Raising Exposure and Interactions in French through Computer - Supported Collaborative Learning

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ABSTRACT

This case study is part of an action research conducted in a Malaysian public university aiming to develop a computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL) interface for learners of French as a foreign language at the bachelor level. A real task-based CSCL assignment was implemented in a blended learning setting with online activities added to the curriculum without reducing face-to-face contact hours. In line with engaged learning and learner-led theories, 24 learners were asked to collaborate to carry out a complex task that challenges their linguistic and communication skills as well as their organisational aptitude. This study focuses on an analysis of the learners' perceptions of the CSCL assignment. Questionnaires and guided interviews were carried out to assess the learners' evaluation of the online support, the relevance of CSCL in a foreign language acquisition and the benefits of real task based assignments. The increased exposure and interactions in the target language and culture resulted in learners' higher motivation, confidence, and participation. The majority of learners enjoyed this assignment and admitted the benefits of being increasingly challenged. The tutorial was very well received. However, some learners also confided having suffered from too much stress due to zealous team leaders. The learners' comments and suggestions provided precious feedback on how to improve the implementation of CSCL in the future.

Keywords: Engaged learning, learner-centred, computer supported collaborative learning, e-learning

ABBREVIATIONS

CALL	:	Computer Assisted Language Learning
CMC	:	Computer Mediated Communications
CSCL	:	Computer Supported Collaborative Learning
IT	:	Information Technology
ICT	:	Information and Computer Technology

INTRODUCTION

Considering the lack of opportunities to interact with native speakers and the scarcity of documentation in French in Malaysia, information and communication technologies (ICT) can provide learners with unlimited resources and effectively reduce linguistic and cultural distances. However, learners need to be trained in order to benefit from accessing the Web in French as effectiveness requires communication and language skills as well as

strategies. Greater exposure can, for instance, be achieved by introducing web browsing and searching tasks, as well as by engaging learners in online collaborative work through forum discussions, a research field known as computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL).

Furthermore, higher education must provide courses of excellence enabling learners to be competent and confident in their specialty by providing knowledge as well as professional expertise based on the job market demand (Razak and Ahmad, 2008). In the context of the present study, fluency and accuracy in French are necessities, particularly in a globalised professional world. Companies are looking for qualified and responsible personnel who are able to handle projects, to come up with new ideas, cope with challenges and meet deadlines. Computer literacy plays a key role in contemporary economy and human resource head hunters will spot the resume of anyone well versed in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Therefore, any CSCL project would have to include this reality in order to prepare students to enter the job market with the best possible advantages.

CONTEXT

This study was carried out in a Malaysian public university. It was part of an action research initiated in 2006 with the primary objective of designing a learning interface for French as a Foreign Language at the bachelor level. The research project sought to raise the learners' motivation through active participation in projects that require the use of ICT.

Learners majoring in French joined the Bachelor degree program as absolute beginners. The programme is carried out over three years in six semesters. During this time, the learners must master the language and enough cultural as well as communicative competence to be able to adapt to a French environment. The curriculum focuses on language courses during the first two semesters, and it then progressively introduces content and specialty courses taught in French to increase language exposure. Every

semester, learners go through intensive training in the target language amounting to ten hours a week. This places the learners in a situation of semi immersion, particularly as French communication patterns are also emphasised in daily face-to-face classes. The cultural exposure often results in confused and anxious learners due to the distance between western and eastern cultures, with the former based on individualism and the latter on collectivism (Chia, 2007).

Such a linguistic and cultural challenge necessitates continuous motivation to sustain interest and efforts. However, French is at best the third choice of major for the current students after management, economics or English. This factor is crucial for it has a major impact on motivation, the driving force behind any learning effort (Arnold, 2006). Consequently, motivational issues were to be tackled first. It was previously observed that a learner-centred approach was the best method to cater to the learners' needs in keeping them satisfied with their progress and thus motivated. The first task for the lecturers was, therefore, to get to know the students to design the ideal project framework. Previous studies had demonstrated the need for incentives to maximise the learners' participation (Gabarre and Gabarre, 2007). Therefore, various combinations of assignments were implemented. As noted by Tan (2006), earlier analysis conducted on the learners' performances and preferences clearly demonstrated that authentic collaborative activities obtained the best results. The learners' already tight weekly schedule meant any additional tasks had to be carried out outside the classroom. For that reason, CSCL appeared as the ideal solution to meet the research's objectives due to its dual potentials of raising motivation and participation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since learners' anxiety was intimately related to ethnicity, a reassuring environment had to be created in order to raise participation. As the present study involved learners of Chinese background, the work of Bouvier (2002),

Choong (2008), Tu (2001) and Robert (2002) were analysed. The findings of these studies stressed the behavioural patterns linked to a Chinese community. Chinese learners were afraid to ask questions or speak in class as it represented a sign of individualism perceived as dissociation from the group or worse, as an act of criticism towards the teaching of the lecturer.

On the contrary, the Western culture emphasizes the necessity for learners to become independent, to free themselves from any model and develop their own way of thinking (Tweed and Lehman, 2002). Such an attitude, however, is close to insubordination in the Chinese perception. The lecturers' role was to understand these patterns in order to progressively insert the western ways of interacting within discussions (Chia, 2007).

In addition, the researchers also aimed to expose the learners to the target language and culture in order to train them to interact in a foreign environment, where there might be no local community to rely on. Success achieved in the previous collaborative learning and real task-based projects convinced the researchers to follow this path.

As the learners' next compulsory course was Communication Skills, a challenging assignment developing greater interactivity along with linguistic and cultural awareness needed to be implemented. Computer literacy in using forums and chats was also targeted in line with today's communication trends in the professional sphere (Arnold, 2006).

The task of creating a bicultural on-line multimedia magazine was opted for the multiple challenges it implied (Salengros, 2006; Trebbi, 2000). The learners were asked to collaborate using specifically created group forums on the faculty's e-learning platform in order to find suitable information relevant to their topics. This implied a construction of knowledge leading them to analyse and select the documents (Develotte, 2005), and then to produce pedagogical content aimed to help their juniors.

The whole process of communicating, while searching and selecting information, was derived from engaged learning theories culminating in the design of multimedia materials for other students which is also called learner-led activities (Conrad and Donaldson, 2004). The Internet plays an ever significant role in the delivery of information and most companies build their own websites to convey their corporate image to the world. The magazine project presented the double advantage of raising the learners' motivation and participation, while representing a showroom of what they were capable of. Their commitment to the project gave them the opportunity to manage new responsibilities and facilitated their entrance into the professional sphere (Cohen-Scali, 2001; Dupuy and Le Blanc, 2001). The sense of community was strong among all students and they were highly motivated as this activity not only improved their French, but also benefited other learners.

The analysis by Tu (2001) on the Chinese social presence in Computer Mediated Communications (CMC) revealed how these learners performed better through this medium, and this confirmed the adoption of CSCL in the present study. A blended learning environment was selected to implement CSCL in order to increase the learners' exposure and participation without altering the course schedule (Salleh and Razak, 2006).

In blended learning is also referred to as hybrid learning, a variable amount of online teaching is introduced to a course schedule. In its implementation, e-learning can either serve to reduce in-class contact hours or be introduced in addition to the existing course schedule. In the context of this study, the learners' need for language exposure ruled out the first option. In meeting the learners' already intensive schedule, the CSCL activities were planned to avoid stress related inhibitions due to work overload following the recommendations from Levinsen (2006), Pallof and Pratt (2005), and White (2003).

OBJECTIVES

Embedded in an action research, the aim of this study was to investigate the learners' perception of CSCL in a blended environment on the

following issues: a) evaluation of the online tutorial and technical support, b) relevance of CSCL in foreign language acquisition, and c) benefits of real task-based assignments in developing autonomy and responsibility.

METHODOLOGY

The CSCL assignment was implemented in the Communication Skills course offered in the fifth semester of the French bachelor's degree programme. The pilot group consisted of 24 learners.

The reasons for choosing this course were threefold. Firstly, the assignment coincided perfectly with the course objectives. Secondly, the learners already reached a reasonable proficiency level in French and were, therefore, capable of studying autonomously. Furthermore, all the subjects had already attended the Reading and Writing Skills course, which strongly emphasized interactive and communicative competences. Lastly, the two lecturers involved in the action research were also in charge of both courses, and this facilitated the following-up of the learners' progress.

Results from the surveys and focused interviews conducted throughout the Reading and Writing Skills course earlier on showed that after the course, the learners felt positive about their knowledge of the language, but still pointed out their distress in expressing themselves. During the interviews and discussions, they stated that their inability to interact was due to their lack of practice, and their helplessness in finding resources. However, on top of all their anxiety was the main obstacle.

The CSCL assignment for the Communication Skills course was, therefore, planned in order to address these issues. In this collaborative task-based project, learners needed to study outside the class to gather and synthesise information. E-learning collaborative work was introduced in order not to overload the learners' already packed schedule. During the span of one week, the learners attended 14 hours of French classes, not counting the time spent for their minor courses.

As stipulated in the synopsis of the Communication Skills course, the total face-to-face time was eight hours per week. As attendance was compulsory, a solution was found to enable students to work inside and outside the classroom (*see* Table 1).

A weekly two-hour tutorial session was conducted by one of the lecturers in a computer laboratory. Learners could, therefore, work on their assignments, and ask the lecturer for assistance whenever necessary. This solution provided learners with immediate help whenever they encountered organisational, language, and technological problems. It also guaranteed that they had access to a computer connected to the Internet at least once a week.

Online moderation and tutorial were carried out by the two course lecturers plus one additional lecturer who is also from the French bachelor's degree programme. Guidelines for moderators were inspired by Salmon's suggestions (2003) regarding the lecturers' computer literacy, knowledge of course content and motivation to participate. The project's success and the level of interactivity inside the e-learning group forums were intimately related. As the task was based on online collaborative work, a virtual community was created so that each group member could feel encouraged and motivated. Learners faced an unprecedented

TABLE 1
Course schedule for the Communication Skills course

	Monday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
2 hour session	Course	Course	Tutorial	Course

freedom in terms of task management. They could make use of their creativity, choose topics in their scope of interests and work according to their schedules. Yet, at the same time, they were also going through a completely new experience using communication tools they had not entirely mastered. Therefore, the entire project relied on moderators and the face-to-face weekly tutorial class. Learners were encouraged to perceive moderators as accessible persons willing to give them assistance and guidance. Freedom and technology were not to be considered as burdens.

E-learning facilities were available to learners through the faculty's managed Dokeos e-learning platform. Learners had previously connected to this platform in a non-interactive way to collect course documents or submit assignments, and they were, therefore, familiar with the environment. Yet, they had never used the forum and the chat facilities.

The faculty's e-learning platform was a perfect tool to implement the project as it combined public and private spaces as well as instruments for lecturers to monitor exchanges (*see* Table 2). Course information, assignment description and announcements could be posted by lecturers and viewed by all course members. General forums and chats enabled communication among all members, while group forums and document sharing facilities gave learners more privacy to work on their respective projects. E-mails were not to be used except to communicate with the lecturers regarding private matters.

As illustrated in Table 3, the project guidelines consisted of three mission objectives and three obligations. Learners were to contribute written, audio, or video materials to a French content-based cyber magazine. They were to bear in mind that the site aimed to help other Malaysian students learn French. Each group of three learners had twelve weeks to complete their assignments in the form of two contributions presenting Malaysia and France on a similar topic.

French was the only authorised language on the platform and for the assignment. Even though motivation to participate in the project was high, an incentive was added to make sure learners actively used the communication tools of the platform. The marking scheme for the task was 60% for on-line exchanges inside the group forums, 20% for data collection, and 20% for quality to the cyber magazine. Learners were assessed collectively by the lecturers.

Data were gathered from monitoring the e-learning platform and the screening of exchanges between learners and moderators throughout the assignment. In addition, surveys, semi-guided interviews, and free discussions were also conducted.

This research study was limited as the findings did not include subjects from the rest of Malaysia. First, the number of learners and lecturers involved in this project was too small to generalise the results to a national scale. Second, this project was designed to address difficulties faced by learners in our institution based on a cultural analysis. In the pilot group, the majority

TABLE 2
Communication tools available for the assignment

Tools	Public space	Private space	Asynchronous	Synchronous
Document	✓	✓	✓	✗
Forums	✓	✓	✓	✗
E-mails	✗	✓	✓	✗
Chat	✓	✗	✗	✓
Announcements	✓	✗	✓	✗

TABLE 3
Summary of guidelines for the CSCL assignment

Mission objectives	Search and synthesise relevant information on the topic
	Analyse the information using an intercultural approach
	Present the results in two pedagogical multimedia contributions
Obligations	Use the course e-learning platform to communicate
	Use French in all communications
	Submit the contributions on week 12
Marking scheme	60% for on-line exchanges inside group forums
	20% for the selection of relevant information
	20% for both multimedia intercultural contributions to the cyber magazine

of the students were Chinese (71%) while Bumiputeras[1] accounted for 29%. Our situation was specific to the French bachelor's degree programme at this public university and did not reflect the Malaysian population composition (Bumiputera 66% and Chinese 25%), as stated in the statistics provided by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2007).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Evaluation of Online Tutorial and Technical Support

Moderators were expected to provide learners with a safe and appealing interactive environment. To avoid social, academic and technological inhibitions, as defined by White (2003), moderators connected at least twice a day to the platform. They inquired if everything went smoothly, answered distress messages, reassured learners, provided guidance, and assistance in all fields. To avoid distress, the moderator's response had to be posted within 24 hours after a learner's message.

In the case of this study, participating lecturers were strongly committed to the research project. Their dedication and willingness to cope with the extra work was exemplary, especially when considering that on-line teaching and consultancy easily amounted to between two to four hours per week. To become moderators, lecturers also had to adapt to a new environment and acquire blended learning skills, as well as technological competence on their own.

Fig. 1 gives one example of an on-line technical help on how to insert a link inside a message posted in a forum. As the platform environment was in French, the moderators had to insert screen captures in forum postings to better illustrate explanations. They also had to provide immediate solutions such as modifying links that did not work directly in the learners' messages and informing them of the action taken. This considerably contributed to a decrease in the learners' anxiety.

Thankful and relieved messages always immediately followed the moderators' responses. Even if a solution could not be found within 24 hours, acknowledging and giving sympathetic messages would inevitably convey encouragement to the learners.

Results from the surveys indicated the learners' perception of the e-learning tutorial. As shown in *Fig. 2*, students were generally satisfied with the on-line support. Twenty one out of 24 learners found the tutorial useful for getting information and advice, and 11 mentioned its flexibility. The platform enabled the learners to work on their assignments from different locations and contact their moderators whenever necessary.

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[1] The term Bumiputera refers to the definition used by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2007) which classifies the Malays and other Bumiputera ethnics under the Bumiputera category (p. 9).
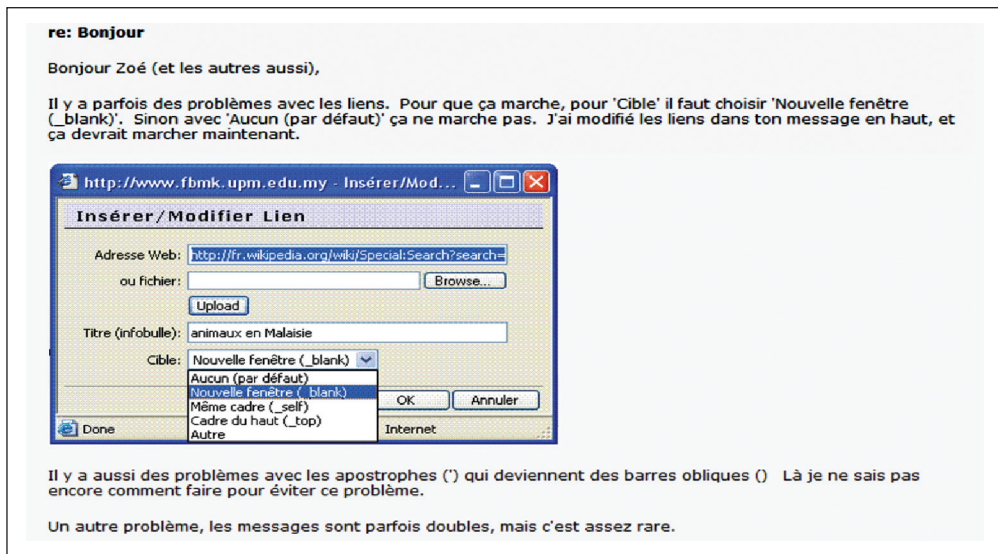
re: Bonjour

Bonjour Zoé (et les autres aussi),

Il y a parfois des problèmes avec les liens. Pour que ça marche, pour 'Cible' il faut choisir 'Nouvelle fenêtre (_blank)'. Sinon avec 'Aucun (par défaut)' ça ne marche pas. J'ai modifié les liens dans ton message en haut, et ça devrait marcher maintenant.

Il y a aussi des problèmes avec les apostrophes (') qui deviennent des barres obliques () Là je ne sais pas encore comment faire pour éviter ce problème.

Un autre problème, les messages sont parfois doubles, mais c'est assez rare.

Fig. 1: Online technical help imbedded in the lecturer's response
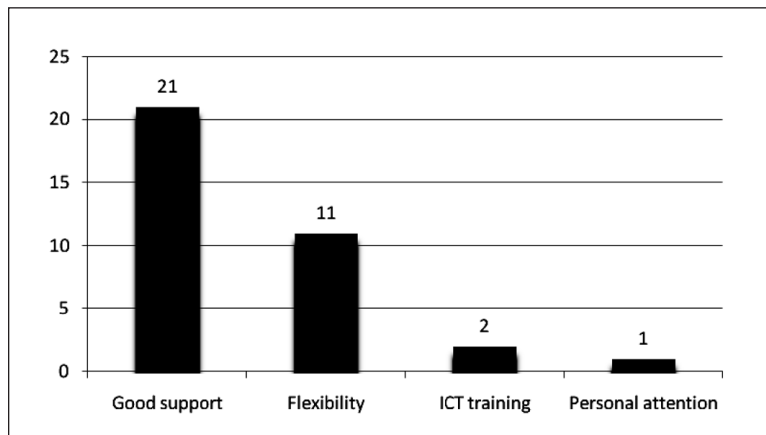
Fig. 2: Positive comments on the online tutorial (N = 24)

Very few responses were negative (*Fig. 3*), and most of them concerned with the lack of immediacy of the platform. Even though moderators were connected to the platform every day, the responses were seldom instant. Forums were asynchronous and a discussion was, therefore, slower. Furthermore, written messages lacked the precision of oral interactivity.

Mistakes were indirectly corrected unless learners had expressly requested help with a structure or a word. Each answer from the moderators showed a positive feedback and brought a feeling of personal care to the group members. The face-to-face tutorial provided an alternative source of help and was used intensively by the learners for complex technical issues pertaining to the creation of multimedia files.

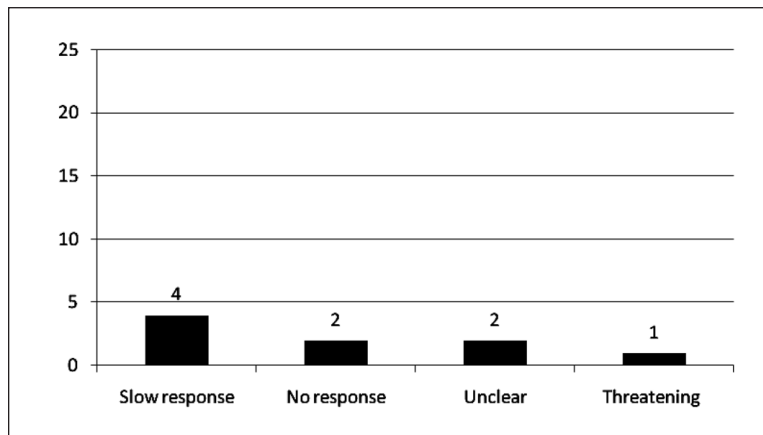The negative responses came from two groups whose moderator encountered

Fig. 3: Negative comments on the online tutorial (N = 24)

technological problems with the platform. As pointed out in an earlier section, all the lecturers participated on a voluntary basis. No specific training or equipment was provided by the institution. Teaching French using ICT in a blended learning environment also implicated new skills compared to face-to-face delivery. Learners expected a reply within 48 hours at the latest, which indirectly put tremendous pressure on newly appointed moderators who still lacked practice in forum management.

Relevance of CSCL in Foreign Language Acquisition

Forums, as illustrated in *Fig. 4*, are perceived as tools facilitating interactions. Nineteen out of 24 learners said forums could help them build language and communication skills by raising exposure through active practice. As expected, the asynchronous factor gave students sufficient time to prepare their answers which benefited less confident learners.
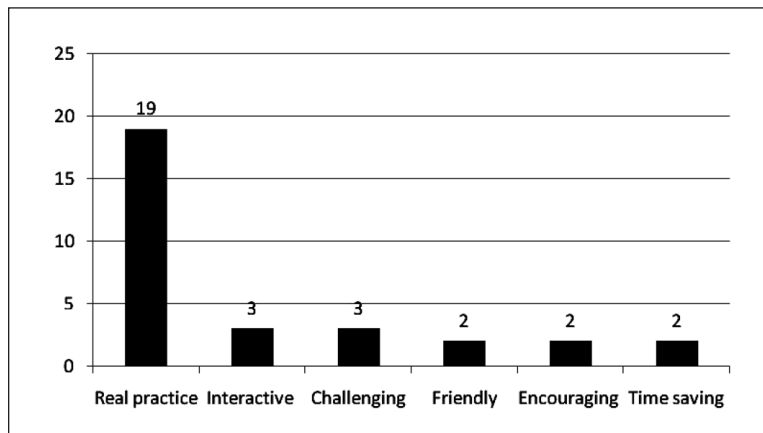

Fig. 4: Learners' perception of forums (N = 24)

The interviews revealed that the 60% incentive in the marking scheme of the assignments did motivate the learners' participation. Most learners expressed language difficulties in communicating at the early stage of the project because they lacked the vocabulary to discuss their topics on-line. Moreover, they were also frustrated with the time consuming efforts spent on posting simple messages. They were also anxious about writing incorrect messages. They feared that their self-image would be affected and were therefore afraid to make mistakes. However, the majority mentioned their willingness to go on with the project because it represented a challenge to test their ability in French. Intense dictionary search, as well as Internet browsing, helped them acquire new terms and structures which in turn were useful for interacting with other group members. Learners preferred numerous short messages to long single messages. Short messages were easier to understand and the time saved enabled them to concentrate on their replies.

Building up of learners' confidence could also be directly linked to the e-learning environment created. Thus, all the moderators introduced themselves at the group forums and encouraged learners to do the same. Getting to know each other helped to build a virtual community. Participants felt closer to their moderators and hence were less afraid to ask questions, and make comments or even jokes.

Interestingly, as on-line exchanges increased, so did the classroom interactions.

The virtual community had a great impact on the face-to-face learning environment. It was as if forums had opened the door to oral interactivity, an observation which was also made by Tudini (2003). The chat became truly popular especially during the face-to-face tutorial sessions. The whole class wanted to take part and a time schedule had to be set up to avoid crossed conversations. Anxiety linked to self image had disappeared.

By practising on the platform, the learners realised that not every written message required formality. They had learned to adapt their language style to the context and their interlocutors. Thus, messages to the moderators were more relaxed in the forums compared to those in e-mails which were perceived as more academic. On-line tutorial and participation in forums were therefore a success in boosting exposure, which was the first objective of the research study.

Fig. 5 displays the learners' self evaluation regarding their improvements in French. Progresses were marked as important regarding vocabulary, grammar, and culture.

Interviews and discussions revealed that learners had achieved cognitive and metacognitive skills throughout their assignments. The learners developed faster reading techniques, such as skimming and guessing the meaning from the context, the text structure as well as from words having similar spelling in English. They also applied learning methods acquired from learning their own languages and used them in learning
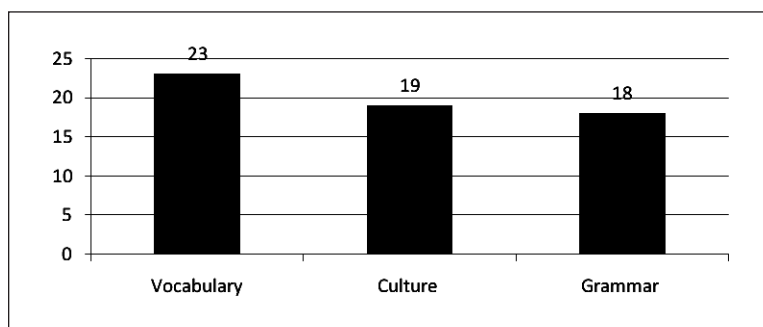

Fig. 5: Learners' self evaluation of their improvements in French (N = 24)

French. The majority of the group found the intercultural approach stimulating. Working on the same topics for both countries, the focus of this class project was an interesting way to reflect on their similarities and differences. Knowledge gained in vocabulary and culture clearly helped the group improve communication skills in terms of spontaneity while a better understanding of grammar usage truly gave them confidence.

Benefits of the Real-task Based Assignments
Fig. 6 shows the learners' comments regarding the ICT nature of the project. Due to the reality of the assignment, all the participants were motivated and put in a lot of efforts. They enjoyed the challenge, adapted themselves to the new tools and learned to carry out many tasks at the same time. They responded professionally and complied with all the new requirements such as file formats and copyrights.

When asked how the project had helped them professionally, 50% of the learners mentioned the use of ICT. Learning how to communicate using forums and chats, as well as manipulating sound and video files were often cited as beneficial. However, one learner admitted to have experienced difficulties with the on-line part of the CSCL assignment. The fact that all messages in the forums were permanently recorded and visible put considerable pressure on the less active members. The on-line forums

provided proof of insufficient participation and seemed to justify criticism from other members. This learner had been more involved with the creation of the multimedia content and thus missed the communicative side of the CSCL assignment.

Autonomy was appreciated but six learners admitted being often tired as freedom also brought its share of responsibility. These learners explained that group pressure and competition for high marks could be exhausting. During individual interviews, a few students mentioned the intense competition which had taken place between all groups during this assignment to obtain the highest mark. This might be due to the public nature of the e-learning platform, where productions could be seen by all. Points were allocated according to the originality and creativity of the multimedia content which definitely contributed in motivating learners to reach perfection. In fact, all the groups compared their works before submitting them on-line just to be sure that they would not be left behind. Consequently for the majority of learners, commitment went far beyond the guidelines and marking scheme provided. Some team leaders really exhausted their counterparts by actually pushing them harder than their moderators. This could not be seen in the on-line exchanges as it also happened during the groups' face-to-face meetings.
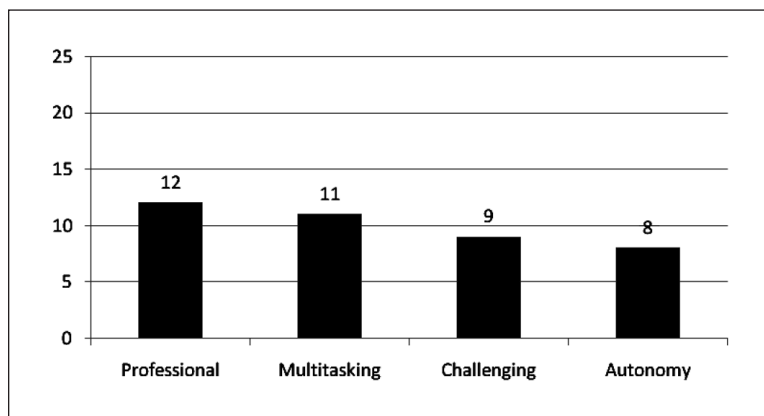
Fig. 6: Learners' perception of ICT project (N = 24)

CONCLUSIONS

This research study was remarkably rewarding especially in terms of the interactions between learners and lecturers. Twenty three out of 24 learners suggested that similar assignments should be introduced in other courses. Although the whole experience was gratifying, the role of the moderators and the amount of time necessary to provide learners with quality and efficient support should not be underestimated. CSCL not only demands technological facilities and know-how but also a lot of dedication. Implementing a similar project on a larger scale and on a long-term basis will inevitably raise the question of human resources. If lecturers are to become moderators or web designers, appropriate training and technical assistance should be recommended.

Answers to the questionnaire given after the completion of the assignment indicated a high level of satisfaction among the learners. The CSCL assignment succeeded in pushing them to practise their language skills and thus in raising their confidence, and this coincided with their comments made prior to the course. On-line exchanges as well as in-class interactions had significantly increased. Exposure to authentic sources and communication triggered or reinforced learning skills and strategies.

As for autonomy, most of the students admitted to having gained enough confidence and competence to better carry out similar tasks in the future. They also suggested that the implementation of another assignment, (i.e. where the tutorials would be progressively decreased) could help them gain the ability to work as a team. In order to avoid in-group conflicts related to participation, clearer guidelines and perhaps role attribution could help team members get evenly and efficiently involved in the project. Self evaluation combined with peer evaluation could also be added to the lecturers' evaluation to reflect what happened inside the teams better. The evaluation of the on-line participation should also be on an individual basis as it was regarded to be much fairer to the more active learners.

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