

# Harnessing the power of informal learning: using WeChat, the semi-synchronous group chat, to enhance spoken fluency in Chinese learners

Marion Sadoux<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** This research is an exploratory study that seeks to evaluate the potentials of the Chinese app WeChat to enhance the spoken fluency of learners of French in China, who report having limited and insufficient opportunities to practice speaking in their daily life. WeChat is an extremely popular instant messenger facilitating communication through a media rich environment that can be used synchronously, asynchronously or semi-synchronously with voice or text messages. WeChat is widely used in China and a growing number of informal highly autonomous language learners join or form WeChat groups to learn and practice speaking languages in personal networks of learning. The study sought to bring together French learners and expert users to give them increased opportunities to practise their spoken French on a daily basis for a period of three months to support the development of spoken fluency.

**Keywords:** semi-synchronous computer mediated communication, fluency development, autonomy, language learning strategies.

## 1. Introduction

The digital age has brought along a plethora of new exciting avenues to learn, teach, and practice a foreign language: from the access to seemingly unlimited authentic multimedia resources in almost any target language, to the availability anywhere anytime, at the click of a button, of a native speaker with whom one may communicate for free, in writing or virtually face-to-face (or voice-to-voice). Formal instructed language learning continues to occupy the central stage, yet it is clear that the affordances and strategies of self-instructed language learning

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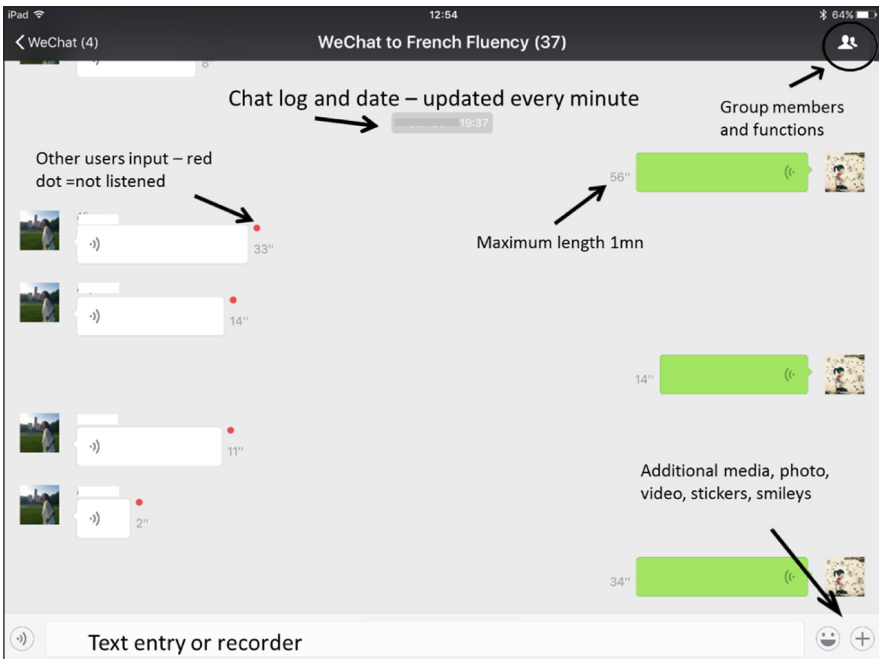
1. University of Nottingham Ningbo China, Ningbo, China; sadouxm@gmail.com

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through the internet could be transforming the language learning landscape and that fully autonomous language learners are increasingly numerous and able to reach high levels of competence without or beyond formal instruction (Cole & Vanderplank, 2016).

This study stems from the desire to explore the possibility of harnessing some of the affordances and learning strategies of successful users of social networking apps and sites for language learning (such as Hello Talk, Busuu, High Natives), as well as communities of Chinese user groups on WeChat, to support the development of speaking fluency among learners of French at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC). This research initially seeks to validate the hypothesis that the affordances of WeChat can facilitate informal engagement and practice in the target language in a way that may support fluency development. It also seeks to examine whether learners in instructed contexts can embrace strategies for best practice from their interaction with fully autonomous expert users.

Figure 1. WeChat to French fluency interface and functions



WeChat is an everyday feature of Chinese life, its use ranging far beyond social networking to banking and daily wireless transactions, apps within apps, and all

aspects of required connectivity. It is also widely used for learning and numerous ‘public’ accounts are set up to provide pushed learning objects towards communities of learners (see Huijiang, <http://www.huijiang.com/app>). Most students at UNNC, both Chinese and international, are well versed in the use of WeChat. Critically, this app offers the possibility of setting up media rich semi-synchronous interaction through voice or text messaging with a minimum time lag. Studies on Semi-Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication (SSCMC) have shown that these can support the development of spoken fluency. Two key features are that these “conversations in slow motion” (Beauvois, 1992, p. 455) generally permit greater participation (Kern, 1995) and offer a highly beneficial short time lag, giving learners an opportunity to plan and repair their communication. Studies have shown that SSCMC leads to uses of language that manifest both higher complexity and wider lexical diversity (Smith, 2005).

The instructional intervention in this exploratory study follows principles of sociocultural theory and microgenesis (Ford, Johnston, Mitchell, & Myles, 2004) and took place between April and June 2017. There were a total of 32 participants and three facilitators<sup>2</sup>. These were all volunteers and included non-specialist students at UNNC on level A2-B1 French courses (the target participants) along with specialist students on a joint honours Bachelor of Arts in French and Chinese from the University of Nottingham in the UK (level C1, the more proficient peers) and experienced users of WeChat from informal learning groups (B2-C1, the fully autonomous expert users of WeChat). The WeChat group also included three French native speaker facilitators with different roles and relations to the target participant group.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. The intervention

During a period of three months, students were invited to participate to informal discussions in French on WeChat using its semi-synchronous voice facilities. Although the students were invited to make predominant use of the voice messaging function, texting was also encouraged. The facilitation operated with three different aims<sup>3</sup>:

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2. See supplement, part 1, for more details: <https://research-publishing.box.com/s/od48ywuqbcw172cp2cu6li3jqg9hb1kd>

3. See supplement, part 2, for detailed examples: <https://research-publishing.box.com/s/od48ywuqbcw172cp2cu6li3jqg9hb1kd>

- to initiate or take part in conversations with occasional corrective feedback to keep communication going;
- to propose warm up activities or topics for discussion;
- to boost engagement with focussed activities and materials timed according to assessment points in the life of the modules the target participants were taking.

There was no set time to participate and participants were totally free to talk about anything – protocols were established from the start in terms of ways to enter and leave the chat through appropriate signals and using basic courtesy.

## **2.2. Methods**

This investigation, which was exploratory in intent, followed mixed research methods focussing on a wide range of potential issues. The WeChat group logs constituted the main data to explore and this was done using both a transcription and coding of some key events – longer and more sustained exchanges or voice input from highly active participants – as well as the chat data available in WeChat (time and duration of voice output). Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews of participants were also used. The table in the supplementary materials<sup>4</sup> summarises the data collection and findings.

## **3. Results and discussion**

The initial findings point to positive outcomes for learners with a high level of regular participation. The chat log clearly shows learners using verbal and non-verbal strategies to produce their messages, but also making use of structural features of the app to maintain a focus on meaning and produce and refine messages: the semi-synchronous nature of the app allows for segmentation, which in turn supports the proceduralisation of more complex messages and the instant deleting of messages by participants also provides an initial safety net enabling learners to feel more able to speak spontaneously, as they can withdraw any message they wish to recall. These latter features are not possible in face-to-face communications and may be one of the reasons why learners indicated feeling less anxious to speak through online tools such as WeChat, which they reported in the

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4. See supplement, part 3, for more details: <https://research-publishing.box.com/s/od48ywuqbcw172cp2cu6li3jgg9hb1kd>

interview as convenient, easy to use, and reducing their fear of making mistakes. This hypothesis is confirmed by the data from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with target participants.

As an illustrative example, the detailed analysis of the chat log of one highly active participant shows instances of deleted voice messages totally disappearing from the log after a month, an increasing use of verbal fillers as opposed to onomatopoeia (“comment dire...” as opposed to “heu...”), and a decreasing number of short mid-sentence interruptions to produce a complete output. In parallel, there is a small gain in fluency measured as syllables per second.

In relation to the exploration of how to bring practice from expert successful autonomous learners who are expert users, a very low level of uptake of regular chatting activity among the group of target participants (non experts) suggests that this possibly requires a particular type of didactic intervention or embedding into the syllabus which did not occur in this study.

The semi-structured interviews between low participation target participants and expert users showed clear differences: the target participants were less sophisticated in their critical evaluation of learning tools and showed lower levels of willingness to participate relating to both their fear of making mistakes as well as the lesser value they attributed to social interaction in language learning.

## **4. Conclusions**

The results of this study suggest that familiar social media tools enabling semi-synchronous communication and the creation of a mixed network of participants can enhance language learning. However, learners in formal instructed contexts may require further guidance, including a focus on learning how to learn a language. Not surprisingly perhaps, in a Chinese context, the fear of making mistakes, often perceived by learners as ‘shyness’, proved to be both the biggest obstacle to participation and the biggest gain and liberation among those who did chat.

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