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# *The development of meaningful interactions on a blog used for the learning of English as a Foreign Language*

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**Abstract**

The use of a blog as a pedagogical aid for the learning of foreign languages is gaining support among teachers' communities (Soubrié, 2006; Tomé, 2007) as it can help students develop online interactions and authentic productions. The current study is analysing the use of such a multimedia setting in a group of Master's students in France, studying English as a Foreign Language, who had to keep a blog in groups of three or four, dealing with a specific topic of their interest. The introduction of such a tool was meant to motivate learners to practise written expression with an added value: the authenticity of the posted message, aimed not only at the teacher and the learning community but also made visible to the outside world.

The aim of this article is to measure the pedagogical added value of such a blog for the development of written expression more specifically, and to see the potential to transform a real activity which is well-known to the younger learners' community[1] into a learning activity for the learning of English. The aims are in agreement with the principles of the Common European Framework of References for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), which establishes specific goals for language learners with the implementation of ICT: task-based learning, authentic interactions or collaborative learning (Wenger, 1998).

Three main aspects have been considered in this article:

(i) a description of the way the interactions take place on the blog;
(ii) an analysis of the motivating factors for such a publication online;
(iii) reflection on the role of the tutor and on the place for feedback.

A quantitative analysis of the interactions shows that the project is quite successful in terms of participation, as there are more posts on average than required in the pedagogical contract. Yet there are some disparities, concerning the level of activity from one blog to another and among the participants, that can be related to the role they undertake within the blog (do they prefer to post messages or comments, who are these for and why are they posted?) and to their level of motivation. Qualitatively, the project is also positively perceived: although the blog is not considered as a ''real-life'' one (the activity is perceived as a pedagogical one), the interactions are meaningful because they make sense for the learners who are fully engaged in the writing process and in the interactions. Finally, the place for feedback needs to be discussed, as the corrections online, although described as necessary, are also very often perceived as inhibiting and appear to be a critical element of the project.

Keywords: blog, online interactions, task-based learning, authentic production, written expression

[1] It is estimated that more than half of teenagers keep a blog.

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## 1 Introduction

The increasing interest in the use of blogs as a pedagogical aid for the learning of foreign languages (Soubrié, 2006; Tomé, 2007) comes from the fact that blogs can help students develop online interactions and authentic productions. Our current study takes place in a context of guided self-learning in a Language Resource Center. Our aim is to analyse the use of such a multimedia setting in a group of Master's students in France, studying English as a Foreign Language, who had to write a blog in groups of three or four, dealing with a specific topic of their interest. The introduction of such a tool was meant to motivate learners to engage themselves in an exchange based on a constructivist approach, mainly in order to practise written expression; some contributions sometimes took the form of a video or an oral document, but very rarely. The expected added value was to permit the development of meaningful interactions through the messages and the comments posted in reaction to these messages, aimed not only at the teacher and the learning community but also made visible to the outside world.

In order to determine the potential added value and the limitations of a blog for the purpose of language learning, we will focus on three main research questions:

(i) What are the **characteristics of the publications** on the blog? What kind of documents do the learners publish, how do they organize their publication of articles online and how do they interact with each other (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004)? How did the learners organize themselves in order to publish their writing? Did they work in groups or alone; did they participate actively, posting comments on their partners' blogs? How were their interactions structured?

(ii) What are the **motivating factors** for such a kind of publication online? Was it highly motivating, was it perceived as meaningful or did the weight of evaluation change the criteria of participation? Questionnaires and the reflective journals created throughout the learning sessions will be analysed to measure the effect of the blog on motivation.

(iii) What are the necessary **pedagogical interventions** to turn the blog into an efficient object of learning: we must keep in mind that the blog is not only an open publication space, but also a learning space. What are the rules of animation and feedback required from the teacher to favour efficient language learning?

The aim of this research was to identify the favorable elements that need to be reinforced for the success of the project and to understand why some elements did not work as expected. Answers to these questions were provided through the triangulation of various documents, in order to have access both to the data objectively and to the students' perception of the activity:

- Analysis of the blogs themselves (themes chosen, content of the exchanges, rate of participation, structure of the interactions);
- Answers to the online questionnaires filled in by the learners at the end of the semester;
- Analysis of the reflective journals created throughout the learning sessions.

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## 2 Background

### 2.1 Context of the experiment

The experiment took place among Master's 1 students specialising in Didactics of French as a Foreign Language (future teachers of FFL) who were placed in a guided self-learning context for the learning of their foreign language, English. During the first semester, they adapted to the guided self-learning arrangement and started to face the challenge of autonomous learning. During the second semester, the students participated in this blog project, in which they were asked to work in small groups of two or three students, mixing students from different levels so that within each group stronger students would help weaker ones, in order to promote collaborative writing. The weaker students could, in turn, contribute their own knowledge of the topic, or their technical competence.

### 2.2 The expected added value of blogs

Several aspects of blogs can be considered as interesting for the language teacher. A blog offers a space for public written production linked with the learning of English as a Foreign Language. It can also foster a motivational gain due to meaningful interactions on topics chosen by the students themselves. Furthermore there are transferable benefits, as the blog is a useful tool to master for our students who are training to become teachers of French as a Foreign Language and who thus acquire competences in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) which are useful for their future profession. Last, but not least, the process of publishing messages and comments on a blog encourages autonomy in students, which is central to the context of guided self-learning in a Resource Language Center.

Although they emerged in a pedagogical context, can we consider the interactions on a pedagogical blog to be authentic or, in other words, ''meaningful''? Can the goals of communication be similar to those of real life? Steven Thorne (2009)[2] refers to his students engaged in a similar activity who considered that ''it's like the same thing but you're doing it in Spanish'', and testified that some were ''posting Spanish blog entries from class to personal blogs and translating personal entries into Spanish''[3]. The challenge in that kind of project is therefore to transform a language activity into a personal meaningful one, as if it were a personal blog. Two questions can help determine the level of authenticity of the interactions:

- Was there a transfer from real life to educational context and vice versa, or was the activity perceived as only educational?
- even if the activity was not real life-like, were there any meaningful exchanges taking place online?

[2] Steve Thorne's presentation was entitled: *''Language learning as bricolage in new media environments'' http://eurocall.webs.upv.es/eurocall2009/speakers.php*

[3] Spanish being the foreign language of these English speakers.

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In fact, as the production is owned by the author, we can therefore anticipate that we will encounter meaningful interactions, in the sense that they are not compulsory and guided by the teacher but rely on a real interest in the topic being developed.

### *2.3 The pedagogical approach*

The use of a blog can take place in two kinds of pedagogical context, according to Soubrié (2008: 124). On the one hand, in an instructionist approach we encounter precise indications concerning the quantity, the content and the type of messages allowed (proactive and reactive method of tutoring) and the terms of the didactic contract are taken into account in the final evaluation. On the other hand, a constructivist approach[4] goes along with relatively free indications or free use of the tool of communication, which are sometimes followed by a reflection on the written productions by way of face-to-face sessions to comment on them.

In our context, we were situated in an instructionist approach as the blog project was assessed within the guided self-learning context. The blog counted as sixty percent of the final mark that included both a quantitative evaluation (five contributions plus comments required) and a qualitative evaluation (originality, quality of the language – taking into account the actual language level of the individual student – and complexity of contributions). Forty percent of the grade was based on the evaluation of the learning journal, an important element in the guided self-learning context.

Regarding pedagogical input, the tutors were not supposed to correct the posts before their publication, in order to leave the writing process spontaneous and autonomous. Afterwards, the native tutor posted a few comments focusing on form, if necessary, and on content in order to demonstrate involvement and interest in the productions.

## 3 Theoretical framework

### *3.1 What does a blog consist of?*

Campbell (2003) defines the main elements that qualify a blog as follows:

> A weblog (or 'blog') can be thought of as an **online journal**[5] that an individual can continuously update with **his or her own words**, ideas, and thoughts through software that enables one to easily do so. Furthermore, a weblog is **interactive**, in the sense that readers can respond to any given entry with a comment and even threaded discussions can take place depending on the software chosen.

Furthermore, blogs are not only composed of text, but can include pictures (all the blogs in this study did, and the graphic aspect played an important part), or even videos. Only one video was actually created specifically for the blog project; most often links to videos on Youtube were imported.

[4] Soubrié (2008: 123–124) opposes « instructionniste » to « incitationniste », the latter permitting « perspective à la fois exploratoire et de co-construction, tant sur le plan des connaissances que de l'identité.. »

[5] The emphases here are the current author's in all cases.

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### 3.2 Typology of blogs and of contributions

Campbell (2003) distinguishes three types of blogs:

- Tutor blog, which is kept by the teacher in order to organize the content of his course;
- Class blog, which is kept by the class and the teacher together;
- Learner blog, which is kept by the student(s) alone or in groups.

> "The idea here is that students can get **writing practice**, develop **a sense of ownership**… In addition, whatever they write can instantly be read by anyone else and, due to the comment features of the software, **further exchange of ideas** is promoted" (Campbell, 2003).

According to this typology, our project was of the third type, learner-oriented.

Cardon and Delaunay-Teterel (2006) suggest another type of classification based not only on the type of owner but rather on the type of contributions that can be encountered. They distinguish:

- Personal blogs: in which the enunciator expresses him/herself on his/her personal feelings and private life;
- Familiar blogs: adressing a network of close people who share a common culture and knowledge;
- Expert blogs: blogs in which the author shows some specific abilities and competences and plays the role of an expert;
- Citizen blogs: that call for public debate.

This typology proves particularly useful in classifying the blogs that were developed in our study. Another criteria can be added to this list of four elements, taken from Soubrié (2008: 125)[6] who identifies the category "*blog gueuloir*", or "rant blog" in which the students express their revolt, their anger or despair, freely. It refers not so much to the kind of topic chosen, but to the argumentative style chosen. Section 4.2 will demonstrate which category the blogs analysed fit into.

### 3.3 A socio-constructivist approach or even a collaborative activity

The activity relied on a socio-constructivist approach, which is one of the recurrent aspects in blogs used for language learning: the aim is to establish a dialogue among the students. Several researchers (among which Camilleri, Ford, Leja & Sollars, 2007; Williams & Jacobs, 2004) have shown the positive influence of the social dialogue that is made possible in blogs created in the context of language learning. In such a setting, the writings of some students serve as a pretext for the others to answer, comment, complete… and vice-versa.

Hence, the construction of knowledge takes place through the development of social interactions. Lara (2006) insists on the blog potential to transform a **monologue** into

[6] «Ce qui compte, c'est d'exprimer l'originalité de son point de vue, ses ressentis, c'est de laisser libre cours à ses réflexions et ses émotions. Le blog joue en quelque sorte le rôle d'un « gueuloir » (Soubrié, 2008: 125).

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a **dialogue**[7]. Soubrié (2008) mentions its double quality as a tool that favours both **self-publication** and **communication**[8].

Generally speaking, the main characteristic of collaboration is that the members of the group have a common intention and share a process of co-construction of knowledge. That aspect makes the blog a collaborative space (even if the students did not work together, they were engaged in the creation of a common content through the use of posts and comments). Not only were the blogs supposed to be collaborative because of the structure of the blog made up of posts and comments, but also because the blogs were organized in small groups who were supposed to prepare their posts together. If we focus on the written interactions, we can really consider the blog as a place for a socio-constructivist process: the posts of one student were either commented on by the students of his/her own group or by the students of the other groups. As such, the task was successful.

### *3.4 Blog and sense of authorship*

The specificities of the blog show the essential link between the individual and the community.

> Weblogs are not special because of their technology but because of the **practice** and **authorship** they shape. And it is a practice that will require a weblog author to be "connected" to processes, discourses and communities…. As a consequence it puts a **social pressure** on the learner (Wrede, 2005)
>
> as "the creation of individual identity is created by the nature and quality of interaction with the discourse – not by judgments of a single other individual (the teacher/coach)" (*ibid.*).

Wrede (2005) also adds that "a weblog (to some degree also a group weblog for small groups) is "owned" by the author(s) and therefore creates a completely different **motivation for expression**." Thorne (2009) states that his students have expressed this feeling in other words saying that "you have to make up a personality using words, and you have to do it in Spanish".

Mortensen & Walker (2002) state that "writing in a weblog, one is forced to **confront one's own writing and opinions and to see them reflected** in the words of others". The construction of authorship that is permitted by the blog is clearly based on a socio-constructivist approach.

### *3.5 Blog vs forum*

As both forum and blog permit the development of authentic interactions (cf. Rivens Mompean, 2007), it seems interesting to compare the kinds of productions that can be developed on these supports.

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[7] "Una de sus características más importantes es la capacidad de interactividad, que permite que el *blog* pase de ser un monólogo a un diálogo en una invitación constante a la conversación » Lara (2006: 9)

[8] « L'une des spécificités du blog est qu'il rassemble deux outils sur un même support: un outil d'autopublication et un outil de communication » Soubrié (2008: 126).

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A blog can be described as a personal space which others can enter to make comments, while the forum is a common space in which each one can write – "individuals are only represented as part of the system" (Wrede, 2005). In fact the graphic design of the blog is an essential element of the project, while the format of the forum is generally not personalized, as it is a common space. "This 'turning around' of the role of the technology/medium makes weblogs a completely different approach in regard to didactical and educational scenarios" (Wrede, 2005), and the difference is not just visual but at the core of the setting. The types of documents encountered also differ: the blog permits the easy (and common) inclusion of hyperlinks and images, while the forum mainly consists of plain texts or attached files.

## 4 Methodology

### *4.1 The corpus analysed*

The corpus analysed comprized the seven blogs that correspond to the productions of nineteen Master's 1 FLE students, including thirteen female students and six male students, which is representative of the population of the Master's course. Among these students, six of them indicated that they had a good knowledge of ICT, seven said they could manage and three of them had already kept a personal blog. All of them had taken a course on the concept of using multimedia for language learning and thus had a theoretical approach to the topic.

Therefore, there were no technical problems to be overcome to be able to post messages, although one or two students declared later that the technical aspect prevented them from posting messages as often as they would have wanted. The students originated from two group levels: half of them were from level B1 or B1+, the other students from level B2 to C1, according to the levels of the Common European Framework of References of Language (2001).

The corpus consisted of 159 contributions and 144 comments, written over three months of the second semester. On average, there were 7.7 contributions per student, which is more than the minimum of five contributions and the same number of comments, required in the pedagogical contract.

In order to have an insight into students' perception of the activity, the analysis of the content of the blogs was triangulated with two other elements:

- the reading of the journals that were part of the evaluation: the students had been asked to describe the writing process during the project, including difficulties, comments and analysis;
- the answers to an online questionnaire at the end of the course.

### *4.2 Typology of the different blogs analysed*

The blogs represented a real challenge of argumentation for the students who chose quite unexpected topics, which required a certain level of language proficiency in order to express and understand sarcasm, anger, humour or revolt. They all had as a common point their non-neutral use of the English language and a strong

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Table 1 *List and typology of the different blogs*

| | Title of the blog and URL | Typology based on Cardon & Delaunay-Teterel (2006) | Argumentation |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | European prejudices, there's no smoke without fire<br>http://europeanprejudices.blogspot.com | Citizen blog | Blog « gueuloir » |
| 2 | FLE blog expat'<br>http://fleblogexpat.blogspot.com | Expert blog | Informative |
| 3 | Fu***ed up actually<br>http://fuckedupactually.blogspot.com | Familiar blog | Sarcastic |
| 4 | Save the children soldiers in the world<br>http://www.worldchildrenfutur.blogspot.com | Personal blog | Emotional |
| 5 | Introduction to JCVD's philosophy<br>http://jcvdfle.blogspot.com | Familiar blog | Humorous |
| 6 | The MJBs present<br>http://themjbspresentdanielmorin.blogspot.com | Familiar blog | Humorous |
| 7 | Come visit India with us<br>http://edwinaandcaro.blogspot.com | Expert blog | Informative and humorous |
| 8 | David's blog<br>http://davelecteur.blogspot.com | Metablog | Informative |

argumentative aspect, expressed in different forms such as humour, anger or emotion. In the questionnaire, the students made a clear reference to their explicit desire not to be neutral: "*we were looking for something funny to talk about, that would allow us to work in English on a not too serious topic*" (student 2, blog 6), or "*Nous avions décidé que nous allions pousser des coups de gueule sur ce blog*"[9] (student 1, blog 4).

Table 1 presents a typology of the blogs encountered, following Cardon and Delaunay-Teterel (2006: 30), according to whom "[…] il est impossible de dissocier les contenus énoncés de la personne de l'énonciateur, ils lui sont si intimement attachés que la manière dont est exprimée la personnalité du blogueur a souvent plus d'importance que ce qu'il énonce"[10]. Therefore, we can conclude that the argumentative style is completely meaningful and the mere fact that the style does not just consist of plain and simple English is an element that may give an indication of the level of motivation of the learners. This typology was based both on the topics chosen and on the argumentative style used by the students in their introductory post on the blog (see Appendix) and as described in the questionnaires. We may just

[9] Can be translated as: "We decided that we would have a really good rant".

[10] It is impossible to separate the content presented from the presenter himself/herself; they are so intimately linked that the way in which the blogger's personality is expressed is often more important than what he talks about (translated from Cardon & Delaunay-Teterel, 2006).

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mention that blog 4 is the only one with no real introductory post, going straight to the point and being very "personal", as the author proved to be strongly involved.

Furthermore, in all the blogs there was a clear public address – talking to the group, addressed as "you" and use of personal deictics, with an overwhelming use of "I" or "we" on the part of the students who are responsible for the content of their productions, as also observed on forums by Celik and Mangenot (2004).

### *4.3 Questionnaires and reflective journal*

In order to complete this descriptive analysis, we have chosen to triangulate the description of these features with two other elements:

(i) The learning journal in which the students wrote down their state of mind and their problems while carrying out this project.
(ii) An online questionnaire at the end of the project, with open questions in order to establish their learning profile, to understand their choices and to have information on their perception of the activity. The questionnaire focused on the following items, in order to help us interpret the content of the blogs:
- General information about the learner;
- The way the blog started;
- Production of the blogs;
- Quality and content of the messages;
- Participation;
- Feedback from the tutor;
- Evaluation of the project.

These elements can help us interpret the reading of the content of the blogs and not remain on a mere descriptive level.

## 5 Results

### *5.1 Qualitative analysis of the interactions*

*5.1.1 Interactions within groups.* Interactions took place at different times. The first interactions that were expected within the group were of a collaborative type. What happened was the following:

- the contributors had a first meeting to decide on the topic, to open the blog and to define some criteria for the graphic design. This moment of real interaction can be compared to a pre-task period during which the students get ready and organize the main task to be undertaken. This period was left completely free, and the students organized it as they wished; as such, the blog production provided an autonomous space for writing with no preliminary interference from the teacher.
- the first article was written in groups: it generally dealt with the presentation of the theme and the authors (see Appendix), who met in order to discuss the organisation, choice of the theme and discussion about the expected ways of participation.

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In the questionnaire, the students explained how they ended up in their respective groups: either the choice of partners took place first and the partners then discussed what to write about (six students gave that reason), or it was the choice of the topic that was at the origin of the constitution of the group (five students). Two students did not answer that question. It is therefore difficult to determine a specific reason for the constitution of the group and it may not be the determining factor for future successful blog interactions.

What appeared from the analysis of the questionnaires and the reading of the journal was that there was no further collaboration nor interaction within the group when writing the contributions, neither for the content, the form, nor the order of posting.[11] Interactions did not take place during the task, but only after the completion of the task, in the comments section. There was no real "face to face" interaction; section 5.2 demonstrates how the interactions took place between one group and another.

*5.1.2 Two specific cases.* Two blogs were an exception to this principle:

(i) The blog on child soldiers, held by a single student who made amazing progress in his mastering of the language. Originally, his linguistic level was quite low (A2+), yet he posted an amazing number of contributions and made huge progress, as the complexity of the messages increased throughout the semester. This blog could really be considered as truly authentic, as expressed by Thorne (2009), as the student really made use of the publishing format to express his very personal and sensitive opinion.

(ii) The blog on India was the other exception and was the only one to be fully collaborative: there was only one pseudonym for the two students who wrote the blog, therefore we did not know who posted what, unless we recognized the style of the individual. These students stated in their journal that they met regularly to prepare the posts, taking pictures, looking for information and writing messages together. At the end of the project, one left to go to India for her training period (confirming that her motivation for the topic was truly authentic) and this destabilized her partner who stopped posting messages, saying she was expecting to keep in touch with her partner by email; this did not happen in the end. Clearly, in such a case the collaborative aspect was the motivating element.

These two blogs were in fact the most succesful ones if we consider our first pedagogical aim, which was to promote meaningful interactions. This leads us to wonder whether the format of the group that was advised originally was the most appropriate, as the two most successful blogs were the ones which did not follow the principle of grouping students in threes or fours. The first blog was individual, with no collaborative writing, yet a possibility for real authorship, while the other was dual (yet the two students behaved as "one"), and it is questionable whether this sense of authorship, that goes along with the possibility of being fully involved and authentic, is possible in bigger groups.

[11] Originally, it was expected that the more advanced students would help the weakest ones in a collaborative process, which did not really happen.

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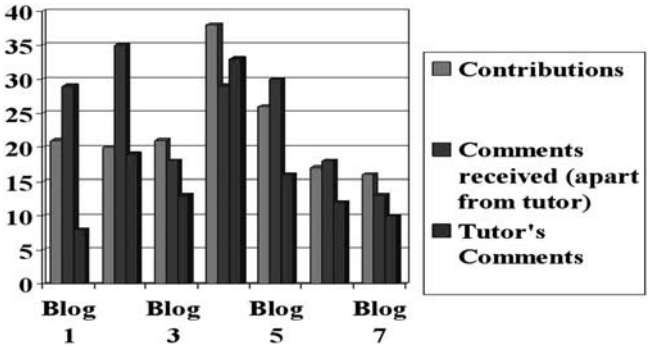



Fig. 1. Quantitative analysis of the interactions

### 5.2 *Quantitative analysis of the productions*

*5.2.1 Number of messages posted.* Figure 1 shows the level of interaction within each blog, i.e., the number of messages posted, comments made, and comments added by the tutor. There was an average of twenty contributions per blog (about 7.7 contributions per learner) and about twenty comments posted on the blogs (from 0 to 7 reactions for each contribution). On average, the students posted more contributions than were originally required, as the didactic contract that was established stated that a minimum of five were required.

*5.2.2 Distribution of the messages within groups.* The distribution is rather uneven within groups and several blogs indicate the appearance of a 'leader' who publishes more than the others, as shown in Table 2. This fact is rather unexpected, yet if we consider what happens on forums, we can see that it corresponds to some known profiles of contributors. We shall discuss that question later and check whether there can be a profile of participants, as established by Trémion (2005) on forums.

*5.2.3 Interactions between groups.* In order to understand how the exchanges were structured, we identified three quite different networks of interaction that emerged among the seven blogs and that seem to be representative of the different types of interaction. Figures 2, 3 and 4 show the number and the direction of the comments that were posted on the blogs. We could argue that the messages can be read, without any comment posted. Yet, the criterion (number of comments posted) seems relevant as it is a tangible sign of the reader's participation and was required in the pedagogical contract; it thus gives us a good idea of the interactions going on.

If we compare the quite well-balanced network shown in Figure 2 with the ones represented in Figures 3 and 4, it is evident that this equilibrium remains rare. Figure 3 is not balanced at all and although there are a lot of interactions from some blogs (blogs 2 and 5 specifically), others (blogs 1, 4 and 7) have not posted anything.

In Figure 4, we can see that in some blogs there were a very low number of comments deposited.

Figure 4 demonstrates that this blog has been accessed by an external reader, not a member of the learning community. Originally, it was hoped that the blogs would be read not only within the group of students but also by external readers. This only

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Table 2 *Number of messages within each group*

| | | Blog | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Students | 1.1 | 7 | | | | | | |
| | 1.2 | 3 | | | | | | |
| | 1.3 | 2 | | | | | | |
| | 1.4 | 3 | | | | | | |
| | 2.1 | | 7 | | | | | |
| | 2.2 | | 5 | | | | | |
| | 2.3 | | 8 | | | | | |
| | 3.1 | | | 5 | | | | |
| | 3.2 | | | 2 | | | | |
| | 3.3 | | | 8 | | | | |
| | 3.4 | | | | | | | |
| | 4.1 | | | | 38 | | | |
| | 5.1 | | | | | 18 | | |
| | 5.2 | | | | | 1 | | |
| | 5.3 | | | | | 6 | | |
| | 6.1 | | | | | | 12 | |
| | 6.2 | | | | | | 5 | |
| | 7.1 | | | | | | | |
| | 7.2 | | | | | | | 16 |
| | | **15** | **20** | **15** | **38** | **25** | **17** | **16** |

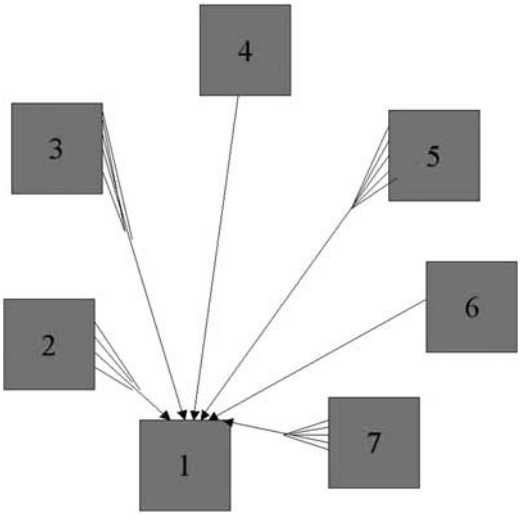



Fig. 2. Network of interactions for blog 1

occurred twice, and blog 7 is an example. The blog project had been announced to the students of Master's FLE who had not chosen English as their foreign language and who were encouraged to participate; but things did not turn out that way and

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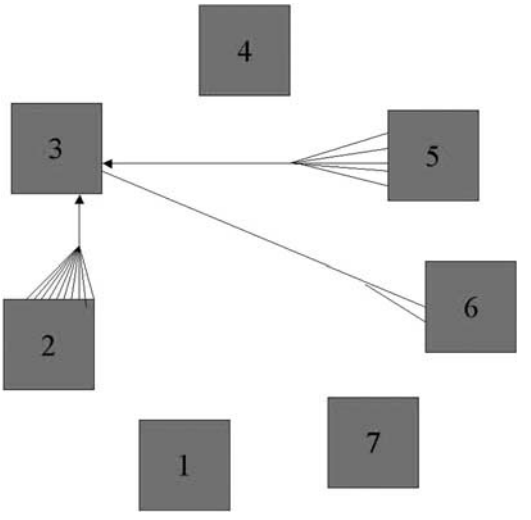



Fig. 3. Network of comments for blog 3

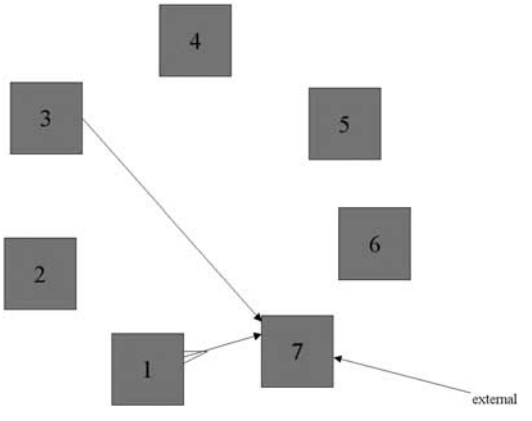



Fig. 4. Network of comments for blog 7

the blogs remained a pedagogical activity, shared by the learning group rather than being open worldwide.

## 6 Discussion

In this section, we focus on factors that may (a) give an insight into which favorable elements of the project need to be reinforced for its improvement, and (b) help in understanding why some elements did not work as expected.

### *6.1 Role of the participants within the blog*

As commented earlier, the figures presented in Table 2 clearly show the appearance of a leader in each group, which was not specified explicitly in the pedagogical contract.

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We may then consider the reasons for such a profile. In her research about forum practice, five profiles were distinguished by Trémion (2005) who classified them according to the number of interactions (emitted or received), the content of the interactions (discourse), the socio-linguistic markers and the pragmatic functions of interactions. These profiles were:

- **the animators** (leaders who ask and answer questions);
- **the pedagogues** (who want to be understood and aim to be fully objective);
- **the provocators** (who take risks);
- **the mediators** (who mainly participate to avoid asymmetric participation or to avoid misunderstanding);
- **the facilitators** (who observe, ask questions, make a synthesis).

If we apply this classification to the interactions on the blogs, three main profiles clearly emerge, taking into account the content of the messages and the argumentative style.

- The animators can be associated with the mediators and facilitators and include the students who post regular comments on all the blogs. This category appears to be more visible if we analyse the comments posted on the partners' blogs, rather than the original messages. The animators are especially active in posting comments in order to encourage interactions.

  Two other categories can be applied if we consider the topics chosen, rather than the form of participation:
- The pedagogues correspond to the ones who tried to write about a topic as objectively as possible (such as the ones who described the expatriation experience in order to share their experience). This category mainly focuses on the posts rather than on the comments.
- The provocators who deliberately chose to be sarcastic and humorous are present in the blogs dedicated to JCVD and F***ed up. They also focus on their own posts rather than on encouraging interactions.

  In fact, two categories seem to emerge significantly:
- the students who focus on the posts to make them interesting and complete (either pedagogues or provocators); and
- the students who are mainly interested in interaction and try to establish a network of interaction (mainly animators).

### *6.2 The sense of authorship*

*6.2.1 Motivation for writing.* Seen from a quantitative point of view, the number of contributions was quite satisfactory as the students posted more messages than the number originally required and this can be interpreted as a sign of involvement in the project.

When asked about their rate of participation with the question, "did the act of writing a blog change your level of participation in the course?", the result was as follows:

- Five students answered "It did not change anything";
- Six answered "I have written more than usual";

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In the extracts from the journals, it appears quite clear that they found the project motivating. When asked about their perception of the project, they gave the following answers:

> *"It's a pretty good training to regularly write down in the blog. I noticed it was quite challenging to write proper english (sic) when you tell about past experiences.–I have to admit that I finally liked it, because even if I am sometimes (often?) wrong, I am aware that I did improve my English. I feel much more comfortable with the writing…"* (student 1, blog 6).
>
> *"What I like more is the blog in itself: choose the coulours, the presentation, the writing style… Yeah, I think the idea of a blog is a great idea. I wish we had more free time to do it…"* (student 2, blog 7).
>
> Yet some of them had an ambivalent opinion of the project and complained about the fact that they felt they did not have enough time to dedicate to a time-consuming project, or felt too uncertain about the feedback, and did not feel they had enough support in the writing process to enable them to feel completely relaxed and enjoy the project.

*6.2.2 Involvement in the project.* Although the students did write more and did respect the number of messages that were required for the evaluation, what matters in such a project is not only the quantitative aspect but also the students' perception of the activity, in order to improve the development of the project. What was quite striking was that some students complained that they felt alone, or that the project was just a "pretext to keep them busy". They felt some kind of closer support was lacking.

The analysis of the journals showed that the students did not enjoy the pedagogic contract (they felt worried because of the assessment involved) and had mixed feelings about the blog activity, divided between the will to communicate and the pleasure this involved, and the obligation to produce a certain number of messages (whether their own posts, or their contribution to the other blogs).

The writing process did not reach the step described by Thorne (2009), in which writing becomes a personal and natural activity. Although it was meaningful pedagogically, it did not turn into a personal practice, except maybe for the student from blog 4. These blogs did not turn out as their "own personal" blog. The students felt obliged to produce (on a topic of their own choice) and therefore had the feeling that their productions were artificial because they were required for the assessment.

### *6.3 Feedback and correction by the tutor vs peer correction*

A very important aspect that needs to be considered is the way feedback can be given.

The tutor gave his feedback by the means of comments and tried to be as encouraging as possible:

> *"As for corrections, I tried very hard to keep up with everybody's comments and could only do my best to make my own comments as pleasant and encouraging – while sometimes being corrective – as possible".*

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One student perceived this effort, although he is still critical of public correction:

> *"I think that the correction could have been done through e-mail. If I had been the one corrected, I could have felt ill at ease to see my mistakes pointed at. Fortunately, he had the good idea to include his corrections in a more general and complete comment"* (student 4, blog 3).

There does not seem to be a totally satisfactory way to give feedback: if corrected before posting, the messages will be written with the linguistic correction in mind and will not be communicatively authentic. If not corrected, students feel insecure. Students need to be somehow deconditioned to focus less on form, as they have been taught during their whole learning process, and to dare to communicate focusing more on fluency and less on accuracy. Other types of production can provide opportunities to focus on grammatical and lexical correction.

It should be remembered that the original project implied the constitution of groups comprising students from higher and lower language levels, in order for them to post messages written together. Peer correction could have been applied in a collaborative way. Yet, although the students respected the pedagogical contract for the number of posts, they did not respect the collaborative principle of writing. It was due to external circumstances – a very busy Master's timetable which did not leave much time for collaborative writing – rather than to the refusal of the principle.

Another possibility lies in the use of the multimedia tool. The affordance (Norman, 1999) of the tools used can help post feedback in a more satisfactory way. A further experiment has been made with a different blog provider, in which the comments appear differently and permit a more private way to offer correction. The choice of the multimedia setting is as important as the design of the pedagogical contract. Tools such as grammar checkers can provide corrective feedback before posting and help the students in their autonomous writing process (ORegan, Desmet and Rivens Mompean, forthcoming).

## 7 Conclusion and further discussion

To conclude, some aspects of the project were quite successful and should be maintained in future similar projects. Undoubtedly, the level of participation and the quantitative analysis prove that real interactions took place and that the blog permitted a rich and argumentative exchange. The choice of theme offered to the learners permitted some of them to make use of meaningful language for the purpose of authentic communication, based on topics they were really interested in. It allowed them to engage themselves extremely seriously and regularly.

On the other hand, some aspects need to be improved. The main problem concerned feedback, which provoked paradoxical reactions from the students who were not sure whether they liked it to be public or not, and a feeling of frustration from others who would have liked to be corrected more and felt alone. This stems from the fact that the project, which was meant to be led in a collaborative way, was finally realized individually due to lack of time for consultation and meetings, and each student worked alone to write, post and read the messages. Finally, although they posted a relatively large number of contributions, they complained that they did it just for the sake of evaluation.

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Pedagogical reflection is still necessary regarding the problem of feedback in future experiments. It is also necessary to find new ways of guiding the students in order to motivate them whenever necessary, through group sessions. In future projects, we should consider:

- the place of the project within the more global guided self-learning framework;
- the typology of blogs: a personal blog vs a group blog vs a class blog in order to determine which type is the most appropriate for the development of written expression;
- the role of the teacher: animator, corrector or simple reader.

Finally, a linguistic analysis of the corpus of productions needs to be done, to better describe the added value of such a setting for language production.

To summarize, there is no doubt that a blog can permit the development of meaningful interactions, even if the blog does not turn out to be ''personal'' and ''authentic'' as in real life. Yet some very distinct criteria concerning the way to provide feedback and correction need to be taken into account in order to improve its pedagogical potential and consequently its linguistic quality.

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## Appendix

**Examples of argumentation for each blog, taken from the introductory posts:**

**Blog 1:**

What do you think about european people? For exemple, how do you imagine the helvetians? How could you describe and see them in your mind? What we use to say about them? Is-it true that they are all rich? Let's take a joke to illustrate this talk. Do you know the difference between rich and poor helvetians? Th rich one makes clean his mercedes by his servant although the poor helvetian must clean his mercedes by himself. Are they always eating chocolate and cheese fondu? Are they all "coucou" clock fixers if they are not bankmen? Is it a paradoxal attitude that they all carry "swiss knife" in spite of the fact they want to stay pacifist and neutral during the conflicts?

But at the same time, have you ever seen there a paper or garbages threw on the pavement, in the street? Helvetians are very preoccupated of ecology and environment care. Maybe more than french people. Do you agree or not with this declaration? What are your representation of different european countries? What we would like to do with thi bloc is to discuss about the french representations his european neighbours. Our goal is to go over those bad representation and trying with humor and reflexions of desintegrate ours prejudices.

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**Blog 2:**
Welcome to our blog! Before reading further, we suggest you to make sure you have your travel bags ready, because there's a good chance you might want to take the very first plane after your visit!

We are 3 French as a foreign language students from Lille 3 University, and as an assesment for the 2nd semester of english self learning, we've been ask to set up a blog about a random subject.

So we (Cécile, Emilie and Laurie-Anne) décided to create a blog about expatriation, since the three of us have been, or will soon be, expatriated.

Emilie will tell you about her expatriation in Guadeloupe, where she lived the last 5 years. She will also tell you about her project to expatriate in South America by the end of the year. Cécile will be telling you all about her plan to move to Laos with her family in a 2010.

And as for Laurie-Anne, she will relate her past expatriation in The Netherlands and in Laos. Not only we will tell you about the countries itself, but we also will make our best to give you tips about the preparation and the different processes you have to go through before leaving. If only expatriating was about to hop in a plane and go…! But it's far from being so easy…;) We hope you will enjoy reading us and hope it'll be a good motivation for your future travel and expat plans!

**Blog 3:**
*With our feet in the shit but a smile on our lips, an upraised fist but comfortably sitting in front of our computers, this blog brings to you some material to reflect on, what we think is important to make a fuss about.*
Hi I'm Zoé…
This blog is going to be useful for me to talk about every events which upsets and bothers me in France and in the world !! I will try to post weekly what Fu**s up in my opinion in order to share my concerns about today society. I'm a newbie in blogging, so I will try to use diversified sources (videos, pictures…) for my posts. Don't hesitate to warn me if something doesn't work properly, and I'll manage to fix it…
I'm sorry in advance for my English writing level !!
Thanks for reading me, and see you soon !!!
Hi I'm Flo, and I would like to talk about Romanian Gypsies in France: life's condition, why they come in France,… They are excluded of society, in Romania like in France and everywhere, they are victims of discrimination for always, but why? ….What are solutions for them? When will they have a normal life? When will they be respected?

**Blog 4:**
*But why our children?*
Coming in the life is not a child's responsability. Born free, they are welcomed in fire!!!!
Peace and love.

**Blog 4:**
*The body, the brain and the air*
Most of people says that JCVD is only muscles. That's true but don't forget that brain is a muscle too! Jean-Claude is MAYBE one of the greatest philisophers of the century and thanks to this blog we will share his thoughts.

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We will introduce the reflections of Jean-Claude on Time, Space, Mankind, Love and oxygen.
"I am fascinated by the air. If you remove the air from the sky, birds fall down on the ground…and airplanes do too…at the same time, you cannot touch it… it exist and it doesn't exist…It feeds man even if he is not hungry…C'est magique… The air is beautiful but you cannot see it, it is soft but you cannot touch it…the air is a little bit like my brain". JCVD

**Blog 5:**
Today we have learned that a blog is a personnal website. Well, it is. Lonely AND personnal site. Help, we're alone. Lost. Where is Bobonne?
Nonsense.
Today's chronicle:
http://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/chro/danielmorin/index.
php?id=75885
Enjoy. And comment. React. Or not.

**Blog 6:**
*Welcome on our blog !!!*
This is a virtual trip to India in which we would like to show you a little bit of the indian culture through the cinema, typical food, dance, religion, history, customs, famous places, …
We hope you will enjoy it!.
As you can see, the two of us sometimes appear on the photos…
Try to find us =)
Watch the traps!

**Blog 7:**
Masters students in FLE can use my blog as a guide for how to set up their blogs, but I'm sure they're all capable of making something much more imaginative! The aim is to post text, images, videos, and anything else interesting about your group's chosen topic. Obviously you should write in English, but don't worry too much about language! We're doing this to encourage free expression and open-mindedness. So have fun!

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