ENHANCING BEGINNERS’ SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH AN INFORMAL ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Web 2.0 tools are used increasingly to support second language learning, but there have been limited studies involving beginner learners, multiple technologies, and informal settings. This current study addresses this gap and investigates the factors affecting students’ interest in a nongraded online learning environment and what kinds of tools, modes of expression, and activities they prefer. Findings reveal that students enjoyed being able to consolidate their skills in a personalized and flexible environment, which highlights the importance of addressing students’ needs and interests and providing the appropriate facilitation and finding strategies to maintain their interest. Students showed interest in the different aspects of the platform under investigation, although to differing extents, hence the relevance of balancing opportunities, combining different tools, and sustaining activities.

Keywords: second language learning, blended learning, informal online learning

INTRODUCTION

Social networks, wikis, and blogs are ever-present in our everyday lives, and communicating in a foreign language is increasingly likely to be done through these tools. Web 2.0 tools are used in many institutions, but there is insufficient research on the use of online learning environments to support language learning at the beginner level. Indeed, beginners’ restricted knowledge of the target language makes it more challenging for them to collaborate and interact. Further, while most studies focus on a single technology, few explore the affordances of multiple technologies. In the context of Second Language Acquisition, studies investigating Web 2.0 have predominantly focused on formal settings and paid less attention to informal learning, which is gaining interest worldwide.

The current study is based on an interactive platform (French Plus) in an informal (i.e., not graded) setting. This project was conducted to support a French beginners course at Monash University (Australia) over two semesters. French Plus was introduced as an optional learning environment enriched with different tools to complement face-to-face classes.

After summarizing the benefits and potential challenges of Web 2.0 in language learning, this paper investigates the following research questions:

1. What factors affect students’ interest in an informal learning platform (including those who have not used a learning platform before)?
2. What kinds of tools, modes of expression, and activities are preferred?

In the light of the findings, this paper discusses the challenges and makes recommendations for dealing with online learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many factors support the integration of Web 2.0 into language learning. By providing access to authentic material and real-world applications that have not been specially designed for learners, Web 2.0 caters to meaningful situations, particularly for students who cannot travel to the target country to immerse themselves in the language and the culture (Simon, 2008).

Web 2.0, otherwise known as the “Read/Write Web” (Richardson, 2006), allows users to easily create and contribute content. This may increase autonomy, which is crucial when progressing in
language learning. Web 2.0 not only provides opportunities for meaningful input but also for students’ output. Swain (2000) has observed that output requires deeper language processing and greater mental effort than input, and “output may stimulate learners to move from the semantic, open-ended, strategic processing, prevalent in comprehension to the complex grammar processing needed for accurate production” (p. 99). In addition, the variety of Web 2.0 tools provides opportunities to enhance learners’ creativity beyond writing, and it allows them to demonstrate their understanding about a subject matter by producing, for instance, an audio podcast or a video and easily sharing it (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007).

Another benefit to language learning is the potential for student interaction and collaboration. Many studies have demonstrated that collaborative tasks contribute to the formation of learning communities (Kessler, 2009; Lee, 2009; Zorko, 2009). Kessler employed a wiki in class to enhance students’ collaborative writing skills. The wiki tool afforded a safe and interactive environment where students were willing and able to work collaboratively. Although grammatical accuracy was not necessarily achieved in the collaborative writing activities, students demonstrated a high level of confidence in their collaboration as they were not hesitant to make alterations to their peers’ work. Furthermore, Web 2.0 tools may promote affective learning by enhancing motivation, interest, and enjoyment (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Martinez, 2012; Pinkman, 2005), which may enhance students’ performance (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Chen, Chen, & Sun, 2010). In their study, Armstrong and Retterer (2008) revealed that all participants felt more comfortable when writing in Spanish after a one-semester blogging experience.

Students’ awareness of audience on Web 2.0 seems stimulating for learners who wish to not just write for their teacher but to be understood by a community (Ollivier & Purell, 2011). It is “important that learners have an audience for the linguistic output they produce so that they attempt to use the language to construct meanings for communication rather than solely for practice” (Chapelle, 1998, p. 23).

Ultimately, Web 2.0 can also promote lifelong learning by allowing learning to take place outside the boundaries of the classroom, encouraging learners to interact with a global audience, and preparing them to be active citizens in the information society (Guth, 2009; Leone, 2009). Recognition of the importance of lifelong learning has been accompanied by increasing recognition of the importance of informal learning (Attwell, 2007). Livingstone defines informal learning as “any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge, or skill which occurs without the presence of externally imposed curriculum criteria” (2001, p. 5). According to Laakkonen (2011), language teachers should design environments in which the target language is not detached from its context of use, and they should equip students with life skills as opposed to focusing on test performance. Guth claims “language acquisition, especially, is a life-long process that cannot end with traditional education and must be cultivated throughout life often through informal learning in different contexts and situations” (2009, p. 453).

Despite the benefits of Web 2.0, the affordances of technology do not, by themselves, guarantee that effective learning will occur. Rather, it requires “careful planning and a thorough understanding of the dynamics of these affordances” (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007, p. 667). Warschauer adds that technology should not be regarded as “a magic bullet to solve educational problems, but rather as a powerful tool that can have both positive and negative impact, and that must be carefully exploited” (2009, p. xix–xx).

There are several challenges related to the use of Web 2.0 tools in language learning. First, technical issues, including poor Internet access, have kept many teachers and students away from incorporating it (Bartlett-Bragg, 2008; Lee, 2011). The longevity of new technologies is another drawback. The number of tools available increases significantly each year and some disappear after only a year or two of existence (Guth, 2009). A lack of support from university Information Technology (IT) services for freely available Web 2.0 technologies has been another downside. IT departments are sometimes seen as controlling and obstructive, as they struggle to maintain both security and flexibility (Hunter, 2009).

Some teachers and students are reluctant to integrate Web 2.0 tools in their learning. This may be because of their lack of experience with
such tools (Gosper, Malfroy, & McKenzie, 2013; Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, & Gray, 2008; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007; Usher, 2013).

Additionally, students need to be self-motivated and self-disciplined to successfully learn in an online environment (Sturm, Kennell, McBride, & Kelly, 2009). Even though institutions are able to attract learners to distance programs, they often face difficulty retaining them (Carr, 2000).

Students’ level of proficiency in the target language might also be a challenge. Most studies examine intermediate and advanced levels, as it is assumed students require the minimal skills to interact efficiently in the target language in order to communicate via technology. Very few studies based on the use of Web 2.0 at the beginner level have been identified.

Quality of content is another major concern for students involved in online learning environments. While some authors argue that collective aggregation of information can lead to better decisions than those any individual can make (Surowiecki, 2005), others caution against the cult of amateurism (Keen, 2007). In addition, most studies (Arnold, Ducate, & Kost, 2012; Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Kessler, 2009) focus more on content than form, which can be an issue for the learner yet to develop linguistic accuracy. In a study based on three foreign language social networking sites, Stevenson and Liu (2010) revealed that most users expressed a preference for interacting with native speakers over other learners, as they felt the former would be able to provide a better response.

Paradoxically, while students appear generally willing to engage in real-life interactions with other users of the target language, they remain highly dependent on traditional methods of instruction. Indeed, Stevenson and Liu’s (2010) study revealed most users wanted to find lessons on the language website and be able to practice the new language before interacting with others.

Furthermore, assessment might be difficult on Web 2.0 as students must be evaluated not only on linguistic ability but also their ability to reflect on their learning process, interact with others, stimulate debate, and work collaboratively (Gray, Thompson, Sheard, Clerihan, & Hamilton, 2010; Guth, 2009).

Time is another issue for both instructors and students. Students may not be familiar with particular applications and significant effort may be required to become proficient in their use (Laakkonen, 2011). Although the promise of elearning was originally to save time, effective elearning based on interaction among students and between instructor and students has proven to be often more time-demanding than traditional methods (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

These challenges were taken into consideration when designing French Plus.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Tools

French Plus was based on a wiki hosted by Wikispaces. As students had restricted knowledge of the target language, they were not expected to edit pages intensively. Instead, they were mainly requested to use the discussion forum to interact. Additional tools were embedded in the wiki to make it more suitable for beginner learners. The current paper will focus on the four main tools offered on French Plus: VoiceThread, Padlet, Voki, and Quizlet.

VoiceThread allowed participants to create asynchronous conversations via media. Users can create and share presentations by uploading their own media (text, presentation slides, images, video, and audio files) and comment on their own and others’ presentations by using different modes of expression, such as typing, or audio/video recording. VoiceThread was used mainly to allow students to express themselves on the weekly topics (e.g., their passion, favorite place, childhood, or eating habits) and as an interface to communicate with different communities.

Padlet allowed students to collaborate by posting notes on a digital wall. This tool was used to brainstorm basic expressions, work on grammatical structures, practice vocabulary, share ideas, and participate in common stories.

Voki allowed participants to create speaking avatars. Users can select the physical characteristics of their avatars, the clothing and accessories, and the background settings, and they give a voice to their avatars by choosing from a selection of digital voices in 25 languages. On French Plus, Voki was used to support various activities, such as creating avatars to match a physical description and simulating various roles.

Quizlet is an application that allows users to
match items by creating interactive flashcards. This tool offers various study options and provides users with automatic feedback on their performance. Students were given flashcards to memorize vocabulary and they were requested to create their own sets to contribute to a common repertoire.

Students could use VoiceThread and Padlet directly from French Plus, and the moderation feature on these tools was used in the project so that when it was activated, contributions were visible only to the author and myself. I received a notification, and once I approved a contribution, it became visible to all. If the contribution needed to be modified, I provided feedback to the author via email and published the contribution later, if and when it was ready to be shared with others. To obtain feedback about contributions on Voki and Quizlet, students had to send me a link to review and I uploaded their contributions once validated.

In order to use VoiceThread and Voki students needed an account, which I created for them. For Quizlet, students were required to create their own account to make flashcards, but they could use this tool for memorization practice without any user account. No individual account was needed to post on the Padlet walls.

Other tools were occasionally used on French Plus. Glogster allowed users to create an interactive poster by incorporating texts, links, audio, pictures, and video. StoryBird allowed users to build their stories by dragging and dropping pictures from a selected collection and writing a text to match the chosen picture. In addition, many authentic materials were deployed to engage students with real-life resources, such as music clips, trailers, TV advertisements, and TV reports, so they could work on listening comprehension and to encourage learners to share their opinions about various topics. In addition, students were given information web sites, such as a hotel and a recipe web site, to assist them in problem solving activities. They were also exposed to real-life web sites that allow users to create their own products, such as eCards and word clouds.

Participants

Four groups of volunteer participants were involved in French Plus: students of the “French Introductory” course, slightly more experienced students called “mentors,” exchange students who were more advanced students, and native speakers. I was involved not only as the researcher but also the teacher (designer/moderator) and facilitator of the platform.

French Plus was specially designed for French Introductory students in their first year at university. Out of the 263 students enrolled in the course, 67 students expressed their willingness to join French Plus. As I was the sole facilitator and moderator, participation was limited to 50 students. To ensure quality of feedback, the optimal number of participants was expected to be around 20 to 25; however, 50 students were given access to account to cover the number of students who might withdraw from the project or the unit itself. French Plus was presented as an informal, optional tool to consolidate the learning of French. The platform offered weekly recommended (more complex and challenging) and optional (less complex and challenging) activities. Students were requested to complete at least one recommended activity per week over nine weeks of the 12-week semester. Participants from semester 1 were encouraged to continue in semester 2, and new participants were also invited to join under the same conditions.

The mentors were five students who successfully completed French Introductory the previous year. Given the mentors had just one year of French instruction more than the students starting the course, they were not expected to correct students or provide feedback. Their role was mainly to interact with students in various activities.

Five former exchange students were invited to interact with students in a one-off activity. They were requested to initiate a conversation about their experience at various institutions in France, and students were invited to question them asynchronously.

Five native speakers were also invited to interact with students in a one-off activity (once per semester). Native speakers involved in the project were from different countries and cultural backgrounds, which exposed students to the diversity of French culture and accents.

Students who met the participation requirement of French Plus and mentors who fulfilled their duties were given a gift voucher and a participation certificate. At the end of each semester, students and mentors were invited to complete an online survey and participate in a focus group to discuss their experience on the platform.
Data Collection

Online surveys, focus groups, and activity trackers were triangulated to monitor students’ participation. Students were invited to complete an online survey at the end of semesters 1 and 2, and focus groups were organized to follow-up on responses. Two focus groups were organized at the end of each semester, one for students and one for mentors.

Of the 60 participants on French Plus over the two semesters, there were 25 respondents to surveys and/or focus groups, which represents almost half of the participants. It is also important to note that the respondents were regular participants, completing a minimum of nine weeks on French Plus.

To track students’ participation (including the less regular ones), an activity tracker in the form of an Excel spreadsheet was used to monitor which activities were completed and which tools were used by students over a period of 12 weeks each semester. For VoiceThread activities, I recorded the mode of expression chosen by the students and whether students resubmitted their contributions according to my feedback.

RESULTS
Factors that Promote and Maintain Interest in an Informal Learning Platform

Interest in French Plus was relatively high for an optional, nongraded activity, especially given that 23/25 respondents reported to be first-time users of an online platform. French Plus attracted 25% (67/263) and 23% (32/138) of the total students enrolled in French Introductory in semester 1 and 2 respectively. This slightly lower number of participants in semester 2 may be explained by students’ increased ability to judge whether after completing one semester of studies at university they can commit to French Plus. In semester 1, of the 50 students given access, there were 41 active participants (nine did not participate in any activity). This is not surprising as first-year students usually need time to adjust to university and often underestimate their workload. In semester 2, 13 students decided to continue using French Plus and 19 new students joined the platform, totaling 60 participants over both semesters. Participation was high in both semesters during the first three weeks and dropped after week 4, and especially after week 9, when the target to obtain the certificate and voucher was reached. In semester 1, 41% of the participants obtained the certificate and were considered regular as against 56% in semester 2. The average participation was also higher in semester 2 (61% against 53%), probably because students became more resilient in their learning of French, and they enjoyed the new activities offered on the platform and the continuing students acted as driving force for the new ones. It is important to note that, in contrast to semester 1, all students who were given access to the platform in semester 2 became active participants.

One of the main reasons for students’ interest in French Plus was the opportunity to get extra practice: “In a university setting, when you don’t have many contact hours, anything extra you can do is beneficial” (Chris). They appreciated that activities were aligned with what is covered in class: “You are completing the work again, in an easier and more practical way” (Rose). Additionally, participants enjoyed the variety of activities and tools which helped them to work on different skills and accommodated the different types of learners: “It was not just one task, one tool, it was like a cocktail” (Hans). Students also embraced the opportunity to interact with different people: “in class we don’t get a chance to interact with many people and it’s difficult to find French speakers on our own” (Nathan).

Furthermore, students appreciated the fact that participation was optional: “If it was compulsory there’d be students who wouldn’t want to do it” (Lucy). They also appreciated that there was no deadline imposed on the platform, and although students completed more recommended activities than optional activities, they did not neglect the latter, suggesting they were inclined to complete activities which met their interests, even if they were not required.

Although in academic contexts students generally place great value on grades, a large majority of respondents (21/25 or 84%) appreciated the fact that French Plus did not attract any marks: “It gives room to make mistakes, you don’t have to worry about not having it right” (Tiffany). When asked whether the grading of activities would encourage them to participate more, most students opposed this idea: “I might not have participated at all, as there is too much risk in losing marks” (Bridget). Three students suggested that grading
might be a good idea, but they were rather hesitant: “maybe a good idea as we could see how well we are doing, but it might be an issue for others as it would be imposed, less freedom” (Lisa). When comparing students’ performance in the French Introductory course and French Plus, it appears that the weaker students in class were not necessarily the less active on the platform. This demonstrates that participants were interested in French Plus independent of their proficiency level, suggesting they considered the platform to be an opportunity to practice the language without being penalized. Only 4/25 (16%) respondents were in favor of grading, arguing that it would encourage them to participate more: “If we were held accountable in some way, I would participate more” (Eva). It is important to note that even if students were against grading, some suggested that the French Plus requirement should be stricter to push them to try harder: “Even though the option to complete all the activities is available, I felt a lack of motivation to do more than bare minimum” (Martin).

Although most students were new to online learning, they enjoyed the online aspect of French Plus as they could practice the language with no time or place constraints: “I enjoy the freedom to work when and where I want” (Chris). For others, working online was more reassuring: “you actually get a chance to say something—in class there’s always someone who knows the answer, and once that person gives the response, you stop thinking about it” (Lucy).

Students also appreciated being able to use the language in more practical, authentic, and creative ways. Some reported that French Plus allowed them to use French in meaningful situations, “such as booking a hotel” (Nathan). The platform allowed them to switch from learners to users of the target language: “It’s like experiencing French, not learning French” (Fiona).

For many students, this authenticity was a motivating factor: “It was good to hear native speakers with different accents, it sounds more authentic” (Chris). Moreover, students mentioned they enjoyed using the language in a more creative way: “StoryBird helped to build up vocabulary as I had to look for words I didn’t know. In this way, you remember these words better because you are using them in a creative way” (Fiona).

My role as the teacher in the current project significantly impacted on students’ participation and interest in French Plus. Students were reassured to know I was monitoring the quality of the content on the platform: “We could rely on all information published because we know it has been checked” (Hans). They enjoyed receiving personalized feedback on their work, and a great majority of students made changes to their contributions after receiving my feedback. Regarding participation, one student commented, “when we see how much effort you have put into it, we feel that we need to make an effort too” (Lisa).

Some students said that they were satisfied with the offering of French Plus and nothing would make them participate more. Some admitted it was out of laziness that they were not more active. Others suggested more opportunities for interactions, listening activities, authentic materials, visual expression, and face-to-face conversation sessions. These recommendations were taken into consideration when designing the semester 2 activities, and students acknowledged the improvements made to the platform.

**Tools, Modes, and Activities Preferred by Students**

Analyzing students’ preferences for the four main tools over both semesters, a total of 83% of students used Padlet at some time, and the average participation rate for Padlet activities was 31%. In total, 78% used VoiceThread at some point, with an average participation rate of 33%. Voki was tried by 22% of students, and the average participation rate was 15%. Finally, Quizlet flashcards were created at least once by 28%, and 19% of students, on average, participated in Quizlet activities. In surveys, students were asked which tool they enjoyed using the most, allowing for comparison between what students reported liking with what they tried and kept using, as depicted in Figure 1.

Students seem to have preferred VoiceThread over Padlet (45% versus 27%), and even though fewer students tried using VoiceThread than Padlet (78% versus 83%), more continued using VoiceThread on a regular basis (33% versus 30%). Fewer students might have tried VoiceThread than Padlet because the former is more complex to use: “I was technically challenged with VoiceThread” (Ellen); “I enjoyed Padlet because it was the easiest tool to use” (Julia). VoiceThread requires users’ login and use a microphone for voice recording, whereas Padlet does not require any login and
posts can be created with a single click. Although VoiceThread is more complex, students who tried this tool seem to have acknowledged its benefits, which might have encouraged them to continue to use it. Voki did not seem to be popular among students (only 22% tried Voki once). Although some students reported it was difficult to use, those who used this tool seem to have enjoyed it, as the percentage of preference (12%) is very close to the average of participation rate for this tool (15%). In brief, all tools were appreciated for their particular features, even if they were challenging to use: Padlet for the ability to see others’ contributions at a glance, VoiceThread to practice speaking skills, Quizlet to memorize vocabulary in a dynamic way, and Voki for the reassurance of practicing speaking via an avatar.

While most activities offered on French Plus required students to express themselves mainly in writing, some offered more possibilities. VoiceThread offers users the choice between spoken, written, or video comments. According to the data collected, 62% of students chose the speaking mode, 30% chose the written option, 8% chose both written and spoken comments, and no participant used the video function, reporting it was too intimidating to show their faces. In the semester 1 focus group, some students mentioned they used both written and spoken comments to practice both spelling and pronunciation and to gain a greater chance of being understood by others. However, in contrast to the results of the activity tracker, which showed greater use of spoken comments, completed surveys indicate the same level of interest: 50% of the students reported a preference for spoken comments and 50% preferred written comments. This is probably because they felt more confident expressing themselves in writing. On the other hand, it can be argued that although students reported enjoying making spoken and written comments equally, they used more spoken comments in order to work on their pronunciation. Indeed, given that students had plenty of opportunities to use writing in many activities, they may not have seen the need to choose writing where speaking was available. Even if most students did not use their own voice when dealing with Voki, some embraced the opportunity to speak without having to show their faces. On Glogster, some students used their own voice to create the audio material required, which requires more effort than uploading an existing audio file. In a context where limited time is allocated to speaking practice in class, students might have seized the opportunity to develop this skill in French Plus, especially since it was without risk of losing marks.

In addition to oral expression, students valued the visual expression afforded by many tools. When creating flashcards on Quizlet, all students added pictures to their sets to facilitate the memorization of the vocabulary items. Students appreciated the ability to upload images to VoiceThread presentations as it facilitates comprehension. As highlighted by Walker and White (2013), learners seem to have less patience with text-based material that does not contain visuals. One student particularly enjoyed the possibility of drawing over an image uploaded on VoiceThread. This function allows users to engage with the content, which does not remain static.
When creating speaking avatars on Voki, students enjoyed not only the speaking feature but also the possibility to choose the characters’ appearance, outfit, accessories, and background setting. The use of Glogster allowed students to create a high-quality product that integrated pictures and videos. In addition, students enjoyed creating word clouds using different shapes on Tagxedo to convey a particular message. When creating eCards on Cartimini, students were encouraged to write messages by the different templates for various occasions. Furthermore, the rich collection of high-quality images available on StoryBird may have awakened students’ imaginations: “At first I had no idea about what to write, but then got inspired by an image and felt excited to write something about it” (Brandon).

There was a total of 85 activities on French Plus delivered through various tools, which may be classified according to five categories of affordances:

a. reinforcing individual learning: includes activities practicing alphabet and numbers, interactive flashcards to memorize vocabulary, self-corrected online exercises (through external websites), and listening activities (through authentic material).

b. collaborating towards a shared knowledge: where students brainstormed various topics, wrote a story together, and contributed to a repertoire of flashcards.

c. communicating in meaningful situations: activities inviting students to express themselves, comment on authentic documents, and create speaking avatars simulating specific roles.

d. interacting with different communities: progressively challenging interactions with peers, mentors, exchange students, and then native speakers.

e. producing for a global audience: using websites to create eCards, word clouds, interactive posters, and digital books accessible to the public.

Activities dealing with “collaborating towards a shared knowledge” were the most engaged in, with a total of 83% of students participating in such activities at some point, and the average participation rate for activities in that category over both semesters being 33% (see Figure 2). On the other hand, slightly fewer students overall (78%) and on average (28%) participated in activities dealing with “communicating in meaningful situations.” A similar level of participation can be noted for activities dealing with “reinforcing individual learning”: a total of 68% of students participated in such activities at some time, with the average participation rate being 24%. While activities dealing with “interacting with different communities” and “producing for a global audience” attracted fewer students, (only 63% and 32% of students respectively tried these activities at least once), it seems that those who attempted these activities continued to do so, given that the average participation rate was relatively high (39% versus 63% for the former, higher than any other type of activity, and 25% versus 32% for the latter, again higher than most activities).

Activities supporting “collaborating towards a shared knowledge” were the most popular. While collaborative activities could be implemented in language classes, having more time to think and to observe others’ responses might have enhanced students’ motivation. When asked “How useful were other participants’ posts?” in the surveys, 84% of students responded positively.

Activities involving “communicating in meaningful situations” was assumed to be appreciated by learners as it is seen as preparing them for real-life situations. However, it seems that students participated less in this category of activity (78%). This may be because this type of activity is generally more complex and requires students to work more independently.

As students participating in this project were new users of the target language, it was expected that activities dealing with “reinforcing individual knowledge” would be more appealing to them. However, it should be noted that I could not track activities entailing autocorrection (online exercises and use of Quizlet flashcards for memorization) as I had no means of monitoring their completion. In addition, although the students expressed an interest in improving their listening skill, only a few of them completed activities aimed at developing this skill. The semester 2 focus group revealed that most students enjoyed the listening activities even if they did not complete the worksheet associated with them: “I haven’t completed the worksheets but I like to watch the videos (…). They were a bit difficult, but I was not answering the questions anyway” (Tiffany). The above findings suggest
that it is likely that more than 68% of students participated in this category of activity.

Participation in activities dealing with “interacting with different groups” can be considered relatively high. Even though this type of activity is known to be a source of anxiety for many language learners (Woodrow, 2008), more than half of the students (63%) tried it at least once and most completed several activities in this category. This may be because students were aware that they did not have many opportunities to interact in French outside of class. In addition, interacting online may be more convenient (they did not have to meet anyone in person) and they were in a safe environment (they received help from the teacher). As can be expected, interactions with the different groups had a major impact on students’ learning and will be examined in further detail in an upcoming publication.

Around a third of students participated in activities aimed at “producing for a global audience.” Although this type of activity generally requires more effort from students, it seems it stimulated them, as most students who engaged in this category completed more than one activity. Indeed, through the different web sites mentioned above, students’ productions can be part of a public gallery, which may constitute a significant motivating factor. As for the tools, students valued activities that allowed them to engage more in the language, even when more challenging.

**DISCUSSION**

**Dealing with Beginners—on Online Learning Environments in the Target Language**

While students generally use technology in their everyday lives, as previously mentioned, almost all respondents indicated they were using an online learning platform for the first time. It was therefore essential to provide students with the appropriate support. In addition to the video tutorials I created explaining how to use the different tools available on French Plus, I encouraged students to make an appointment with me if they experienced any technical issues. A video presentation of the project was also sent to all students enrolled in the French Introductory course to invite them to join French Plus. In hindsight, a face-to-face session may have had a better impact, as it would have allowed students to ask for clarification or additional information. Such an induction session was organized at the beginning of semester 2 to recruit new participants, and it resulted in fewer misunderstandings and more positive comments.

Having to deal with absolute beginner learners of the language also represents a significant challenge. Scaffolding is essential in such contexts. For instance, interactions on French Plus were supported in a progressive way. At the beginning, students were given individual work with the possibility of checking others’ posts, then I introduced pair/group work with peers, before giving the opportunity to interact progressively with
different groups, including more advanced students and native speakers. Ultimately, participants were encouraged to produce for a global audience.

**Maintaining Students’ Participation over Time**

In order to retain students and keep them motivated, it is important to address their interests and to be ready to adjust offerings accordingly. Although French Plus was known and appreciated as an online learning environment, participants expressed their desire for face-to-face interactions. This could not be ignored and it is important to recognize that some activities are best done face-to-face. With this in mind, I organized a game session and conversation sessions to allow participants to get to know each other in person. Such an initiative enhanced the subsequent online interactions, as confirmed by students in semesters 1 and 2 focus groups. It can be concluded that appreciation for face-to-face interactions is not incompatible with online learning. On the contrary, students may benefit more from blended-learning settings.

Care should be taken when facilitating online learning environments. Students were sent email updates to present the weekly objectives of the platform, but a video format may have been more appropriate because students expressed on many occasions a desire to see the face of their interlocutors. In addition, they were sent reminders about activities to be completed. While some students did complete the activities that were due, others did not take any action, most likely because they knew that their participation was optional anyway, but also perhaps because they did not really pay attention to their university email. It would probably be better if there was an automatic function integrated into the platform to allow students to track their progress and receive alerts on their private emails.

It can be challenging to ensure equal participation in online learning environments. Some students were more active not only in terms of participation over the weeks but also in terms of their share within an activity. In order to encourage the less-productive students, in some activities participants were requested to post a minimum of five answers to have their activity validated. As for the students who tended to be very productive, it was important to keep them motivated without affecting the less-productive ones. For this reason, after they provided five answers, their additional answers were kept hidden and were only revealed at the end of the week.

The timing of the activities proved to have a great impact on students’ participation. Teachers should consider offering the most challenging and time-consuming activities in the first half of the semester, provided the students have sufficient knowledge to accomplish the tasks. It is worth noting that in other informal educational contexts (e.g., language centers), these activities might be kept for the end of the course, as generally students do not have to deal with the pressure of final tests and can focus on applying their extended knowledge in more complex nongraded activities.

**Ensuring Quality of Content**

On French Plus, posts on were visible to all participants only after being validated. While participants appreciated that posts were checked so that they were not exposed to others’ mistakes, it is important to point out that this hidden aspect was at times misleading. Indeed, as the moderation process incurred a delay in posts being visible to all, participants thought there were not many responses, which did not encourage them to participate, or they waited to see others’ posts before giving their own response.

Controlling students’ posts to ensure the quality of the content on the platform can be seen as impeding spontaneity, as students had to wait for my review to have their posts published. This issue was compensated for by the way the feedback was handled on the Wikispaces forum. Indeed, on the forum, students’ posts were visible to all participants as they were submitted, and students made changes to their posts (if needed) subsequently, after receiving my feedback via email. The specificity of the forum correction was not seen as an obstacle. On the contrary, it aimed at encouraging students to become more autonomous and responsible, as in most cases students provided a revised version of their posts. However, given that some students did not address my feedback (leaving their posts with mistakes visible to all participants), it would be good to find a way to signal posts that are still waiting to be amended and perhaps invite other students to suggest a correction. However, it is worth noting that real-life forums are far from mistake free, and that it is probably more important to be understood in a spontaneous manner than to be linguistically perfect.
Applying an Informal Approach to a Formal Educational Context

Informal learning is generally appreciated by students to compensate for the pressure felt in formal educational settings. However, it is difficult to maintain students’ interest without the motivation of grades. To attract more participants, teachers may consider applying bonus points to the final result of students who succeed in meeting the requirements of the learning platform. But for equal opportunity purposes, this would be possible only if the learning platform could be offered to all students enrolled in the course and not only to a limited number of participants. Another alternative would be to present the learning platform as an academic hurdle but with no grade awarded. In other words, to pass the university unit, students would need to meet participation requirements, but their mistakes (if any) would not count against their mark. In this case, clear objectives should be set from the beginning in order to demonstrate to students how regular participation on the platform would allow them to be more successful in formal tasks. If such a requirement was set, it would also be interesting to check whether students still have a good image of the platform and whether they genuinely use the platform to reinforce their learning or if they participate just for the sake of addressing the hurdle. In addition, if the directions suggested above were taken, teachers should ensure that the monitoring of all participants is feasible by offering more self-corrected activities or involving more moderators. It is important to note that the latter suggestion would also raise a financial issue, as marking payment made by universities is generally associated with graded work.

The success of online learning environments relies in a great part on the constant dedication of teachers. While many students indicated they appreciated my involvement, prompt responses, and personalized feedback, it is worth noting that the extra time teachers put into this kind of project is generally not recognized in their academic workload. Considering the time spent on individual feedback, teachers may consider providing general feedback summarizing common mistakes and providing recommendations. However, this type of general feedback may not apply to all activities and should not fully replace individual feedback, which was reported as one of the strengths of the current project.

Optimizing the Offering of Online Learning Environments

It is essential to provide students with a range of activities at different levels of difficulty so the online learning environment can be accessible to students of any ability. However, teachers should find strategies to encourage students to complete more complex activities by providing incentives.

When developing online learning environments, it is important to consider the sustainability of activities, especially challenging activities, to allow students to go over them again. Although students expressed a desire for more listening opportunities, only a few of them completed the activities implemented in semester 2. Students would probably benefit from guidelines outlining strategies for dealing with listening activities. Such guidance is generally given orally in classroom situations, but having tips at their disposal in an online learning environment would allow students to use listening resources at their own pace so they can replay or pause the videos as many times as they need. Furthermore, students might have been discouraged from completing the listening activities as they had to fill in a worksheet, send it to the teacher, and wait for her feedback. It would be good if there was an autocorrection function integrated into the platform, at least for the closed-ended questions, so that students could have instant feedback.

Even if the four main tools (Padlet, VoiceThread, Quizlet, and Voki) were not used to the same extent by students, all were appreciated for their main features. Given that it is unlikely to find a tool that would address all students’ needs, it is advisable to combine different tools to optimise online learning environments. It is also important to be able to integrate new tools according to students’ abilities, needs, and interests, which fluctuate over time. As the project progressed, tools like StoryBird and Glogster were introduced to address students’ interest in visual expression.

Choosing suitable tools also implies providing appropriate facilitation. The video tutorials provided on French Plus were reported to be useful, which probably contributed towards students’ quick adaptation of them. This technical support could also be supplemented by educational input and by providing tutorials in the target language in
order to optimize students’ learning opportunities. Students should be encouraged to become more autonomous when working online. For this reason, instead of being provided with a classroom account for Quizlet, Glogster, and StoryBird, students were required to create their own accounts. Creating personal accounts gave students the opportunity to share their flashcards, posters, and books to an extended audience beyond French Plus, which prepared them for life-long learning. As could be expected, this type of task attracts fewer students, given that it requires not only more self-confidence but also time and effort. Significant contributions by students were thus acknowledged in weekly updates sent to all participants. In addition, to encourage students to use more complex tools like Glogster and StoryBird, organizing competitions with special prizes was found to be worthwhile.

Furthermore, in an online learning environment intended for language learning, it is important to offer activities that not only aim for linguistic accuracy but also cater for cultural awareness, so that students of any language level can demonstrate their expertise. Such an approach holds the potential to motivate the weaker students who can be valued for their nonlinguistic abilities.

CONCLUSION

In recognizing the challenges of maintaining students’ long-term interest in an informal setting, this paper has highlighted the importance of finding strategies to keep participants motivated and provide students with a variety of tools, modes of expression, and activities. However, when dealing with Web 2.0 tools, teachers should prioritize pedagogy over technology. Furthermore, developing sustainable online activities appears to be beneficial not only for teachers whose time and effort are often not institutionally recognized but also for students to foster life-long learning.
REFERENCES


