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Multilevel courses and blended learning tools for pedagogical differentiation and promoting student autonomy

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Abstract: Multilevel language courses are frequently seen in teaching and learning contexts in higher education. These complex teaching situations can sometimes lead to frustration and a slowdown in student learning, which can even hinder their success in university. Despite the heterogeneities present within a class, studies on differentiated pedagogy have shown that it is possible to build a group where each student can evolve at his or her own pace – according to his or her level, profile, or needs. Furthermore, hybrid courses that are based on an authentic project pedagogy make it possible to offer differentiated courses, stimulate motivation, maintain group cohesion, and encourage the development of learning autonomy. This study examines the relevance of setting up a hybrid course within the framework of multilevel courses to suggest a differentiated pedagogy that would effectively meet the needs of learners and evaluate its potential to develop their autonomy. The methodology is part of an action-research composed of 4 experiments focused on the implementation of a hybrid course based on the differentiated pedagogy, the project pedagogy, and the levers identified to develop autonomy. The corpus will consist of questionnaires and recordings of interviews, classroom sessions, and semi-directed interviews. This short article aims to summarize the theoretical framework, to describe our hybrid course, to show our methodology, and to provide the first results of our study. The paper is part of the AILA Europe Junior special issue.

Keywords: heterogeneity, blended learning, differentiated pedagogy, autonomy, task-based approach

Résumé : Les cours de langue en classe multiniveaux sont des contextes d'enseignement fréquemment rencontrés dans l'enseignement supérieur. Ces situations d'enseignement complexes peuvent parfois conduire à une frustration et à

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un ralentissement de l'apprentissage des étudiants, pouvant même entraver leur réussite à l'université. Malgré les hétérogénéités présentes au sein d'une classe, les études sur la pédagogie différenciée ont montré qu'il est possible de construire un groupe où chaque étudiant peut évoluer à son rythme en fonction de son niveau, de son profil ou de ses besoins. Par ailleurs, les cours hybrides qui s'appuient sur une pédagogie de projet authentique permettent de proposer des parcours différenciés, de stimuler la motivation, de maintenir la cohésion du groupe et de favoriser le développement de l'autonomie d'apprentissage. Cette étude examine la pertinence de la mise en place d'un cours hybride dans le cadre des cours en classes multi-niveaux afin de proposer une pédagogie différenciée qui répondrait efficacement aux besoins des apprenants et d'évaluer son potentiel pour développer leur autonomie d'apprentissage. Notre méthodologie s'inscrit dans le cadre d'une recherche-action composée de 4 expérimentations portant sur la mise en place d'un cours hybride basé sur la pédagogie différenciée, la pédagogie de projet et les leviers identifiés pour développer l'autonomie. Le corpus sera constitué de questionnaires, d'enregistrements d'entretiens conseils, d'entretiens semi-dirigés et de séances en classe. Cet article a pour objectif de résumer notre cadre théorique, décrire le cours hybride, illustrer la méthodologie choisie et de fournir les premiers résultats de notre étude. L'article fait partie du numéro spécial d'AI-LA Europe junior.

Mots clés: hétérogénéité, cours hybride, pédagogie différenciée, autonomie, approche par tâche

Resumen: Los cursos de idiomas en clases multiniveles son contextos de enseñanza habituales en la educación superior. Estas complejas situaciones de enseñanza pueden conducir a la frustración y a la ralentización del aprendizaje de los estudiantes, lo que puede incluso dificultar su éxito en la universidad. A pesar de las heterogeneidades presentes en una clase, los estudios sobre la enseñanza diferenciada han demostrado que es posible construir un grupo en el que cada alumno pueda evolucionar a su propio ritmo según su nivel, perfil o necesidades. Además, los cursos híbridos basados en la enseñanza de proyectos auténticos permiten ofrecer cursos diferenciados, estimular la motivación, mantener la cohesión del grupo y fomentar el desarrollo de la autonomía del aprendizaje. Este estudio examina la pertinencia de implementar un curso híbrido en el contexto de las clases multinivel con el fin de proponer una pedagogía diferenciada que satisfaga eficazmente las necesidades de los alumnos y evaluar su potencial para desarrollar su autonomía de aprendizaje. Nuestra metodología forma parte de una investigación-acción compuesta por 4 experimentos sobre la implementación de un curso híbrido basado en la pedagogía diferenciada, la pedagogía de proyec-

tos y las palancas identificadas para desarrollar la autonomía. El corpus estará formado por cuestionarios, grabaciones de entrevistas de asesoramiento, entrevistas semiestructuradas y sesiones de clase. Este artículo pretende resumir nuestro marco teórico, describir el curso híbrido, ilustrar la metodología elegida y ofrecer los primeros resultados de nuestro estudio. El artículo forma parte del número especial de AILA Europe junior.

Palabras clave: heterogeneidad, curso híbrido, pedagogía diferenciada, autonomía, enfoque por tareas

1 Introduction

Multilevel French as a foreign language (FFL) courses characterized by the presence of learners of different levels are recurrent classroom contexts in university environments (David and Abry 2018). To understand the impact of multilevel classes, the selected university conducted a study in June 2021 with 92 students enrolled in multilevel courses in FFL. The results show that for 25.6 % of the students who participated in the study, this configuration causes a slowdown in their learning and lack of motivation.

This complex situation questions the relevance of a hybrid course, articulating face-to-face and distance learning sessions around a pedagogical scenario centered on a project task, as a possible solution to meet the needs and expectations of each learner.

In this research, we investigate how a hybrid course in a multilevel classroom on project-based pedagogy can offer a differentiated pedagogy adapted to the heterogeneity of the levels and develop the autonomy of the learners.

Our main hypotheses are the following:

- Hybrid courses promote the implementation of a differentiated pedagogy, they are able to respond and adapt to the levels and needs of learners.
- Hybrid courses, oriented towards a project-based pedagogy, promote the development of learners' learning autonomy in a multi-level classroom context.

In the following section, the theoretical framework that allowed the construction of the hybrid course will be described.

2 Theory

The multilevel course is characterized by the presence of several levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) in the classroom; this is what we call inter-individual heterogeneity. On the other hand, intra-individual heterogeneity represents the differences in levels of 4 language skills for each learner. However, the heterogeneity of the university's FFL learners is not limited to their respective levels. Huver and Belondo (2008) identify 3 additional forms of heterogeneity: social heterogeneity (our learning culture), cognitive heterogeneity (our way of learning), and linguistic heterogeneity (our linguistic heritage) that make each learner have his or her way of learning, as shown by Larsen-Freeman (2012: 79): “Each individual ... acts as a unique learning context, bringing a different set of systems to a learning event, responding differently to it, and therefore, learning differently as a result of participating in it.”

Since the 70s, work on differentiated pedagogy aims to offer courses adapted to different heterogeneities of learners, maintaining a cohesive class group while taking into account their similarities and differences (Meirieu 2016). The European project LINGUA-A, Puren (2001d) focuses on differentiated pedagogy and distinguishes two approaches to implement it: variation – which suggests similar tasks but adapted to the learner's profile – and differentiation – which submits different tasks. More recently, David (2014) proposes a grammar of teaching action based on these approaches for multilingual and multilevel courses. She shows how the teacher articulates activities according to language objectives using different grouping and teaching materials.

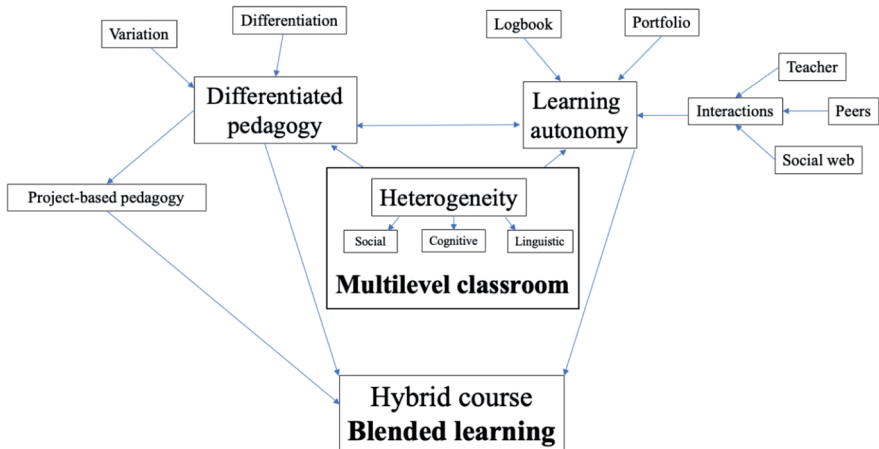


Figure 1: Diagram of the various components

In their work, Puren and Bertocchini (2001k: 4) suggest a continuum between differentiated pedagogy and autonomous learning that illustrates the degree of a teacher's intervention as shown in Figure 1. Therefore, the learner's learning autonomy defined by Holec (1979: 31) as "sa capacité à prendre en charge son propre apprentissage" [his ability to take charge of his own learning] plays a key role in differentiated pedagogy (Meirieu 2016). However, learning autonomy is not innate, it must most of the time be acquired formally (Holec 1979), especially through metacognition, the main lever to develop autonomy according to Cappellini (2015) which is facilitated by the use of a logbook and a portfolio, but also through social interactions with the teacher or tutor (Bruderman 2015; Bruderman and Pelissier 2016), peers (Lewis 2013) and the social web (Lamy and Zourou 2013), as summarized in Figure 1.

Hybrid courses are characterized by a "double modalité présentielle et distantielle, appuyée sur l'utilisation d'une plateforme d'apprentissage en ligne et une centration sur l'apprenant" [dual face-to-face and distance modality, supported by the use of an online learning platform and a focus on the learner] (Nissen 2006: 45). These courses have many advantages for managing the heterogeneity of a classroom; they allow for differentiation of paths, offer individualized paths, adapt the learning time to the needs of the learner, and promote autonomy (Narcy-Combes 2007). A project-based pedagogy coupled with a hybrid course would offer both a stimulating project-task challenge (Guichon 2012) and would be the structuring element of both pedagogical scenarios and distance learning articulation's backbone (Nissen 2019).

3 Description of the hybrid course

The FFL hybrid course is based on project tasks, such as video competitions, in which learners must participate. Reflexivity (metacognition) is developed through learning-to-learn sessions, a logbook (forum on the university's Moodle platform), a portfolio (a shared storage space), and advisory interviews with the teacher at the beginning, middle, and end of the course.

Face-to-face courses are based on alternating the two approaches of differentiated pedagogy (variation and differentiation) that maintain a sense of belonging to the class group while offering activities adapted to different levels as shown in Figure 2 below.

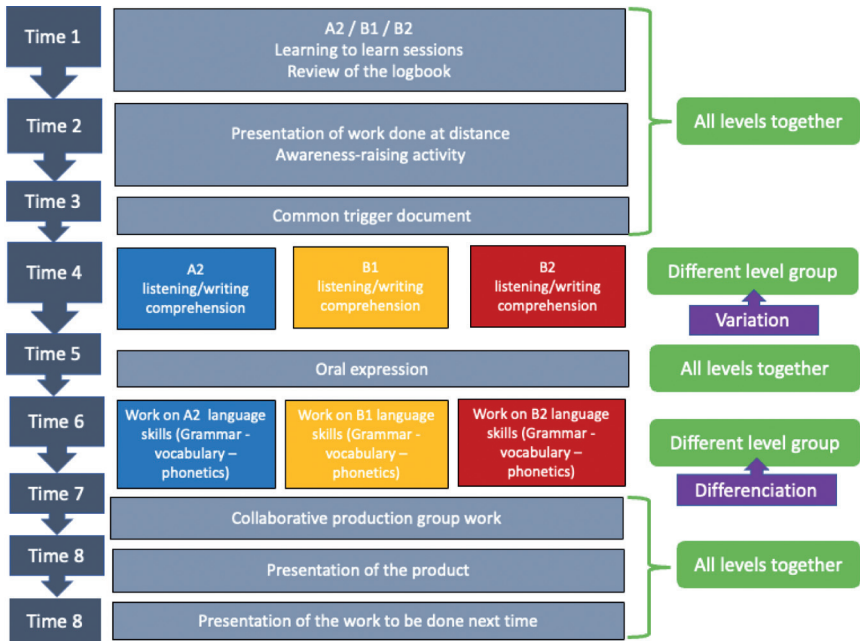


Figure 2: Example of the organization of a face-to-face course

The remote course is divided into 3 parts on the university’s Moodle platform:

- Before the face-to-face course: pre-course activities to be carried out before the face-to-face course adapted to the learner’s level between A2-B1-B2.
- After the face-to-face course: post-course activities to be carried out after the course such as activities adapted to the learner’s level, needs and personal objectives detected during their consultative interviews with the teacher. In this part, they also must fill their logbook with the strategies and resources chosen.
- Final task: lastly, they must complete their final task directly or indirectly related to the final “project task”.

The articulation between the remote and face-to-face course rigorously structured by the three stages described above, allows the learner, despite the complexity of the system, to easily find his way around.

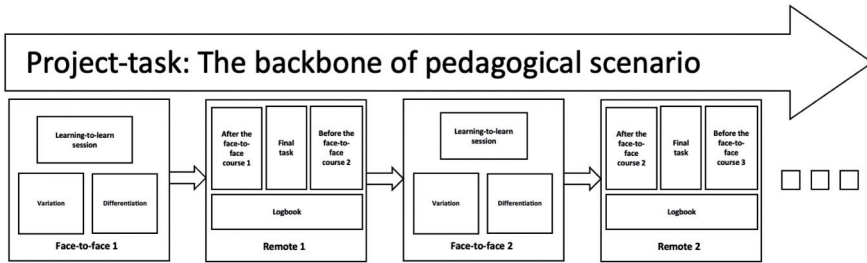


Figure 3: Diagram of the hybrid course

The originality of the course is reliant on how it can adapt to the level of the learner on the one hand, and also to the learners' personal needs and objectives identified during advisory interviews with the teacher on the other.

4 Methodology

Our research field is located in the language learning department of the university and more specifically in the multilevel FFL classes. Our learner groups are made up of university exchange students of various nationalities, at various university levels (from bachelor to doctorate) in a wide range of disciplines and the course is for some of them optional and for others mandatory. Due to the constraints linked to the distance between the different university sites on the one hand, and to the students' schedules on the other hand, the university has no other choice than to offer multilevel courses to allow each exchange student to have a FFL course.

Our study is part of an action-research (Cartoux 2002) based on the repetitive and cyclic experimentation of multilevel FFL hybrid course, as shown in figure 4 below, calibrated for multilevel courses. The courses are 30 hours in duration of which 20 hours are face-to-face and 10 hours are distance learning, they will be offered 4 times to 4 different audiences as summarized in the diagram below.

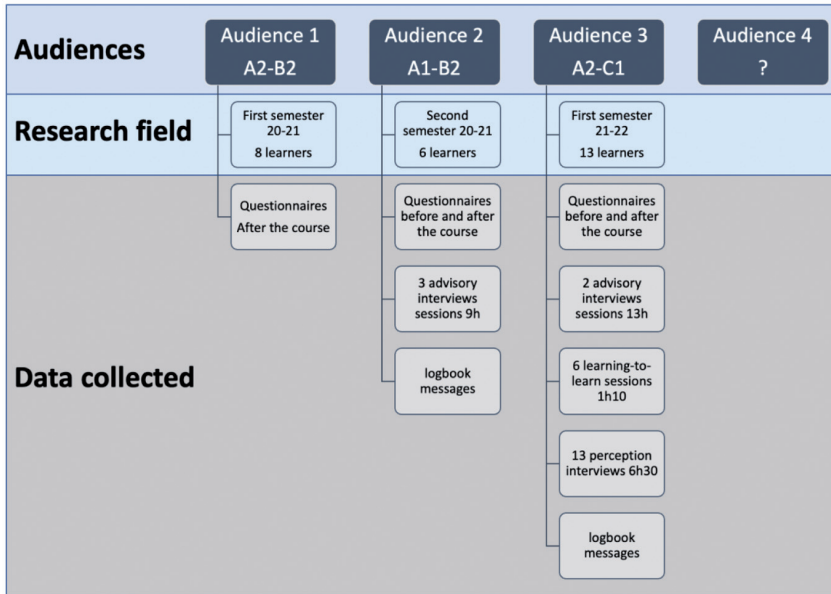


Figure 4: Diagram summarizing our action-research

The corpus consists of 3 kinds of data (Van der Maren 2003):

- “invoked data” data produced during the course and used for research purposes: recordings of advisory interviews which are 13h of audio recording, messages from the learners’ logbooks, class recordings of learning-to-learn sessions these are 1h10 of video recording.
- “provoked data” data produced without any link to pedagogical intentions: recordings of semi-structured interviews on the hybrid course’s perception conducted by a third parties for our latest experiments which are 3h30 of audio recording.
- “elicited data” data collected from the questionnaires: these are made up of closed and open questions (one being at the beginning, and the other towards the end of the course).

The chosen approach is based on a thematic categorical analysis (Bardin 2013) whose categories are around learners’ impression of level heterogeneity which can be positive or negative and the development of autonomy which the implementation of new learning strategies, and the use of certain relevant resources adapted to their needs, etc. The annotations of the recordings are made with ELAN version 6.2¹, a tool

¹ <https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan>

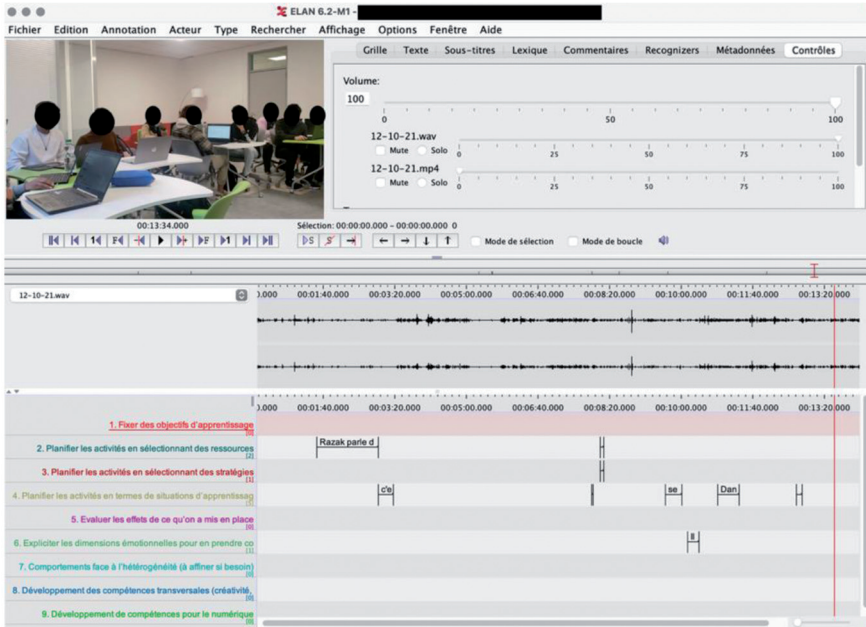


Illustration 1: ELAN screenshot

which facilitates the analysis and the identification of co-occurrences. These recordings will be counter-coded for the last experiment (Tellier 2014).

We will then move towards a triangulation of the data to obtain the most objective analysis possible and to guarantee the validity of our results.

5 Results

The quantitative data analyzed in the final questionnaire during the first 3 audiances (the fourth hearing has not yet been completed), is made up from 25 responses from a sample of 27 students. A1 to C1 shows that for the majority of learners, the multilevel class is an advantage (54.3 %) and it's a disadvantage for only 2 students (Table 1).

Table 1: Responses on the multilevel class from the final questionnaire

For you the multilevel class is:						
Audience:	Audience 1	Audience 2	Audience 3	Audience 4	Total	
An advantage	2	0	12	?	14	56 %
Neither an advantage nor a disadvantage	4	4	1	?	9	36 %
A disadvantage	0	2	0	?	2	8 %

On the other hand, 92% of the students felt that the course met their specific needs. Furthermore, we can observe that the level of general satisfaction obtained is 8.5 out of 10 (Table 2).

Table 2: Means are presented on the satisfaction from the final questionnaire

General satisfaction : 1 to 5 (1= not at all; 10 = perfectly)						
Audience:	Audience 1	Audience 2	Audience 3	Audience 4	Total	
	7.8	8.8	8.6	?	8.5	

The different qualitative data which consists of audio recordings and logbook messages, show a general satisfaction of the learners regarding the heterogeneity of the levels. We see that the advanced learners appreciate being with the lower levels because they need to master the language as further development that will help them, this also makes the learners' feel more confident. The lower levels learners are satisfied with collaborating with the advanced learners because they drive them towards progression. However, some learners point out the difficulties associated with group work when the level gap is too wide, especially with complete beginners.

Through the collected data on the learners, we see that the development of new learning strategies show the effectiveness of the different tools put in place for the development of learning autonomy.

6 Conclusion

The outcome of this study provides encouraging results which show that the learners have more positive views than negative when it comes to the multilevel class. We also see that the different elements of the hybrid course were impactful and met the specific needs of the learners.

In addition, the development of learners' learning autonomy has proven to be successful. After the next experiment (Audience 4), we will assess the capacity of the hybrid device which are centered on the project task to develop certain soft skills such as creativity, self-confidence, team spirit and curiosity. The results of this research will be fully available at the end of 2023.

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