

# Vlogging: a new channel for language learning and intercultural exchanges

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**Abstract.** The potential for computer-supported learning in educational contexts has opened up the possibilities for learners to interact in informal contexts outside the classroom. The context of the present research is a young American individual's vlog on YouTube sharing his experiences as a learner of French. This paper focuses on the potential use of vlogs for developing language speaking skills and intercultural exchanges between users. The aim of the study is to describe and analyse informal learning communication using a vlog between one American French Language learner posting his learning experiences on YouTube and his audience. We highlight learner's opportunities in terms of speaking and intercultural skills in a vlog environment. This study is based on an empirical method of collecting ecological data on the web. The qualitative data analysis method is based on the description of the online conversation (Develotte, Kern, & Lamy, 2011) in addition to interaction analysis and technodiscursive analysis (Paveau, 2015). We discuss the qualitative findings of the research conducted on this multimodal corpus in order to highlight the vlog's potential for supporting informal language learning, speaking and intercultural exchanges between YouTube users in a globalised world.

**Keywords:** informal language learning, intercultural communication, social networking, vlogging.

## 1. Introduction

Web 2.0 tools use for online language learning and intercultural exchanges have grown significantly. Guth and Helm (2010) class Web 2.0 tools into three categories that can serve as a platform for communication and collaboration:

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social networks, wikis and blogs. However, media sharing communities such as Flickr and YouTube are excluded from this category. It is the latter (YouTube) that we are interested in, as it is likely to encourage online autonomous language learning (Barton & Lee, 2013) and yet is quite unexplored in the context of French language learning. Previous research highlighted learner's 2.0 skills (Guth & Helm, 2010). Our research focuses on what Herring (2015) calls emerging phenomena in digital communications: Web 2.0 platforms that support a convergence of channels or “modes” (text, audio, video, images) for user-to-user communication (Herring, 2015, p. 1).

As recalled by Blommaert and Rampton (2011), “over the past two decades, globalization has altered the face of social, cultural and linguistic diversity in societies all over the world” (p. 1). Concepts such as migration and multiculturalism have gradually been replaced by what Vertovec (2007) calls superdiversity. In this context, the emergence of new medias and technologies of communication are intensifying globalisation and are complicating the notion of superdiversity.

We discussed previously (Combe, 2014) the emergence of the vlog genre, a particular kind of vlogging as a way to practice languages online while learning.

Our study focuses on the following research question: What opportunities do a learner's vlog present in enhancing their speaking and intercultural skills? This paper is divided into three parts. Firstly we will present the theoretical and the methodological frame, then we will present the corpus of study and the results of our research.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Methodological framework**

The research protocol is based on an empirical method of collecting ecological data. Our research studies what Paveau (2015) defines as a ‘digital’ document, that is, a document natively produced online, on a website, a blog, a social network or any digital environment where speech acts take place (in this specific context the YouTube platform).

In order to analyse users’ comments on YouTube, we applied Bennett’s (1986, 1993) conceptual tool, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

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(denial, defense, minimisation, acceptance, adaptation, integration) to understand personal reactions and better discern the criteria of adaptation to another culture. Bennett's (1986) scale of six ranges of sensitivity to difference, aiming to underline individuals' cognitive concepts of cultural experiences, are an interesting tool for understanding emotional and conventional reactions when faced with culture shock in digital environments. The typology of the six stages is presented in a continuum: we explored to what extent the YouTube comments fall within Bennett's (1986) scale. However, the development of intercultural sensitivity follows a line of continuous progress (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). The continuum of stages is not static, as opposed to the written comments on YouTube, which once posted, if not clarified or restated by users, appear to be a definitive statement.

The qualitative data analysis method is based on Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (Herring, 2015) combined with recent French research on discourse and interaction analysis in digital contexts (Develotte, 2012; Paveau, 2015) and Bennett's (1986) scale of intercultural sensibility.

We adopted a semio-discursive approach in order to analyse a vlogger's discourse. Additionally, we proceeded to a preliminary heuristic analysis of the corpus of all comments based on what YouTube calls Top Comments, that is, comments YouTube users vote as the best, and have sought to manually track the number of polylogues, the number of responses they generated and the number of users who took part in the interaction.

## 2.2. Corpus




Given the scale of the data and the instability of the multimodal online research corpus, we selected a corpus of reference from the vlogger's 'texfrançais' channel content<sup>3</sup>. This corpus, determined as of 5 January, 2016, consists of 38 videos, 0:10 - 15:56 minutes published from 28 June, 2011 and the written comments they inspired.

Our corpus of study consists of three vlogs ('Unpronounceable words for us Americans', 'Differences between France and the USA' and 'American Slang') for a total of over 14 minutes and more than 7000 comments posted on YouTube.

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3. <https://www.youtube.com/user/texfrançais/videos>

Table 1. Corpus of study

<b>Screenshots</b>			
<b>Title</b>	Unpronounceable words for us Americans	The differences between France and the USA	American slang
<b>Published</b>	14/01/2012	09/01/2013	05/03/2015
<b>Duration</b>	5'09	5'34	4'48
<b>Comments</b>	5,386	1,628	210
<b>Views</b>	1,050,382	141,616	26,303
<b>I like this</b>	28,278	3,738	2,283
<b>I dislike this</b>	251	80	3

### 3. Discussion

The first results of our research show that the vlogger is widely encouraged by peers (we observe strong socio-emotional aspects), exchanges take place on a multilingual environment, the vlogger is both a learner and a teacher (he practices French but also teaches American slang), and users share knowledge and comments in informal ways (without signs of stress or formality).

Vlogs offer the possibility to practice spoken production skills as recommended by the Common European Framework Reference for languages. This skill is often difficult to implement in an authentic context of communication outside the classroom. Vlogs have the potential to help develop digital literacy and speaking skills in front of a camera and encourage publication (speech acts and gestures, improving the final media product before posting it, adding text, and emoticons which illustrate speech acts). Topics such as lexicon and pronunciation generate exchanges, which lead to rich debates. Vlogging appears to be a space for collaboration and hetero-peer learning. It was observed that users often offered linguistic explanations without demonstration expertise in phonetics. Hence attempts to explain how to pronounce words appeared to be limited by both the medium (YouTube comments) and peers' knowledge of the topic. Additionally, vlogs are useful in helping negotiate the meaning of words in foreign language.

However, in contrast, intercultural issues can crystallise tensions. Vlogging space on the Internet is also conducive of exchanges on cultural issues or statements

questioned by users and conflict of opinions about stereotypes. The vlogger's perceptions rise various comments in which users express their own cultural perceptions on topics that the vlogger posted, and raised reactions on a local level (France and its regions) and differences of point of view on Paris and the rest of the France, dividing users in in-groups and out-groups (Bennett, 1993). Ethnocentric attitudes of denial, defense and minimisation demonstrate some users' inter-regional cultural bias. Other users minimised their in-group and out-group division, and we also noticed some cases of acceptance and integration. One of the users in particular takes each point developed by the vlogger and positions herself with respect to these points, demonstrating the acceptance stage of Bennett's (1986) scale on topics such as the school system in France, smoking in high school, and TV channels, and gives a personal explanation on youth behaviour in France. Hence, vlogs have inherent limitations in enhancing speaking and intercultural skills.

Finally, commercial, ethical and privacy aspects of sharing on social networks need to be considered when using online interactions in pedagogical contexts.

## 4. Conclusions

This study highlights the vlog's potential for supporting informal language learning and intercultural exchanges between YouTube users in a globalised world. The vlogger becomes an almost fictional character, a movie character or a digital character through the looking glass of the screen between him and his followers.

Our case study, through the example of a vlog ('texfrançais' channel), shows the potential of new multimedia and multimodal interactions for informal foreign language practicing and learning. On the one hand, vlogs offer opportunities for speaking skills, digital literacy skills, multilingual peer learning, and opinion conflicts through cultural stereotypes, and intercultural skills. On the other hand, vlogs are limited by the ethical aspects of social networks and by the linguistic skills of social network users. In a formal teaching context, 'texfrançais' channel can be a resource for teachers in order to think about the potential of a multimodal interactive platform to practice a language and develop digital literacy skills.

This case study raises important questions in the era of mass digital communication in a globalised world where the interactional reference space has diversified.

More research is needed to analyse interactions in an unstable context of production and study how language vlogs could be of interest from a pedagogical point of view.

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