Langues-U: A digital campus to increase students' autonomy?

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Introduction

The aim of the digital campus Langues-U (http://www.langues-u.org) was to answer French universities' needs to prepare ESP students for the CLES (Certificat de Compétences en Langues de l'Enseignement Supérieur), providing the students with a self-study pedagogical tool. The online learning environment offers realistic activities and can be used by any learner working alone, either at home or in a language centre.

In the form of blended learning the training can combine both distance learning and regular meetings with a teacher, according to the demands of the institutions deciding to implement it. It thus induces a modification of the roles of learner and teacher, and lets learners decide how they work and the resources they use according to their needs.

Since it started in 2002 the campus has mainly been used by the participating universities for their own students to prepare for the CLES. However, because of the difficulties that accompanied the implementation of the certificate in recent years, at Nancy 2 university we decided in 2005 to propose Langues-U to other types of students, perhaps less used to autonomous learning.

During the first semester of 2005-2006 Master's degree psychology students of our university, who need to be able to read specialized articles in English by the end of their first year, were given the opportunity to experiment with a flexible scheme combining work in a

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resource centre and work on the digital campus. They were then asked to fill in a questionnaire whose aim was to evaluate the way they perceived the scheme.

After a short historical and theoretical background and some explanation of what the campus offers, this paper will examine the results of the questionnaire as well as the students' work preferences. These elements seem to indicate that learning both how to learn and how to use Information Communication Technologies (ICT) may be a prerequisite to using such an online environment.

Historical Background

Created in 2001, Langues-U is a digital campus that involves six active partners (list available on the site) besides Nancy 2 university which initiated the project and is in charge of the technical maintenance of the platform. Partly financed with funds from the Ministry of Education, it was originally designed to prepare French students nationwide for the CLES, a non-specialist language certificate at university level, officially created in 2000 (see *http://www.education.gouvfr/.sup/formation/cles.htm).* One of the purposes of the CLES, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Language[2] (henceforth CEFR), was to facilitate students' mobility in Europe by helping them to obtain official recognition of their language ability.

Expressly built for non-specialist French students, the campus is meant for use by any learner working alone, either at home or in a language centre, at a distance or in a blended learning situation.

What the campus offers

Thanks to the different communication tools provided on the platform (email, forum and chat), the teacher responsible for a group of learners can help them define their objectives and answer their learning needs individually, both synchronously and asynchronously. The guided autonomy – autonomy as defined by Holec as "the ability to take

[2] http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio/documents_intro/common_framework.html

charge of one's own learning" (1981: 3); and the concept of guidance referring to the role of teachers who act as tutors (Raby, 2007: 182) – offered in Langues-U thus defines new roles for learners and teachers (such as recommended by Holec in 1991) as opposed to those in traditional classes.

The language activities on the digital campus are based on CEFR and are very varied. They offer the learners both oral and written authentic resources with tanks. A number of thematic files composed of authentic video, audio and written documents focusing on the same subject and accompanied by pedagogical activities (these files contain documents on education, the environment, technology, and so on) are proposed on the platform. More 'traditional' activities such as vocabulary and grammar exercises are also available. The resources and activities are organized as follows: levels B1, B2 and C1 of the framework correspond to CLES 1, CLES 2 and CLES 3 levels on the digital campus.

Moreover, oral expression workshops can be organized by the institutions using the campus to supplement the training provided whenever needed.

Changes in 2005-2006

However, because of difficulties implementing CLES over the years (although created in 2000 the certificate had not yet been generalised at the time of the experiment related in the article); none of the universities collaborating in the creation of Langues-U had really offered work on the campus to large groups of students. Since its creation, it had thus been used rather irregularly by most of the partners and its actual impact on the learners' training had never been assessed.

For contextual reasons, partly linked to the fact that in our university the implementation of the Bologna process meant the creation of new language courses for numerous sections of non-specialist students, we decided last year that it would be interesting to use the campus with some of these students. Master's degree psychology students were chosen as they were, for the first lime in

2005-2006, required to take an English course in order to be able to read specialised articles and to write abstracts by the end of their first year. However, because English was not a compulsory subject in their undergraduate training, some of them had not been studying or using it for a long time

Since we felt the variety and flexibility of the activities present on the platform might help them reach the level necessary to follow a course in reading specialised articles in their domain, we thus constructed an experimental system integrating Langues-U to prepare them for that objective.

The evolution of the digital campus described in this paper stems partly from a desire to open up the campus to other types of students, whose first objective was not necessarily to obtain a language certificate and whose motivation was perhaps less strong (see Raby, 2007: 186).

Theoretical and experimental background

Because we were confronted with a new type of student whose prime objective was not to take CLES, we felt that it might be necessary to adapt Langues-U.

Autonomy and motivation being strongly linked (Barbot & Catamari, 1999), one of the main problems to assess seemed to be the need to improve and maintain the motivation of these learners who had not chosen to work on the campus, and who had not even decided themselves to study English. Motivation is indeed a complex parameter correlating strongly with language learning (Chateau, 2005; Dornyei, 2001) and we were aware of the fact that, with such external constraints, not all the students would be motivated. It was thus decided that, at the end of their four-month work on the campus, they would be asked to fill in a questionnaire evaluating the impact of the new system and the way they perceived the activities present on the campus.

Among the activities present on the campus especially designed to maintain learners' motivation, thematic files with authentic video documents can be mentioned and analysed.

Video, motivation and language learning

Video resources are some of the elements that are used in the campus to motivate the learners and to help them to become autonomous. Their impact relies on what Young and Asensio (2002) call the 3 'I's:

- Image is important to explain the context or non-linguistic factors such as body language.
- Interactivity: video resources can be used by learners according to their needs. They are, according to Young and Asensio, a "focus for student activity and communication" (2002: 1). Students can indeed interact with the documents, choosing and controlling them (stopping, rewinding, etc.) at their own pace and according to their needs, which is a way to increase their motivation and autonomisation (see also Raby, 2007: 197-198).
- Integration: video documents need to be accompanied by microtasks in order to provide varied work environments. Furthermore, the work environment available offers possibilities to use the language items covered in other contexts. This helps learners develop their metacognitive capacities (Raby & Baille, 1998; Chateau & Nussbaumer, 2006).

One of the thematic files illustrating this desire both to maintain students' motivation and to help them become more autonomous, called 'Chairing a meeting' can be consulted freely from the campus (see *http://www.languesu.org/portail_languesu/Presentation/langues_index. htm).*

The experiment

For the first time last year, Master's degree psychology students at Nancy 2, representing a population of roughly 160 students, thus experimented—during the first semester— with a flexible system partly based on Langues-U.

At the beginning of the year they were informed that, in order to prepare themselves for the second semester course, they would have to work on the digital campus and to spend a minimum of one hour a week in the University self-access language resource centre (for a description of this centre and its possibilities for language learning, see Gremmo, 2000). They were also told that the teachers in charge of the

system would be present in the centre regularly (twice a week for each of the teachers) and that the learners who wished to do so could come and ask them for advice. The aim of this system was to help them improve their skills in English in order for them to be able to follow a course in English for psychology in the second semester. The final objective of the course (designed in collaboration with psychology colleagues) being to improve their production of specialized abstracts in their discipline, they clearly had to brush up their English before the start[3]. The flexible system combining work on Langues-U and in the resource centre thus seemed the best way to guarantee that they had reached a sufficient level at the end of the first semester.

As mentioned previously, Langues-U offers a variety of thematic files — 25 at the time of the experiment — composed of authentic resources focusing on the same subject and accompanied by pedagogical activities. Moreover, the digital campus also gives learners the opportunity to work on vocabulary and grammar exercises, if they think that type of exercise can help them. Psychology students thus had the choice of a wide variety of subjects and tasks that could, we hoped, suit their needs. Although we had decided not to evaluate their level through a test at the end of their four-month work on the digital campus and at the resource centre, the students had been told that both the number of hours they spent in the centre as well as the number of connections to Langues-U would be tracked. Moreover, the campus also offers tutors the technical possibility to access students' individual workfiles, that is, to keep track of the activities they worked on.

At the beginning of the second semester, the students were asked to fill in a questionnaire (Chateau & Nussbaumer, 2006) through which they gave us feedback on their overall impression. The questionnaire comprised a mixture of closed and open questions, so as to obtain useful comments on the system (as recommended by Nunan, 1992:

[3] In order to understand this, it should be noted that not all students enrolling in the Master's degree psychology have received tuition in English in the previous years. Some are even professionals (e.g. primary school teachers or school psychologists) who after working for a certain number of years decide to resume their studies. Their levels of English are thus very heterogeneous.

143; or Stracke, 2007: 62). Furthermore, by accessing students' workfiles, we also examined the way they used the digital campus and the type of activities they focused on. The results of this study, detailed thoroughly in Chateau and Nussbaumer, 2006, revealed a number of unexpected features as will be explained in the next sections.

Results

Although the students were generally satisfied with the system (61%, or 76 students out of the 123 who answered the questionnaire), the lack of human contact with a teacher/tutor as well as with peers was a commonly cited source of regret, emphasizing the social aspect of learning a language. This need for human interaction is confirmed by the fact that among the students that contacted us (either through the forum, via e-mail or directly at the resource centre), almost all of them (40 out of 41) found the contact useful for their work.

Many students seemed to have difficulties managing their own work. To put it another way, some learners (roughly a third) worked almost exclusively on grammar or vocabulary exercises and not on the thematic files offered to them. The analysis of some of these students' workfiles, along with their answers to the questionnaire, reveals very traditional representations of language learning. This seems to confirm Walter's (2002) opinion that French learners are obsessed with grammar and correctness. As she explains, this is largely due to the rulings of the *Académie Française* which infuses French people with a sense of respect mixed with guilt towards 'good' language (see also Boulton, 2006).

Other students regretted the absence of 'real' evaluation in Langues-U (i.e. felt distrust towards self-assessment), and felt that this type of work could not help them improve their English.

Another striking fact emerging from the results was the number of students who had never worked on fine before—114 out of the 123 who worked regularly at the resource centre. This supports the results of an earlier unpublished study carried out at the scientific university in Nancy in 2003 which revealed that out of 127 students asked to test a site helping them to improve their written comprehension in English

(http://www.crelens.uhp-nancyfr/CE), only 10 had ever had the opportunity to work online before.

Discussion

The general impression emerging from this population of French psychology students might seem to be rather negative as far as their attitude towards ICT is concerned. However it is important to note that all nine of the students who had previously worked on fine found the activities offered by Langues-U very varied and work on the campus useful. The frequent connections made by some students may suggest that they appreciated the digital campus, 31 of them connecting more than 30 times, with 6 peaking at more than 50 times (the record being 79). Furthermore, it is worth noting that among the students who contacted the tutors (41, see above) almost all of them found the activities 'very varied' (14) or 'varied enough' (26), and that some students commented their answers indicating that they found work on the campus interesting because of the variety of subjects as well as the tasks proposed with the different resources.

This is thus probably an indication that the difficulties or disappointment with the campus encountered by some of our learners — 40 students found work on Langues-U 'little useful' or 'not useful' among the ones that did not contact the tutors — are mainly due to their not asking for advice, in spite of their lack of familiarity with ICT and with autonomous work, rather than to a misconception of the tool. The study seems to reveal indeed that, unlike what tends to be claimed in the 'official' discourse — the Ministry of Education, the university authorities or even the media —working on line is still uncommon for the majority of French university students who are, in fact, not very computer-competent and still insufficiently autonomous to make the most of the tools provided (Linard, 2000).

This is clearly something we had not sufficiently anticipated, although it has been noted by other French researchers (Bangou, 2006; Narcy-Combes, 2005; Demaizière 2003). Moreover, these findings corroborate results found by researchers studying populations of students in other countries (Ellinger, Sandler, Chayen, Goldfrad &

Yarosky, 2001).

Conclusion

Langues-U is a digital campus that was specifically designed to maintain student's motivation and develop their autonomy or "ability to take charge of one's own learning", to quote Holec again (1981: 3). However, the experiment carried out in 2005-2006 at our university reveals that because of some students' lack of familiarity with, and even possibly fears towards ICTs (sec Ming and Bidmeshki, 2006 for that particular aspect), there clearly is a need for more information and training to help students not strongly motivated by the desire to obtain certification, to work more efficiently on the digital campus. Furthermore the fact that there is relatively little space in traditional French educational culture for focus on the learner as an individual, for autonomy, and for the construction of knowledge in a personalised way compared to some other cultures may account partly for this phenomenon.

More human contact at the beginning and at regular intervals thus seems necessary in order to help such students acquire enough autonomy to enjoy working on this type of tool. Learner autonomy should thus be seen as an aim, and some sort of guidance should be provided to help learners gradually gain increased autonomy.

With this in mind, we thus decided that the scheme designed for psychology students would be modified for 2006-2007, and that more information and training as to how to use the platform and how to direct their own learning according to their needs would be provided. As in the case of the experiment described in this article, a questionnaire will then help to evaluate the improvement brought to the system and to Langues-U.

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NB: Since the article was written and published Langues-U has, for financial reasons, been displaced and integrated into the Virtual Learning Environment of Nancy 2 University (http://ent.univ-nancy2.fr). It is thus no longer available freely and the url http://www.langues-u.org is unfortunately not valid anymore.