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Web-enhanced approaches to the teaching of linguistic variation in French

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Abstract

This paper considers the progressive integration of a web resource in a language degree option centred on language varieties and linguistic variation in French. It focuses on the features introduced by the web environment and how they can enhance the learning experience of the students. It addresses the issue of the language used for teaching and learning with diverse groups of students including a high proportion of non-native speakers of English, varying levels of linguistic competence and different stages of study. The paper also examines web-based facilities supporting interaction and collaboration among members of the learning group (some teacher moderated). The evaluation is based on the results of a survey conducted with the group of students who took part in the pilot implementation in 2000–01 and on module feedback. The last section in the paper points to ways of integrating further the technology within the delivery and the assessment of the module, and of increasing student support and interaction.

1 Introduction

This paper describes the introduction of information and communication technology into a Sociolinguistics module contributing to a language degree in French and reports on student evaluation following a pilot implementation in 2000–2001. Although the course currently involves both face-to-face classes and web delivery it has potential for distance learning.

2 Rationale for the introduction of an online resource

2.1 Module content

The module (Table 1) is taught over fifteen weeks in two-hour sessions (twelve of which are timetabled teaching weeks) and organised in two blocks. The first relies primarily on the mediation of subject knowledge by the teacher and through seminar activities. It is

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Table 1. *Module calendar (2000–2001)*[a]

Dates	Lecture/workshop topics	Group seminars (2000–2001)
Week 1	Introduction to linguistic variation	
Week 2	Emergence of 'standard' French, codification	
Week 3	Regional variation. Dialects, patois and languages	
Week 4	Multilingualism, language policy and diglossia French outside France.	
Week 5	Regional and minority languages.	
Week 6	Pidgins and Creoles. French Creoles in the Caribbean and in the Indian Ocean.	
Week 7	Language and Gender in Francophone countries	*Créole in la Réunion and Guadeloupe: a comparison*
Week 8	Sociosituational variation Language variation and age	*'le français des bonlieves'*
Week 9	Language planning in France: recent legislation, official bodies…	*Language policies in Quebec*
Week 10	Francophonie	*Francophonie and Commonwealth*
Week 11	Language planning: spelling reform, neologisms, terminological issues	'*Touche pas à ma langue'*
Week 12	French and language policies in Europe	*Occitan language*
Week 13	Revision	*Status of French in Mauritius and Seychelles: a comparison*
Week 14	Written coursework deadline	

[a]The order in which topics are covered from week 7 onwards partly depends on the seminar topics chosen by groups of students. The session is split between student seminar presentations and a mix of lecture and workshop activities. As a result the list provided can only be indicative. Seminar topics vary from one year to another.

well suited to face-to-face teaching and interaction. The second block introduces a parallel strand whereby students are expected to form groups of two to four students and to engage independently in collaborative work on a related sociolinguistic topic. The outcome for each group is a video-recorded seminar presentation, amounting to between fifteen and twenty minutes per student, shown in class, and the setting of related tasks to the whole class. The seminar, based on the joint presentation, is led by the student group. They can interrupt the video to add some information, run one of the tasks or open discussion on a particular issue. They can also support aspects of their presentation through the use of OHP transparencies, maps or other relevant documents. The record-

[1] http://www.dcu.ie/~salis/tandem

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ings and accompanying dossiers constitute the module's first assessed assignment, which is then available as a class resource for the end-of-module written assignment.

In the second half of the module, the mode of learning moves further from "learning through acquisition" to "learning through guided discovery" (Laurillard, 1994: Figure 2) with a change in the student role. There is a shift of emphasis from teaching to co-operative and problem-based learning where teacher and student become collaborators. Learners work to the goals they have defined and their interaction with the world and their peers becomes central in the learning process. A majority of the students are mature students who usually have to work to support themselves, may have family care responsibilities, and for whom meeting outside scheduled classes in preparation for the seminars has always been difficult to manage. Alternative modes of delivery had therefore to be considered. The availability through the Internet of a bank of texts relevant to the module and through a Computer Managed Learning system such as WebCT™[2] of asynchronous communicative facilities (electronic mail, discussion forums or lists, virtual message boards, computer conferencing) offered ways of supporting learner-controlled initiatives and of overcoming time and space constraints. The availability to our students of open access to networked computers led to a rethink of the overall mode of delivery for the course material.

Given the limited number of teaching hours, a web-based resource provided quick access to a fuller range of material easily expanded and updated. It also allowed a more flexible and challenging use of class contact time (see Taylor, Pickering): the lecture coverage could be more selective, more time could be spent on specific workshop activities while others were left for students to complete individually or collectively outside of class. Independent work was supported by the introduction of online hints or solutions designed to guide the learners' investigation at appropriate times.

The introduction of computer-mediated communication presented another advantage in the context of wider participation and modularity pervading the Higher Education sector: an opportunity to revisit an issue of central concern for language students who may be attempting both to master a discipline and to develop their language competence in the target language when taking their options in cultural, linguistic or area studies.

2.2 The language issue

Choosing English or the target language as the language of mediation in an option contributing to a language degree is an important and sometimes controversial issue. In the sociolinguistic module considered, the language to be used in class was chosen through negotiation between the lecturer and the group of students, even if the collective decision was then applied with a degree of flexibility. In contrast the language used for assessment was left to individual choice. Related research undertaken on a large student sample across the UK demonstrated that more students would favour the use of the target language than were exposed to it. At the same time a staff survey emphasised a number of factors irremediably leading towards greater use of English (McBride, 2001, 2000). The development of online materials provided the opportunity to support learners by offering two parallel sets of lecture notes, one in English and one in the target language.

[2]WebCT was developed by the Computer Science Department of the University of British Columbia.

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Recent undergraduate cohorts taking this module have been diverse in terms of linguistic competence in the target language, year level within the degree (second or final) and cultural and language background. In 2000–2001, when the web component was introduced, the group consisted of 17 students: Five French students (two of them Creolophones); Five Francophones from countries other than France (Belgium, Congo, Senegal, Togo); Five native speakers of English; and two native speakers of Spanish. Nine students were in their second year of study (all post A level equivalent) and eight in their final year. The group included three students who started their language degree at *ab initio* or intermediate levels.

In such a context of linguistic mixed ability, the availability of two sets of notes (in English and in the target language) offered students familiarisation with terminology in French and in English relevant to sources listed in the module bibliography. It also provided both native speakers of French and English with supplementary support. Making more time available to think, research and respond than the face-to-face classroom usually allows may benefit some specific learning styles and objectives (Palloff and Pratt, Maloney). Lee, Armitage, Groves & Stephens (1999) describe the use of Computer Mediated Communication tools as empowering for students who are not native speakers of English:

> "It has been found that CMC environments are particularly useful for students for whom English is not their first language. They can take the time to check their understanding without 'missing' any comments as they may do in a face to face situation. They can also take their time to compose their replies without being under pressure as in a face to face situation" (Chapter 3, p.1).

The availability of French lecture notes for learners of French as a foreign language provides a similar service. Thus the integration of Computer and Information Technology in the module provides support for the development of linguistic outcomes associated with language degree competence.

3 The resource developed

3.1 Structure

The module web-site was created as a complement to face-to-face delivery. It gives open access throughout the semester to the following resources: lecture notes, references, links, seminar tasks, and module information and management. As an expanding resource linking to other sources of information it enables learners to explore knowledge in an area suited to their individual interests and needs or to those shared by their seminar group. Peraya (1994) relates the concept of 'dynamic hypertext' to that of 'intertextuality': "WWW typically makes available a growing and changing text composed of a mosaic of texts selected by each reader/writer". This is particularly appropriate for a very mixed student population and a module that allows students a substantial choice of topics for further investigation.

Overall the web site aims to provide a strong sense of structure and place and to be simple to operate. Students access different sections in the programme through a menu

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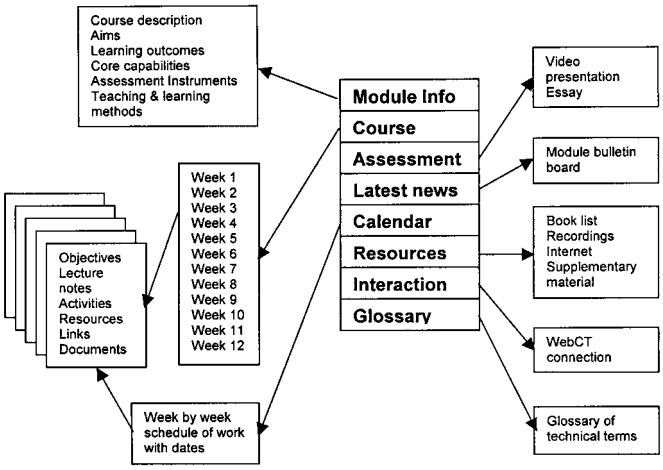


Fig. 1. Website structure.

available on the module homepage. Figure 1 replicates the levels and options available to students.

3.2 Features

3.2.1 Immediacy of information

The site can integrate a variety of resources (text, audio and video format from a range of Francophone sources) through links to other sites available on the Internet and access to locally held files. This provides a single point of access to a wealth of material previously scattered and regularly reported as difficult to locate by student representatives at boards of study. Although the links require regular maintenance students can be encouraged to contribute actively to the updating of the resource.

3.2.2 Language flexibility

The site structure makes it easy to move between the two sets of lecture notes provided. Apart from a common core of information, the target language and English versions have been developed as complementary texts with particular reference to sources of information available to the students rather than straight translations.

3.2.3 Complementarity

The web site and the class environments are meant to complement each other. In class, students can test and internalise new knowledge by comparing or sharing their interpretation and by engaging in workshop activities. Outside the class, by using the module web site, they can explore a particular area in more depth, engage in the study of related cases, interact with their peers and the lecturer (through participation in a threaded

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discussion group and emails) to address an issue, prepare a case summary or solve a problem. Through their interpretation of information and shared experience, they individually or collaboratively construct knowledge, with the lecturer acting as a coach rather than a teacher (Jonassen, 1999). They also have the opportunity to apply recently met techniques and knowledge by completing the seminar exercises held in the *course materials* section of the web site.

3.2.4 Supporting various stages of the learning process

Problem solving is a key aspect of the learning approach in this module. The 12-week e-seminars involve solving tasks related to the information presented in the lectures. They also provide associated learning support which can be introduced at scheduled times, for example hints released in the week preceding the related class and solutions in the following week. Immediate feedback is then available to students for the rest of the semester. Therefore the resource acts as a useful complement for limited class time.

3.2.5 Interaction and privacy

The site offers support for different types of interaction within the learning group: one-to-one, one-to-small group, one-to-many, and many-to-many. Students are invited to use the module discussion group:

- to announce their interest in a particular presentation topic, exchange ideas and find partners for their seminar presentation;
- to contribute to the collective creation of a glossary;
- to signal outdated links and share addresses of new sites to be added to the module;
- to explore issues introduced in the lectures or related to their own investigation and support each other.

In the second block of the module the various preparatory stages leading to the group presentations can take place through face-to-face interaction or through asynchronous collaboration using the WebCT private forums specifically set for each seminar group. These allow, through emails and attachments, the sharing and developing of work in independent secure areas where both ownership of the knowledge constructed by the small group and privacy are ensured prior to the seminar presentations. In the pilot implementation the lecturer was not a member of any of these areas.

Using technology tools that can support dialogue as a fundamental means of inquiry provides a suitable platform for learning as "a social dialogical process" in which meaning is socially negotiated (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell & Bannan Haag, 1995:9). Online collaborative learning in encouraging communication between peers and developing user-structured learning (Pickering, 1995) becomes an appropriate alternative environment or adjunct for a problem-based learning approach.

4 Students' evaluation

Seventeen students took the module in Semester A of 2000–2001 and participated in

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the pilot introducing the complementary web resource. Evaluation was through questionnaires and informal feedback. The sixteen students who completed the web-site questionnaire all reported having made use of the site, six once a week and four at least once every two weeks.

Twelve students described the site as easy (or very easy) to use right from the beginning: four were able to get used to it in 'no time', eight within one session. Three students expressed 'no opinion' on the matter. Only one referred to ongoing technical difficulties but accepted them as something s/he had to be able to cope with.
Nine students found that information was 'easy to find' against two 'difficult to find'.

The list below shows the site components (see homepage menu in Figure 1) ranked in descending order of consultation by the group:

Course materials (including lecture notes, seminar activities, links, resources and supplementary documents) – 13
Module general information – 12
Module assessment – 12
Module resources – 11
Module calendar – 9
Latest news (teacher-managed electronic notice board) – 8

The responses showed that the section most frequently visited by students was the 'course materials' menu. This is not surprising since this section holds the knowledge-based resource for the module. However, sections with practical information on the module and its assessment came very close behind. Students were also asked to name the subsections in the 'course materials' menu, which they most regularly consulted. These are listed below, in descending order of consultation:

Links – 10
Lecture notes (in French) – 7
Lecture notes (in English) – 7
Resources – 5
Seminar activities – 3
Supplementary documents – 3
Objectives – 2

Despite the fact that French was the prevailing native language in the cohort, answers showed an equal demand for lecture notes in English and in the target language (French in our context). Four students recorded systematically visiting both sets of lecture notes, the others seemed to prefer one language only. The questionnaire did not ask students for their native language but informal feedback pointed to a majority of students using their own language in the assessment (with occasional variation between the two assignments). A bilingual site seems to provide learners with appropriately demanding input that can accommodate individual needs in terms of language competence and of subject knowledge. Further evaluation is needed on the impact of a bilingual approach.

Overall very positive reactions were recorded as to the validity of the resource. It was described as:

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- appropriate to the students' needs (14 versus 1 who clearly preferred the teacher/class contact approach);
- expressed in an effective way (12);
- of appropriate length: (10 described the lecture notes sections as'just right', 2 would have liked them broken down into smaller units while 1 found the units of information 'too short').

A strong concern when devising the site was to strike a balance between providing substantial expandable information and at the same time avoiding scrolling long web pages. Findings by Nielsen (1996) indicated that "only 10% of users scroll beyond the information that is visible on the screen when a page comes up". Even if web users' behaviour has evolved in the past few years and now points to a greater willingness to scroll (Nielsen, 1999), it is worth noting that there is still a proportion of users who will concentrate on what is visible prior to any scrolling. The units, of variable lengths (two to four screen heights), are broken down into smaller units through the insertion of live links to relevant documents/pages or to seminar tasks so that scrolling is not the sole possible interaction for the learner facing the screen.

The style and approach adopted seemed to be equally well received. The students rejected the following descriptors: 'too easy', 'too difficult', 'too technical', 'too simplified' and characterised the course material as: 'not too easy' (2), 'not too difficult' (3), 'not condescending' (2), 'not too technical' (2) but 'challenging' (6).[3]

The questionnaire also attempted to identify the motivation driving students to the site, especially as they all had access to a printed dossier fulfilling a parallel function. Because the pilot was run on a very low budget and the material could only be published on the web week by week, students had been given the option of acquiring a module dossier in print format. All chose to do so. The dossier contained a high proportion of the information now held in the web site, though it did not include any of the live links to other web sites. One student stated that s/he "could not have done without" the web site. Half of the group stated that they enjoyed it and seven wished that similar sites were developed for other content modules. In contrast, four acknowledged using it because they felt they had to, two expressed a preference for sole use of the module handbook and one stated a dislike for online media in general. Half of the group considered that the site provided material and support which they would not otherwise have been able to access. The most frequently identified gains related to aspects not provided by the module dossier: links to other sites and immediate access to supplementary documents such as legal texts and audience comments on language policies reported as very time-consuming to locate when not integrated in the site. Only four, among the low users, expressed resistance against the medium itself and did not feel that it added value to the module delivery. Instead they were concerned that the technology might deprive them of valued interpersonal communication and expressed their preference for all documents to be provided in print form by the teacher. Among these students some clearly became aware of some of the additional facilities offered by the web site at a late stage in the module.

[3]Despite an invitation in the question to tick more than one answer few students did so which explains the low numbers.

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The questionnaire queried how necessary the printed dossier was, now that a module site had been created. Four students agreed that the dossier was superfluous while seven rejected this view. Although they recognised advantages in using the site they fitted into the frequently observed pattern whereby online students tend to print out electronic materials. In recognition of this practice and to facilitate independent study, special care had been given to ensure easy to read printed versions of the lecture notes by supplying corresponding PDF files. Seven students in the group stated that they had printed pages provided on the site and not available in the dossier. Only three in the group maintained that they would not print from the web.

Finally students were asked whether the web site resource provided sufficient material for the course to support distance learning. The site is currently accessible on and off campus via the keying in of a username and password. Five students replied that the site included enough information for the module to be taken without attendance, six disagreed. Students' comments showed that they particularly valued the social dimension provided by the class environment and the immediacy of communication inherent in lectures and workshops: "students' participation is really good and without attendance people can miss it", "although the web site is very helpful, nothing can replace the teacher support towards students". Two replied both 'yes' and 'no' to this question, adding that they benefited from the exchanges with the tutor and with other students and that "distance learning demands much more from the student". It is possible that students prefer scheduled meetings and teacher-guided activities to what they perceive as a more lonely learning environment requiring a high level of self-discipline. This is supported by their suggestion that "some contact time would still need to be made available" if the distance learning mode of delivery was adopted.

Research (Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Duffy, Arnold & Henderson, 1995; Taylor, 1998) shows that learners' reactions to computer-mediated communication are affected by personality and by their ability to express themselves in public. Students who perceive themselves as self-conscious or introvert tend to find online communication more satisfying and enjoyable than face-to-face interaction. "Introverts generally appear far more extroverted online, frequently becoming quite verbal and interactive. Their ability to take time, reflect, and present themselves through text serves them well". In contrast extroverts who are "used to being able to establish presence quicky through verbal and social connection may have more difficulty in the flat, text-based online environment" (Palloff & Pratt 2001:21–22).

The online medium opens up real opportunities for students who find the face-to-face environment less conducive to intercommunication, especially as skills acquired in the online environment may transfer to the face-to-face setting. It is equally relevant for teachers to be aware of the added difficulty that their more extrovert learners might face when the online mode is introduced although some comment that "it must also be said that the best debaters are those students who perform well in live situations too" (Duffy, *et al*., 1995:5).

In a phenomenographic research project contrasting experiences of face-to-face and online learning Asensio, Hodgson and Trehan report that "participants of the online environment appeared to become more interpersonally aware and more interpersonally effective in the way they communicate with each other" (Asensio *et al.*, 2000:18). Their study is particularly relevant as the approach includes, in common with the students at UNL, a

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substantial collaborative assessment process, prone to create emotional uncertainty, if not anxiety, among students. It demonstrated that online participants were more able to deal individually and collectively with the situations or problems and break free of dependency on the teacher. However their research concerned postgraduate participants who through their professional background were already skilled in the art of interpersonal communication. Our module takers are undergraduates who, despite being in the majority mature students, may not always be able to apply such skills and may need more guidance. Further investigation is needed among undergraduates.

5 Future developments

Despite the preference expressed for a module printed dossier, this facility is to be discontinued on the grounds of funding and time required for dual maintenance. As a result the web site will become the main learning resource rather than an enhanced alternative and adequate preparation is needed to help students become familiar with the online resource and tools. "Learning through the use of technology takes more than mastering a software program or feeling comfortable with the hardware being used. Students… need to realize that the online process occurs, for the most part, through the formation of a learning community and is reflective in nature." (Palloff & Pratt 2001:108) This section concentrates on changes to be introduced next time the module is delivered.

5.1 Training in using the resource

Even though all Humanities students at the University of North London are provided with generic computer skills and introduced to the web and HTML in their first semester at the university, at least one studio session will be organised formally at the start of the course to provide supervised hands-on experience and familiarisation with the facilities available on the module web site. All students have open access to networked desktop computers and software and some can use computers off campus. None, however, in the pilot group had previous experience of online learning.

5.2 Focusing on the e-resource

The discontinuation of the printed dossier will make the e-resource central in the delivery of the module. Current experience gained on modules running with sole electronic support at the university seems to indicate that students are more likely to engage actively with the resource and to interact with the material if they know that the website is a necessary component of the course. The views expressed by students about printing online material was a reminder of the risk that the web resource might be treated as a mere storing device, materials being printed and at best used as any linear resource. Consequently more attention is to be given to the learning environment and the role of the tutor in online delivery. In order to enhance personal construction of meaning through dialogue (Jonassen *et al.*, 1995) and to promote collaborative learning processes, the active use of discussion forums will be strengthened and become a necessary rather than optional stage within the learning process (see Sections 5.4 and 5.5).

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5. 3 Increasing student confidence

Two developments, suggested by students, will be introduced in the coming session. The aim is to increase learners' confidence as they engage in a new discipline (Sociolinguistics) and in new modes of delivery, i.e. online learning and the preparation of a seminar presentation to be recorded and shown to the class. A 'Frequently Asked Questions' section is to be added in the **Interaction** menu items. Feeding on issues raised both in and outside class, the FAQ section will include excerpts from e-mail exchanges and act for the lecturer as an opportunity both to guide learners in the development of new knowledge and to provide feedback. To alleviate student anxiety and encourage reflection on what constitutes good practice the web-site will also include in its **Assessment** menu item access to snippets of video presentations produced by students in previous sessions.

5.4 Enhancing communication through interactivity

Engagement in interpersonal communication using asynchronous electronic tools will become a necessary stage in the learning process rather than an optional one.

(i) Students will be expected to submit a minimum number of postings to the WebCT module discussion forum. Support will be provided at the start of the semester. In an early studio session they will be invited to engage in a first posting centred on introducing themselves to the group and describing their language experience (e.g. native language, language used and learnt in education, status of the language(s) spoken in their country). The second posting, initiated by a real-time discussion, will address a clear agenda: selecting and submitting a topic for the seminar presentation and/or reacting to others' suggestions so as to form seminar sets in time for the given deadline. The electronic medium presents advantages over using the last ten minutes of a class and traditional notice boards. Apart from removing geographical and time constraints from the exchange, it underlines for learners the importance of interpersonal factors and social negotiation in the definition of goals to be shared within each seminar group. At the same time it familiarises students with the technological asynchronous support available for the remainder of their course.

(ii) Each seminar group will have access to a WebCT private area enabling them to work in the same electronic space, though not necessarily at the same time. In providing secure areas for work in progress, these forums aim to support collaboration rather than just communication.

(iii) All students on the module will be invited and encouraged to exchange reflections on the learning process they are undergoing through the introduction of a discussion forum on **Online learning**. The forum will act as a support and diagnosis resource in respect of the students' needs.

(iv) The increased use of tutoring via e-mails will create further opportunities for coaching learners, the speed of response being one element sustaining motivation.

Students will be encouraged to log in at least weekly on the WebCT module discussion

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forum. More frequent logins would be required from online students. Depending on the number of students opting for the online mode of delivery the seminar presentation groups could be mixed (class-scheduled and online students) or exclusive. Online students will be invited to join scheduled classes at specified points and might need to attend one of the class sessions to deliver their presentations.

5.5 Reflecting delivery diversity in the module assessment

To motivate students to contribute to the online forum (Cook & Boyle, 2000), a remodelling of some assessment components will be tested next year. It will incorporate participation in the module discussion group. A number of substantive postings demonstrating collaborative experience will be required from each seminar group prior to the presentation and for access by the whole class: announcement of the seminar topic, abstract, seminar supplementary documents and handouts (if produced electronically), and bibliography. Following the seminar presentation, the group will also need to provide a reflective piece on their collaborative experience. These postings will constitute 20% of the seminar presentation assignment so far allocated to a written portfolio submitted after the seminar presentation.

6 Conclusion

Local and national initiatives (Dearing 1997) encourage the development of technology-based delivery in Higher Education, as do current student cohorts now coming with diverse needs and increased computer literacy. An influx of online materials, however, needs to go hand in hand with effective ways of supporting the learning process in this new environment. For example the availability, alongside a module web site, of widely accessible computer-mediated communication tools such as email, discussion forums and virtual notice boards in a sociolinguistic module presents learners with a flexible resource able to support collaborative study and the social and reflective construction of knowledge. It also underlines the role of the lecturer as advisor and facilitator within a learning environment extending beyond the university campus. In this context future developments, following the pilot introduction of online learning, aim at strengthening the integration of asynchronous communication and interaction within the learning and assessment process.

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