sachdev & Ticheler 2009). Although these activities are interactive, their main aim is to reinforce existing knowledge with integrated reminders, practice exercises and answers. Researchers at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies (SOAS) and University College London (UCL) are developing a range of mobile learning material called "flexi-packs" for a variety of Asian languages to integrate traditional lessons and self-study (Sachdev & Ticheler 2009). Although these "flexi-packs" are mainly for individual study, further development is envisaged by Sachdev and Ticheler (2009) to encourage collaborative learning by "creating a community of learners ... beneficial to students' experiences ... by using communication tools such as discussion boards in tandem with Flexi-Packs".

Building on the Vygotskian principle, Little (2002) has argued that social interaction and scaffolded learning can lead to autonomy and independence in learning, where learners can develop a capacity for reflection on their own learning. Although the present study is not about achieving independence in language learning or learner autonomy *per se*, it aims at developing a teaching and learning environment to foster the following graduate attributes (Hoban et al. 2004), as set out in the course subject outline: increasing knowledge and awareness of the French language and culture, and encouraging students to communicate and develop their independent language learning skills by evaluating information using a variety of sources. As Esposito and Weaver (2011) have pointed out, teamwork and problem-solving skills contribute to students' employability. Moreover, investigation by Wilson (2005) has shown that "team-based exercises and structured group-problem solving activities enhance learning" (in Esposito & Weaver 2011, p6).

Despite the benefits of online discussions in promoting collaborative and student-centred learning, their use in higher education is more widespread in distance and postgraduate online courses than in undergraduate courses (Graham et al. 2001; Barr & Gillespie 2003; Hazari 2004; Beckmann & Kilby 2008; Lockyer et al. 2010; Mazur et al. 2010). McNamara and Burton (2009) pointed to two reasons for the low usage of discussion boards at undergraduate level: they are highly time-consuming to facilitate and that there is no consensus on how to assess the discussions. Designing an appropriate discussion board may well be time-consuming and cannot be standardised, as its design would depend on the mode of delivery and student numbers. In addition, in addressing the question of who should do the assessing, it can be argued that assessment methods should be left to tutors, since they need to be aligned with the learning outcomes of the course and the research framework of the study as in the present study (see section on data collection).

The success of asynchronous discussion forums (where participants post messages for others to read whenever they happen to log in, as opposed to real-time chats) resides in their design and careful planning by the instructor, as well as in their ability to foster deep learning in students (Harris & Sandor 2007; Andresen 2009, p250). In their evaluation of online forum discussions, McNamara & Burton (2009, p3) have highlighted three factors crucial for learning: organisation of the forum, motivations for students to participate in the first place and opportunities for them to participate *effectively*. In their investigation of how and what students learn through online discussions, Ellis et al. (2006, p254), recommend that "worthwhile learning" is most likely to occur when students are encouraged to think about their learning from a holistic perspective and to reflect on postings and evaluate them in a critical manner.

These considerations and recommendations have informed the design and assessment method of our discussion forum. This study involves the following elements of constructivism: learners' collaboration, learners' cooperation and learners' multiple representations of content/idea/concept (Koochang et al. 2009, p14). The assessment is adapted from Hazari's evaluation method (2004, p351), which is based on holistic scoring.

The present study researched the three following questions:

- (i) How do students collaborate and cooperate to create or construct an enhanced awareness and knowledge of French grammar?
- (ii) How do more-experienced students share their knowledge to scaffold their less-advanced peers?
- (iii) What evidence is there that students improved their grammar skills and awareness as a result of their participation in the discussions?

Pilot study

A pilot study was carried out in semester one of 2009 in the first year of French studies to ascertain the form the forum was going to take: small or large discussion groups. Two factors were taken into account to determine the size of the groups: a 20% increase in student numbers from the previous year (80 students in 2008 and 120 students in 2009) and students' previous experience of learning in French. A small questionnaire distributed in week one revealed that students' experience in learning French ranged from complete beginner to five years of study. We decided to put students into small groups of four students and mixed beginners with non-beginners, so the groups would be balanced in terms of language experience, and the more-experienced could support their less-experienced peers.

A demonstration session was scheduled during lecture time in week two of the semester to show students how to access the online discussion board on the VLE. There were 30 groups at the beginning of the semester. All groups were asked to exchange their thoughts on grammar aspects studied in the face-to-face lectures and seminars on a weekly basis. As this was a pilot, the interactions in the first semester were not assessed. At the end of semester one, a one-question written feedback survey was conducted to find out whether students felt the discussions had been beneficial to their learning of grammar. The responses revealed that the small-group model did not work in the same way for every group, for various reasons. The main problem seemed to be a lack of communication, since some students did not respond to the postings made by other members of the group. Those who had posted their thoughts admitted to their disappointment, as they felt they had been "speaking to themselves" for several weeks. In many cases, the breakdown in communication was due to students dropping out of the course during the semester, since the cut-off date for withdrawal without penalty is week five in a 13-week semester. In the successful groups, however, it was clear that students were benefitting from discussions by collaborating and helping each other, and this was largely due to some members acting as leaders in the group and initiating discussions every week.

For the second semester of 2009, a change of strategy was implemented following feedback from the pilot study, and after a most fortunate accident towards the end of semester one, when the lecturer left the discussions open to the whole class instead of confining it to the small groups. Students commented upon how useful it was to read postings from the whole class and to learn from peers. Consequently, in the second semester, the whole class was allowed to contribute to the discussions as one group. From a logistical point of view, this was made easier by a smaller class size, as the numbers dropped from 120 to 60 students between sessions. This group was mainly composed of students having completed their first semester successfully and included some direct-entry students who had obtained the prerequisites elsewhere.

Main study and data collection

The grammar discussion forum, as a language learning tool, was housed on the Virtual Learning System and was available asynchronously for the duration of the second semester in 2009. This system provides a wide range of tools to support online teaching and learning. In this instance, the major function used was the "discussions" function, and more specifically, the "threaded discussion topic" function, which shows progression in the student exchanges. In the second semester of year one, the discussion topics were inspired by the three main aspects of French grammar studied in semester two: the past tense (passé-composé and imparfait), object pronouns (direct and indirect) and reported speech (Figure 1).

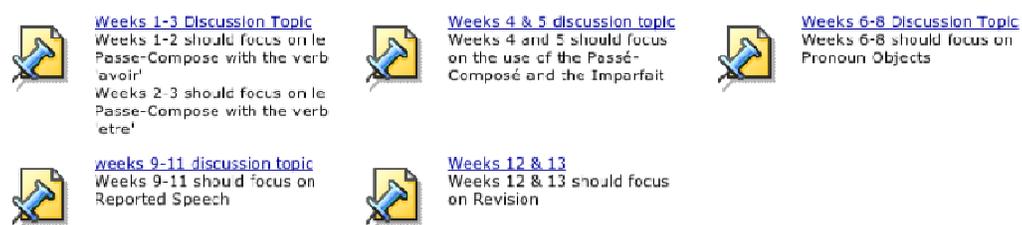


Figure 1: Access to the weekly discussions on the VLE

Students accessed the discussion forum at any time by clicking on the weekly icons (Figure 1). They could post, reply to and forward messages, but they could not delete or edit their own or their peers' messages once posted (although these functions are provided within the discussion function of the VLE). Nor were the posts graded within the VLE. All students had access to the forum, and there was no group structure controlling access.

The discussion forum was integrated into the formal assessment, since research conducted on online learning suggests that students will not participate in a task unless it is structured into a course (Wozniak & Silveira, 2004). To motivate students and encourage a high quantity of discussion, the forum was integrated into the continuous assessment as a participation mark worth 10% of the semester's mark.

There was only one compulsory requirement: a minimum of five discussions directly related to the grammar aspect studied in the semester (in practice, this worked out to a minimum of 10 posts per student over the course of the semester). Exchanges could be in either English or French. In addition, the first person to start the discussion was asked to indicate the topic of discussion; for example, "agreement of past participles with the passé-composé".

In week one, students had a practical tutorial in the IT labs, where they could access the forum individually, and were given an instruction sheet. In the first couple of weeks of the semester, a stimulus for discussion was given in the form of a personal example:

"Ce week-end je suis allée voir un concert classique à l'Opéra de Sydney. C'était ma première fois à l'Opéra House et c'était très impressionnant. Et vous, qu'avez-vous fait de spécial ce week-end?" (This week-end I went to see a classic concert at the Sydney Opera House. It was my first time at the Opera House and it was very impressive. And you, have you done something special this week-end?).

It can be noted that direct input from the teachers was deliberately kept minimal, since the main aim of the forum was to encourage students to initiate discussions, interact and be rewarded for it. Hazari's evaluation method (2004, p351) based on holistic scoring was adapted to the present study. The assessment criteria were kept simple and flexible, with a minimum of 10 postings per student over the semester, and a score determined by sorting the whole set of discussions for a given student in chronological order and giving an overall score out of 10.

The mark scheme awarded a range of one to ten marks for weekly discussions based on regularity of postings, content of posting (related to grammar and/or another aspect of French) and interaction with others (Figure 2).

Marks (out of 10)	Assessment Criteria
8-10 marks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - regular postings over the semester, minimum of seven on grammar and any other aspect of French - interaction with others and adding to discussions by providing relevant responses, and/or by illustrating a point with examples - leading discussions and/or encouraging group discussion
4-7 marks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - several postings (fewer than seven over the semester but not all at once) - exchanges related to grammar and/or any other aspect of French language/culture - interaction with others and adding to discussions by providing relevant responses - helping others understand and encouraging follow-up discussion

	from other students
0-3 marks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - irregular postings (fewer than four over the semester, can be all at once) - exchanges can be related to grammar, but must not always be - post has to bear relation to other students' posts - comments or opinions with little or no effort to interact with others and help class discussion - no postings over the semester

Figure 2: Marking Scheme and Assessment criteria for online discussions

Results and discussion

Using the forum as a learning and social platform

A quantitative analysis of the data on read messages (Figure 3a, y axis) and posted messages (Figure 3b, y axis) suggests that the forum was well used as a peer-support and learning platform.

A comparative analysis between read and posted messages shows that students were reading more than they were posting throughout the semester, which illustrates a high degree of engagement, although participation was less and more varied. Approximately 12 students read more than 500 messages over the semester, three students over 1000 messages and one student over 2500 messages. As far as posted messages were concerned, 17 students posted more than 10 messages whilst half of the group posted between five and 10 messages in the semester.

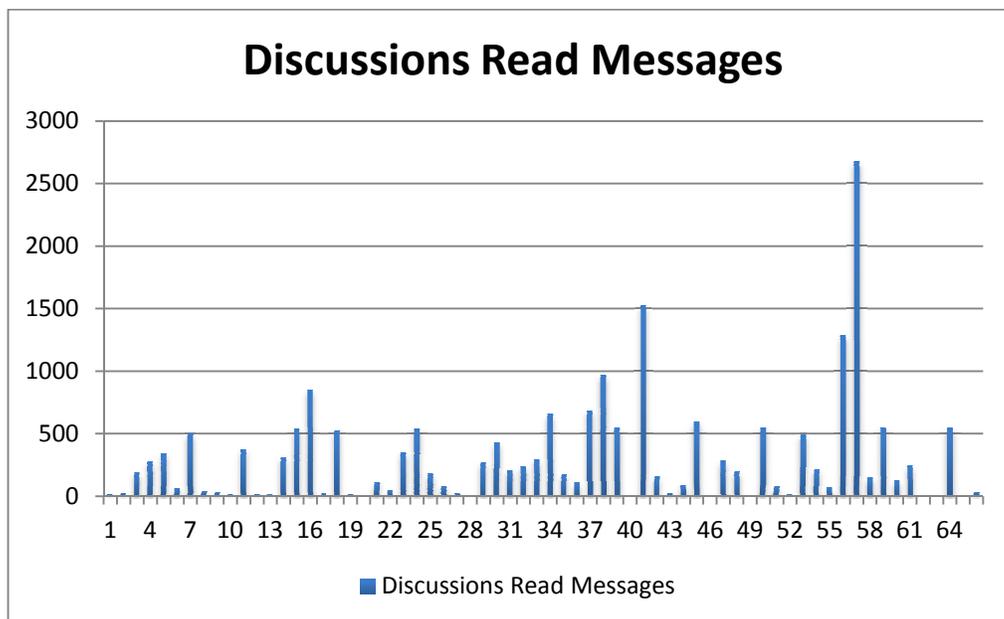


Figure 3a: Number of student messages read during the semester

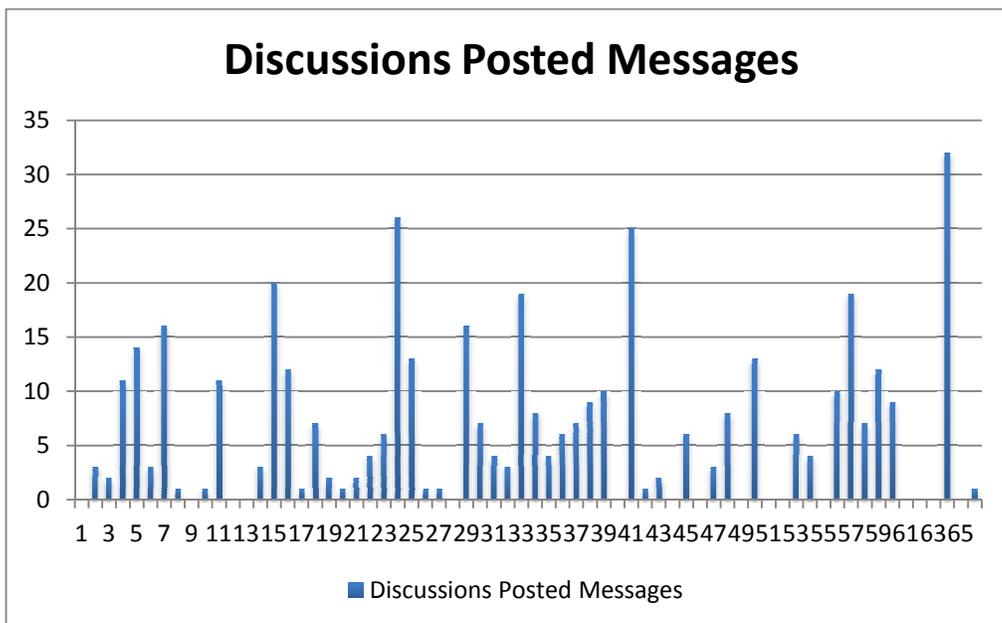


Figure 3b: Number of student messages posted during the semester

A qualitative analysis of the content of the interactions also reveals that students used the discussions as a learning platform, as well as a social platform. Those who felt they could help by virtue of their more advanced knowledge or understanding did so almost instantly. This gave an element of spontaneity to the interactions. Experienced students provided excellent explanations to the grammar-related questions, as shown in the examples below; others built on these explanations and provided feedback, whilst yet others asked for views and opinions from their peers and sometimes the teachers, when they felt unsure of their own responses. What is clear is that requests for help to the teachers in the discussions were minimal, which shows that students tried to work on their own and rely on their peers as much as possible.

A detailed qualitative analysis of the data was carried out on the exchanges of four students representative of this mixed proficiency student population: two beginners, students A and B; and two more advanced, students C and D; these four students are studying French as one of their major subjects and thus will be able to take part in follow-up studies in the near future. These students were chosen in part for this reason, but particularly because their involvement and approaches to the discussion forum are representative of the three types of learning that were occurring: Moreover,

- i. building and sharing of grammar knowledge and awareness
- ii. making connections between language, culture and society through experience and reflection
- iii. sharing of language-learning tips and strategies

The first two categories were expected as part of an activity fostering cooperation and sharing of knowledge by initiating, explaining and commenting on postings. The third category, however, came as a pleasant surprise, since the content of the postings went beyond the expected activity and revealed a meta-linguistic awareness of the relationship between language, culture and society

by evaluating and reflecting on other postings. This is now discussed in the following paragraphs.

Building and sharing grammar knowledge and awareness

The two students who illustrate this category best are student A, who is a beginner, and student C, who is more advanced. Student A has been very involved in the Forum (1521 messages read and 25 messages posted in the semester). Although he is a beginner in French, student A has a sound knowledge of English grammar and technical terms, which he has displayed on numerous occasions. He does not initiate discussions much, but contributes to the exchanges by commenting and by sharing his knowledge, as seen in Figure 3c. When someone asks about agreement of direct-object pronouns, for example, student A contributes to the discussions by explaining the grammatical point and comparing it with English (see Example 1 below). Most of his explanations are clear with illustrations, thus showing that he knows the subject well and can apply his previous knowledge of linguistics.

Example 1

Subject: Direct-object agreement

Student 1: I'm having trouble understanding the whole deal with the direct objects/agreeing or disagreeing. Can anyone possibly sum up in simple terms?

Student A: Ok, here goes:

Objects, in French and English, normally come after the verb. However, you can make a fairly awkward phrase in English and French with the object coming before the verb; the example on page 64 of EoF [Elements of French] is [...]

"Les cassettes qu'elle m'a données". (The tapes that she gave me. The m' is the French word for "to me" hiding in there somewhere).

In this case the object is "les cassettes" and, since the object comes before the verb, the verb agrees with it.

These cases are pretty rare, but we'll be using this rule a lot when we learn direct object pronouns because in French they normally come before the verb and they make the verb agree with the gender of the pronoun. But don't worry about it yet...

Many students in the class benefited from this type of peer explanation and support, as there was evidence of comprehension posted by a number of students thanking student A for a "very clear and helpful" explanation "that helped clarify things".

Another student who is active in scaffolding learning is student C (540 messages read and 20 messages posted), who is more experienced, with the equivalent of a HSC or advanced level in French. Like student A, she does not initiate many discussions. Her exchanges focus mainly on explaining and helping others with grammatical questions (see Figure 3c) relating to points she has already mastered from her previous knowledge of French grammar (see Example 2 below). Although she states the rules of agreement with the verb "avoir" (to have) clearly to one of her peers, giving an illustration would have been useful in making the notions sound less abstract and more real.

Example 2

Subject: *N'y???*

Student 2: Just a quick question... does ne and y elide to form n'y???

Also...y doesn't alter the past participle does it (because it is primarily used as an indirect object pronoun)?

Student 3: yes, ne and y elides to form n'y although i'm not too sure on the relationship between y and the past participle sorry!

Student C [Student 2]: remember that the past participle only changes for verbs taking avoir as the auxiliary if there is a preceding direct object so it doesn't matter.

Between her earlier exchanges at the beginning of the semester and later ones in the semester (week nine), student C's responses denote a clear improvement in the way she engages with her peers, when she gives a detailed explanation of the rule with illustrations (Example 3).

Example 3

Subject: *Commands*

Student 4: Bonjour; Just went over the test for "commands". I found them a little tricky.

You have to put de or d' before the verb. Is that right?

The verb then has to agree with the subject. Merci.

Student C: Bonjour [student 4], usually with commands it goes:

de/d' (ne pas) (pronoun if there is one) infinitive verb

with commands the verb doesn't agree because you've got the de at the front so for example:

"faites-moi une omelette"

becomes

(after the he said to her bit)

"de lui faire une omelette."

hope that's a bit clearer, bonne chance

Student 4: Merci! There is so much to remember.

Nevertheless, she makes a slight error in the terms when giving the agreement rule in an infinitive prepositional phrase "the verb does not agree with the 'de' in front", which in fact is not totally accurate, since the rule is that there is no agreement in phrases with 'de + infinitive'. No one seems to have picked up on this small error, due perhaps to a lack of detailed knowledge at this stage.

Despite a couple of gaps, Student C contributes to the discussions by helping to build the knowledge of her less-advanced peers by providing clear, accurate and detailed explanations and reformulations of notions from the viewpoint of an Anglophone learner.

As a learner, she does not take the risk – unlike student A – of explaining a point she is unsure about, nor does she invite class discussion. She comes across as wanting to help others through her numerous interventions, and gives the impression of having good knowledge of grammar and the French language.

In terms of personal improvement resulting from online discussions, the postings suggest that her own progress is due to independent learning and effective reflection, thus countering the view of the socio-constructivist paradigm that learning requires the mediation of others. In contrast, these results would seem to illustrate the psycholinguistic paradigm in language acquisition (Lamy & Hampel, 2007, p119) that some type of cognition requiring understanding of concepts and internalising of rules occurs progressively at an individual level.

Connecting language, culture and society

Student B, also a French beginner, is perhaps the best example for this category, with over 500 messages read and 10 messages posted). Her approach is very different from those of students A, C and D in that she does not seem altogether interested by grammar. Although she does fulfil the assessment criteria for this activity by having ten posts for the semester, and has initiated more discussions than her three peers (Figure 3c), her posts are comments related to her interests in the French culture and how it compares to her own Australian culture.

Her linguistic skills in grammar are on the weak side and she reflects on the reason for a 0 score in the passé-composé (perfect tense) test by acknowledging her error (see Example 4 below).

Nevertheless, she is very supportive of her peers.

Example 4

Student B: Yeah, I got 0/100 for the Passé Composé because I thought I only needed to put in the subject and the verb. Il n'est pas un [sic] petite erreur, il est un[sic] grande erreur!!! [It is not a small mistake, it's a big mistake]. I hope everyone else did better than [sic] me!

Her posts clearly show that she thinks the forum should not be limited to grammatical discussions and understanding the rules and terms of a foreign language. Her interactions are mainly focused on sharing her enthusiasm for French music and cinema with the class, and making connections with her own culture, as shown in Examples 5 and 6 below. It can be noted that student B switches between English and French as her language skills improve over the semester. Although language-switching was noted on numerous occasions in the students' exchanges (greetings, taking leave, giving support), its impact on language acquisition was outside the scope of this study.

Example 5

Subject: la culture français [sic]

Student B: Bonjour! D'accord, so I know it's not really related to the subject of reported speech. But for those who want to immerse themselves, or find out more about "la culture de France" I just thought I'd share some bands I found, as well as a really good site for French pop culture. Des group[sic] de musique et chanteurs français sont: Carla Bruni (of course) BB Brunes Malajube Plastic Bertrand (these guys sing that mars bar ad) Camille Tonton David (He does reggae). Listening to French music is good because you do not have to feel guilty about it. For anyone else who gave it a try, let me know of any good bands or movies or websites. Vive la France!

Example 6

Subject: Le film

Student 5: ça va? I was unable to see the film on Monday night, For those who saw it I'd just like to know if you all enjoyed it? It got some very good reviews.

Student B: Hey guys! The film ["Entre les murs", titled in English "The Class"] was really good- I'd recommend it. It was interesting to see the different schooling system they [the French] have, and also their society (not to sound like a nutter or anything). [...] SBS [Australian television channel] also have late-night films that are sometimes French but always fun, or at least interesting, to watch!! A bientot!

Student 6: Hi! I'm bummed that I missed the film as well. I really like "Joyeux Noel" (sorry, can't be bothered finding accents). It's based on a true story about the ceasefire between the troops on Christmas Eve of 1914 (I think). It sounds really dry but is actually kind of fun.

Student 7: The film was really interesting. I just loved the fact that it was a french class that the film centred on. It meant a major reason I identified with the students was their struggle completely grasping the intrinsics of french grammar - gah! Another great film where a character's french isnt 100% is "La science des rêves", starring Gael Garcia Bernal and Charlotte Gainsbourg. Anyway, yep, "The Class" was fantastic; you should definitely get your hands on a copy of the DVD.

Sharing learning tips and strategies

Student D, who, like Student C, is more experienced, is perhaps what one could call a minimalist in terms of number of exchanges (43 read messages and four posted messages). He does not initiate any exchange (Figure 3c), and his small number of exchanges is focused on commenting and helping others by giving accurate explanations and sharing language-learning strategies and useful tips from his prior experience, as shown in Examples 7 and 8. Although student D's explanations are generally helpful and accurate, illustrating the rule with an example would have provided a social context and made the explanation clearer and more relevant to others, particularly the less-advanced and weaker students.

Example 7

Subject: Direct object en français

*Student 8: I just need confirmation since the text book's a little confusing on this and I got confused trying to articulate this in class:
attendre, chercher, demander, écouter, payer, and regarder
are all direct pronoun object in French, meaning they take "les" instead of "leur" etc, right?*

*Student D: Bonjour [student], Those words that you listed are verbs, yes?
They would take the direct object though, because the word that follows would not generally come with a preposition.
I think the textbook meant that the definition of "regarder" was "to look at" so there would be no need for a preposition after the verb. I hope this helps.*

Example 8

Subject: conjugaisons-EEK!

Student B: Salut tout le monde ! Just wondering if anyone else has heaps of trouble trying to figure out what verb has been conjugated. And if there is any easier way to recognise them. I'm guessing it's all a matter of learning them...

Student D: Salut [student], I think that you are spot on in saying that to recognise the verbs we just need to learn them all. However, if we know the stem, which is the same for a few different conjugations of the same verb, then I think we'd go a long way. So what am I saying? Learn the stem, know the stem, and then from there, we can know the verb I hope this helps.

Another example of student engagement and collaboration is Example 9 below, where students interacted in a threaded discussion to scaffold (student C, student 10), and share useful tips and advice (student 9) on how to prepare efficiently for the oral examination.

Example 9

Subject: Re: Oral Exam

*Student 9: Hey everyone,
I was wondering if someone could please help me out. I am feeling quite unsure about the books and movies topic. Could people please post back some ideas of phrases, words etc. to use with this topic?[...].
Thank you*

*Student 10:
Are you feeling just as stuck as I am? I'm thinking of maybe looking for a french website that does film reviews...*

*Student C:
have a look at wikipedia the french version pick a movie that you know and then look at both our version and their version of the article and you should get heaps of phrases, descriptions etc*

*Student 11:
Yeah, I agree with [student] on that - wikipedia is great because you know whta [sic] is written is almost 100% likely to be in correct french. I have also found it very helpful if you want to talk about places and people as well. Basically any topic that you can think you might want to talk about you can find some good phrases and ideas on in the french wikipedia.
You have to be careful in translating the French though because the French/English versions are often not always the same, so any idioms and things like that might not make complete sense.*

*Student 12:
thanks for that wikipedia tip - it's been helping a lot! For the movies and books I've mainly been describing the plot (VERY simply) and saying if I like the actors/authors. I've been going over some topics that could be in the exam, does anyone have anything to add that may be in there?*

*family
friends/ best friend*

town where you live
daily routine
weekends/hobbies
favourite books/movies
Maybe something on past tense, like talking about a holiday.

Student 9:
to add to the list:
what you will be doing this summer
also don't forget a couple of questions you can ask [the teachers](I got caught out on that last semester!)

Student 12:
ah, merci.
that would be using just the simple future tense wouldn't it? U just put the verb aller in front of another verb like:
je vais faire

Although a discourse analysis by coding and categorising each student exchange was outside the scope of this study, an analysis of the nature of the exchanges posted by students A, B, C and D into categories was carried out to illustrate in what way(s) these exchanges were supporting the learning process. The interactions can be classified into four categories: initiating, commenting on exchanges, self-evaluating and explaining, as shown in Figure 3c. The last column relates to the number of postings by each student throughout the semester.

Student	Initiate	Comment	Self-Evaluate	Explain	Total Posts
A	1	8	1	16	25
B	3	8	1	1	10
C	1	9	1	10	20
D	0	2	1	1	4

Figure 3c: Analysis of student exchanges by category

Student feedback and evaluation on the effectiveness of the forum

Students were asked to provide a brief, anonymous, written feedback about the language-learning benefits of the forum and how it could be improved in the future. The results are based on 48 responses (20 beginners and 28 non-beginners or more-experienced students) and the oral responses of students A, B, C and D at a focus-group interview. Responses and comments give an insight into how students perceive their contributions and class discussions in helping them improve their awareness and knowledge of French grammar.

In a similar way to Beckmann and Kilby (2008), who incorporated online discussion to "nurture" exchanges between on- and off-campus students in their postgraduate anthropology course, most of our undergraduate students felt the online discussions had been beneficial to their learning. The

written responses point to instances of scaffolding each other in a variety of ways that supported the learning process, very similar to Example 9 above.

For beginners, the benefits of the discussions included "developing tips or strategies to remember things and also to discuss homework", or "people posting useful resources like podcasts", and more precisely, "understanding difficulties encountered in class" in "answers from classmates at times outside of uni hours".

Other beginners found explanations of concepts and good suggestions from more-experienced students on learning techniques "useful", and that "it is good to have people there to answer questions you forget to ask in class"; one mature student remarked, "questions posed by some and answered by others [are] questions that concern me but had not crystallised in my mind".

As in the study by McNamara and Burton (2009), students' comments highlight the importance of belonging to the same learning community, since it is "good to read other people's questions and know they are having similar problems – answers my questions", and students benefit mutually from "having everyone's responses and explaining them in a more relatable [sic] manner", and the forum is "like a chance to practise French when you are at home where you can't really go and speak French to your mum and dad...."

For the more-advanced students, the benefits were varied. Some benefits were similar to those experienced by the beginners' group: the interactions and exchanges were "good to get tips on various grammar topics" and "to see other students having the same problems".

In the data from the group interview, students elaborated on how their peers' clear explanations and comments had helped them improve their knowledge of French grammar and develop as learners:

"When you [the tutor] gave your lecture on transitive and intransitives, we had no idea, but when he [student A] wrote that thing and explained it, I just wrote it down and said 'ah, okay...'"

Results also confirmed claims made by Biggs (1999), that interactions and support had stimulated students' cognitive development and self-evaluation or reflection skills, since "explaining to other people helps my understanding" and that it was important to "...see the issues and answers of others in the class" since these "may be the same ones as myself that I don't know how to express".

There was only one student who admitted to "no benefits because I [prefer to] converse with fellow students face to face".

Suggestions for improvement were practical: "if the class was halved, it might be more productive". This seemed an excellent pedagogical suggestion, and it has since been adapted to suit current circumstances of increasing student numbers at year one level. For this academic year, discussion groups include approximately 30 students.

Conclusion

This study focused on embedding peer learning in online discussions to enhance the teaching and learning experience at our institution. Although it can be argued that the use of discussion boards is not innovative in itself, combining online discussions to extend face-to-face learning is a new approach for our teaching environment, since it enhances the existing teaching model and encourages students to play an active part in their own learning.

The interactions show evidence of successful peer support and cooperation by both more- and less-experienced students. It was usually, but not always, those with lower levels of French who were asking for explanations, and those with higher levels offering to share the knowledge they had gained through previous experience and exposure to the language. Interestingly, some with lower levels took leadership roles and contributed to the flow of communication, as well as enhancing the language learning experience from a linguistic and cultural perspective. The role of the teacher in these interactions was kept to a minimum, since one of the main aims was to encourage students to interact online to improve their learning of French grammar.

These findings can inform future practice in two related areas. The first is improving existing teaching and learning experience by combining well-structured online discussion tasks to complement face-to-face learning activities in a "blended learning" model (Ellis et al. 2006). The second area deals with ways teachers should get involved. The decision of how much to interfere and the degree of involvement, in a space primarily designed for students to take responsibility and shape the direction of their learning, should be weighed. However, we would agree with Wozniak and Silveira (2004) that teachers should offer timely support and guidance if required so students can reflect, then find and correct their own errors. This would promote a deeper approach to learning than merely correcting errors and giving answers.

As the results show, although the discussion forum has been received positively by students, allowing them to interact and improve their knowledge and awareness of grammar outside face-to-face sessions, there are still improvements to be made. In addition, these results have opened other lines of questioning and enquiry for the near future. A follow-up study on how students use their language skills for specific tasks in a blended-learning situation during their undergraduate years is being envisaged as a way to encourage reflection (Clarke, 2004) and a deep approach to learning languages.

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