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From the logbook to the forum: how to reinforce collaborative learning for a better student's autonomy?

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Abstract

This article reports on a study involving MA psychology students at a French university. For the fourth consecutive year the students were asked to work on a flexible language learning system combining e-learning on a virtual learning environment, pair-work and counselling appointments. The use of this system has been studied for four years, both quantitatively and qualitatively, following the tradition of action-research. For the fourth population a logbook has been integrated in order to favour a metacognitive approach by the students and to enable them to go a little further towards autonomy. Our research question was to know if the use of logbooks helped the students to progress towards autonomization in their learning of English. Moreover, the study of the logbooks could enable us to improve the use of the forum which had already proved successful to solve technical problems, and which could now be used to make the students' learning strategies evolve. In this aim we carried out a questionnaire to study the students' perception of the system, as well as a content analysis of the logbooks**.** This analysis helped us to point out the problems encountered by the learners in the learning process. The purpose of the study was to guide them more efficiently in their use of the forum which could perhaps enable them to ask more precise questions concerning their learning strategies, to which their peers and their teachers could answer. It would help develop collaborative learning strategies and encourage the students to use strategies which they would primarily not have thought of. This study may lead to a higher degree of learners' autonomy.

logbook; forum; flexible system; autonomy; collaborative learning

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Version 1

1. Introduction

To prepare themselves to follow a course in English for Psychology in the second semester of their university year, MA psychology students (i.e. fourth year students) at Nancy 2 University, France, are asked to work on a flexible language learning system in the first semester of their university year. The system – designed to cater for the needs of students who have very varied language learning backgrounds when they arrive – combines individual work, pair-work and counselling appointments. It is accessible from the 'Espace Numérique de Travail' (ENT), the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) of the university, based on Moodle (Brandl 2005). The use of this system has now been studied for four years both quantitatively and qualitatively, following the tradition of action-research, as defined by Nunan (1992), Riley (1996) or Benson (2001), has already been the subject of presentations and articles (see Chateau, Pereiro & Boulton 2007; Chateau 2008; Chateau Zumbihl, 2008), and has gradually been improved over the years, thanks to students' feedback. Last year, for the fourth population, we introduced a change into the scheme. A logbook was integrated in order to favour a metacognitive approach by the students. Our purpose was to induce and enable them to go a little further towards autonomy. Although the students can use a discussion forum in the system to express their difficulties to both their peers and the teachers, indeed, up till 2008-2009 it had been used mainly to solve technical problems.

The paper describes the methodology adopted to study the impact of the new tool, and, after briefly focusing on the results, discusses their implications for the next populations of students.

2. Method

The introduction of the logbook into the scheme meant to help learners increase their 'critical reflection' (Murphy 2008: 84) and accept responsibility for their learning. From a theoretical point of view two concepts are indeed essential to this study: autonomy defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec 1981: 3) or "as the capacity to take control over one's own learning" (Benson 2001: 2) and autonomization, or developing learners' capacity to learn (Holec 1990: 77). Our objective in introducing the logbook and asking students to keep a record of their autonomous learning experience, was thus to go along these lines and guide learners in order for them to develop their capacity for autonomy and "to assume control of their own learning processes." (Benson 2001: 37).

The question was thus to know whether this had actually happened or not. To find out we decided to study the logbooks, which could also help us to improve the combination of the different guidance elements present in the scheme.

The methodology adopted for the study was twofold, to cross-check different types of data (Raby 2007). We first carried out a content analysis (Bardin 1977; Brown and Yule 1983) of the 115 logbooks written by the students during the semester, and then used Wconcord 3.0 (free software, http://www.linglit.tu-darmstadt.de/index.php?id=linguistics) to count the occurrences of the most prominent themes expressed by the students. This first part of the research – sequence analysis, then thematic analysis and finally use of a concordancer – helped us discover that the students had a very positive evaluation of the learning scheme. It seemed they were able to analyze their difficulties very well, which is a first positive step as they were not really given the opportunity to do that before. Moreover this analysis of the difficulties generally appeared immediately when they started using the learning system. From these difficulties, they determined objectives and the strategies to reach them. The most commonly chosen strategy appeared to be the 'trial and error' one.

The second step of the study was to give the students a five-level Likert-item questionnaire about the utility of the different tools of the learning system (the questions were in French), elaborated with the software Sphinx (for more information about Sphinx, see http://www.lesphinx.eu/fr/accueil/accueil_sphinx.php). It aimed at showing the level of students' satisfaction with the learning system and especially of the logbook and forum and was distributed during the first session of the second semester course. This accounts for the fact that only 72

questionnaires were obtained. Among M1 psychology students indeed, there are people who have either part-time jobs or even full-time jobs and cannot therefore regularly attend all sessions.

The table below shows the average figures obtained on a scale of five concerning the utility of each aspect of the learning system, the terms 'Valeur moyenne' stands for mean; and 'Ecart-type' for: standard deviation:

	Valeur moyenne	Ecart type
utilisation facile	4,15	0,91
dispositif utile	3,97	0,83
session de présentation utile	3,68	0,98
contact utile	3,88	0,77
forum utile	3,42	0,96
carnet de bord utile	3,56	1,12
travail sur langues-U utile	3,93	0,83
Ensemble	**3,80**	

On the whole the figures showed a general satisfaction of the students and confirmed the positive evaluation obtained from the study of the logbooks.

3. Conclusions

Two aspects clearly appeared in the results obtained with the content analysis of the logbooks and the study of the questionnaire. First it seemed that the students had adopted a metacognitive approach. Furthermore 46 students (or 63.8 % of them) were aware of the usefulness of the logbook and 35 students (or 48.6 %) recognized the usefulness of the forum – 27 students (or 37.5%) however had no opinion about the forum, this being possibly explained by the fact that the forum was mainly used to solve technical problems. Secondly, the results showed that with this learning system the students had a behaviour leading them towards autonomization and that this autonomization process was enabled by collaboration with their peers and their tutors. The presence of a real autonomization process was thus clearly revealed in the content analysis of the logbook. Moreover, the logbook being considered useful by a majority of the students, we can consider that this process has to be reinforced by the combined use of the different tools present in the system (i.e. forum and logbook).

The previous (third) population of learners studied had indeed enabled us to notice that the forum was very useful to find solutions in case of technical problems (Chateau, Zumbihl, 2008). We added the logbook to help students develop a metacognitive approach. According to the results obtained with the present (4rth) experimentation this evolution of the learning system seems to be successful. On the other hand, the forum was proved to be useful, but only by the learners who felt the need for it. Consequently we have to reconsider the use of these tools. One solution would be to combine the logbook and the forum to enable the students to find solutions with their peers or their tutors when their learning is blocked in spite of the strategies chosen. The forum would enable the students to ask more precise questions concerning the strategies they use. As Kol and Schcolnik state it indeed, "By promoting student engagement, reflection, and critical thinking […], forums can be used to enhance the learning experience" (2008: 49-50). Then the possible solution to improve autonomization would be to create a link between the logbook and the forum to reach a higher degree of learners'autonomy. According to our present experimentation the solution for a better autonomization process is therefore to reinforce collaboration. And, consequently, this is what we will try to do in be the next step of our experiment.

This paper dealing with the study of this year's experimentation with fourth year students of English for Specific purposes at a French university has shown the importance of the logbook for the students' metacognitive evolution. It has also proved the usefulness of the forum, both in case of difficulties and to reinforce collaboration. As explained by Sook Lee indeed "Participation in online forums […] engages its members in a social process of

learning through shared practices" (Sook Lee 2006: 93). Our next step now in the experiment is thus to link these tools to promote collaborative learning strategies, which will help students to reach a higher level of autonomy. Our key word for the future populations may well seem to be 'autonomization through collaboration'.

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