Tongues Untied: A Bridge over *Interlanguage* for Learning Online

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Abstract: Unfettered electronic live chat can bridge the gap between fear and freedom in learning a new language. Free-of-cost chat rooms that have been used for more than fifteen years to stimulate creativity and foster the development of successful learning strategies in a foreign language have permitted learners unrestricted contexts in which to improve grammar and vocabulary as they escape from "interlanguage". But electronic live chat has been regarded with suspicion by many educators, as Noet-Morand (2003), among others, has pointed out; complaints about the academic/pedagogical viability of chat have surrounded its failure to help students with pronunciation, its inability to engage the paralinguistic and kinesic aspects of conversation, and its inadequacy in thought processing development in a new tongue. Simple, exemplary methods exist, however, that incorporate live chat effectively into online coursework to keep learning current, "real", and relevant. Moreover, live chat has been demonstrated to reduce student timidity, even as it encourages participation and the development of useful conversational strategies.

Introduction and background

Teachers and learners worldwide have for half a century been able to benefit in various ways from computer-assisted language learning (CALL). As Warschauer (1996) has described it, the history of CALL can be followed through three principal phases that parallel the modern history of linguistic educational practice. That is, just as teachers were extolling the virtues of *behaviorism* during the 1950's, so did computers arrive to assist them with repeated drills on correct pronunciation and foreign vocabulary, sentence patterns and word formation. The behaviorist partisan of CALL felt that drills and practice would burn new trenches into the brain; a new language could flow smoothly along those trenches and thence effortlessly from the mouth.

But after a couple of decades, behaviorism began to be questioned both theoretically and pedagogically. CALL, along with its adherents, entered a new phase, the *communicative* one. The computer was exploited as a tutor that could teach implicitly rather than explicitly, engaging the learner in interactive games and inciting students to use words and patterns rather than simply to memorize patterns by rote.

Ultimately, this communicative engagement of the learner was to lead to a third, *integrative* phase of CALL, in which twenty-first century machines are used as multi-

media learning environments that students can control, individualize, and navigate forward, backward, or through at their own speed or volition.

CALL, like all foreign language learning, has throughout its metamorphosis always retained the primary goal of teaching four areas of linguistic competence: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Typically, modern personal computers have been most useful in helping students with only the last three of these competencies; as Noet-Morand (2003), among others, has stated, using the computer to assist in the learning of pronunciation, or helping students to improve their skills in genuine, spontaneous conversation, has been unsatisfactory. Audio quality, imperfect synchrony, and expense have rendered inadequate the wholesale use of CALL for speaking, mostly because neither hardware nor software has yet been rendered cheap, practical, or portable enough for pedagogically efficacious student use.

And so, as Noet-Morand (2003) has confirmed, simple-to-use, easily-downloadable electronic live chat services that do not depend upon audio have demonstrated their efficacy in enhancing CALL in a practical way. Indeed, the open-content Wikibooks (http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/ATALL/Interaction/Finding_Language_Exchange_(eTandem)_Partners) lists nearly two dozen "language exchange" options for interactive language practice, some enhanced by audio and most requiring very little technical skill or equipment. And the commercially supported but cost-free About.com, BBC Languages, as well as podclasses and "network-based communication", have enjoyed success in such places as the University of Calgary (Davison, 2007) and the University of California Davis (Blake, et al., 1998), among others. In fact, as UC Davis's Blake et al. report, while even the incomplete learning of a secondary language usually requires more than a minimum of five years, CALL can usually speed up the process, even as it offers the ancillary benefits of computer skills improvement and acquisition of linguistic pragmatics (Blake, et al., 1998).

An exemplary case of electronic efficacy: Dissipating *interlanguage* difficulties

At Coastline Community College, in Fountain Valley, California, more than a dozen students of French language and culture have been meeting virtually in electronic live chat rooms for a decade and a half, twice a week, every week, year after year. Not only have their computer skills improved during this time; their linguistic awareness, their writing and reading fluency, and their conversational strategies have advanced, too. These adult learners have made progress in inter-cultural understanding and research methodology, improving their analytical techniques while also learning to reason *à la française*.

But online chat rooms can't shrug off their bad rap in much of academia, despite the integrative nature of twenty-first century computer-assisted learning. Especially among foreign language teachers, it has been difficult to overcome the opinions that "conversational fluency" (Ersch, 2008),"communicative competence" (Hymes, 1972), and "sociolinguistic competence" (Hymes, 1972) are most effectively achieved only

through live, face-to-face interaction, where body behaviors, vocal quality, and other "indirect language learning strategies" (Oxford, 1990) are in play.

Learning a secondary language in a country where that language is not commonly spoken is a challenge, though, tying the tongue and too often breeding fear of failure. Besides the fear and loathing inspired by having to utter alien sounds in front of fellow students and a judgmental instructor, foreign language students have to overcome a desire to deploy structures that they already know and use fluently in their native languages as they try to manipulate a new mode of communication. Indeed, foreign language instructors are all too aware of the ill effects of this *interlanguage* phenomenon. The purgatorial parlance is a linguistic system created by a learner of a secondary language (L2) who is not yet proficient in that L2; thus, *interlanguage* comprises approximations of the L2 that show lots of features of the learner's native tongue (L1).

Interestingly enough for proponents of CALL, however, researchers such as Hismanoglu (2000) among others, has observed a difference in the degree to which *interlanguage* interferes with language learning in the classroom as opposed to online. And at Coastline Community College, in Fountain Valley, California, a group of fifteen persistent adult students of French language and culture have made extraordinary progress in reading, writing, and understanding French by meeting for between two and ten hours every week online in an electronic chat room, demonstrating the thesis that online learning of a new language is not only possible but productive. These Coastliners have never met face-to-face, although they have been gathering together online for fifteen years. They have improved their understanding of linguistic pragmatics, cultural differences among francophone groups, and even begun to argue about francophone software *à la française*. Indeed, they have bridged the gap between the purgatory of tongue-tied and tentative *interlanguage* and the unconfined comfort of secondary language success.

Eight C's to overcome *interlanguage* obstacles online

Coastline Community College online learners of French language and culture have achieved their accomplishments by employing simple, free-of-cost chat rooms that they may access from anywhere and by persisting in their presence hour after hour, week after week, year after year. They "talk" freely in these chat rooms, whether in the ellipses of ordinary conversation or in the complete sentences of exposition or explanation, about subjects in everyday life. No specific topics are assigned; it is rare for a subject to be off-limits.

Electronic live chat has facilitated Coastliners' learning by offering at least eight features unique to the online environment: convenience, (low) cost, currency, context, creativity, communicative competence, cognitive shift, and, as a bonus, computer skills.

Convenience

As has been stated above, the electronic live chat rooms used by Coastline's French language students are free of cost and always "open." They are accessible to anyone

anywhere, even on iPods, iPhones, or other mobile devices; the chat rooms comprise applets requiring no excessive computer memory and only a password for entry. Students have found the chat so convenient that they have made appointments with friends to meet in it; moreover, hyperlinks and cut-pasted citations are easily accommodated. Although each chat session dissolves upon its completion, Coastline's French instructor has been archiving most of the sessions in MS Word document format for fifteen years, with each session dated and its participants named. Indeed, ease of access has made these chat rooms inviting to the tentative adult learner.

Cost

Since the chat room used for French language and culture studies is free to the college and to students, it requires no extra user fee or materials fee, as some computer-based courses or ancillaries may do. Thus, it is attractive to the typical older adult who is studying French online to improve fluency and cultural awareness; notably, Coastline's entire online French language program requires no extra fees or textbooks. Everything is virtual. In fact, although "…most specialty books and courses (state) that the best way to build up on a foreign language is to live in an environment where the language is constantly present," as Grabikow (2006), among others, has noted, he adds "…there is an alternative that can get you surrounded by the language you're learning without involving the costs and time requirements of actually visiting a foreign country: the Internet." Community college students who cannot pay even for their own computers or Internet connection can link to Coastline's French language live chat at libraries or Internet cafés, or they may use the college's free-access computer labs. The idea is to engage learners in an environment as easily and as dynamically as can be made possible. The learnable moment should not be bypassed because of financial constraints.

Currency

Because live chat is "live", it can probe students' affect and their awareness in ways that textbook-based courses cannot. The emotional aspect of learning a new language and culture is important; Baudry (2003), among others, has pointed out that francophones are particularly emotionally involved in their acquisition of knowledge. Seeing and hearing live the results of and the world's reactions to the American Presidential election of 2008, with live feeds interpreted in the French of Morocco and Belgium, Switzerland, France, Canada, and Sénégal, provided Coastliners an exemplary teachable moment impossible to replicate a day later in class. Moreover, when current affairs serve as live chat subject matter, as they often do, vocabulary becomes fun, if not a lot easier, to learn; since French and English share many of the same Latinate word sources, cognates are apparent, especially in writing. Too, a live chat room can accommodate links to audio, video, and print media that are truly dynamic, expediting acquisition of new words and phrases.

Context

When foreign language learners can hear, see, and read their new language in a context that they understand, such as that of the American election, they can become actively

engaged, taking charge of their learning, using higher order thinking skills than they have to use in class. Indeed, regular participants in Coastline's French live chat have found that the amenable social context has incited them to interact more than they might do in a context-restricted classroom full of all-too-attentive living ears and eyes. If the context is friendly and familiar, the road through *interlanguage* is smoothed by cognates, recognizable words in recognizable situations. Indeed, as most expository writing authorities have claimed, students find it much easier to write about the things that they know most about. Unlike textbook French, the language that Coastline onliners are learning has no limits; sentences are not restricted to the "learner vocabulary" or to simplified 100-word or 200-word corpuses. This phenomenon liberates the learner as it gives him confidence.

Creativity

Comfort with the social and subject-matter context will free the learner's mind. Since Coastline's online chat sessions have no pre-organization, no topics set in advance, discussion ranges freely over the personal, through the political, into the social and the cultural, passing through the linguistic. Learners participate in parallel conversations, sometimes following the interaction of two others, sometimes commenting on a statement made minutes earlier by another, often asking one another about current events or shared interests. As is the case in typical brick-and-mortar classrooms, they use creative circumlocution and alternative expressions to avoid having to reveal that they do not know how to say something, but the fact that they can see on the computer screen what they have written often leads them to produce more complete, cogent thoughts than they would do in a traditional conversation class. Moreover, direct questioning by fellow interlocutors leads them to think critically, even as it encourages them to participate. Novel thoughts lead to rich dialogue.

Communicative competence

Oxford (1990), among others, has noted that it is immensely difficult to achieve true communicative competence in more than one language; even multi-linguals find that they tend to carve up their brains into areas of interest, expertise, or sociocultural experience associated more comfortably with one language or another. But Coastline's French onliners' sheer persistence, as well as the francophone environment in which they find themselves for so many hours each week, could be the genesis of a linguistic sophistication rare in secondary language learners. That is, they have come gradually to use in their communications much more French and less English, more "real French" words and fewer cognates, longer and more complicated sentences, and more linguistic abstraction, not to mention more attention to francophone modes of address and other sociolinguistically fitting markers. Too, their coursework essays include compound and complex sentences, longer utterances, and more abstraction than do the writings of typical classroom students.

Cognition

Indeed, Coastline's online learners of French language and culture have begun to argue, to reason, to think more circuitously, vermicularly, *à la française* as they have participated more in live chat sessions. Students who have taken Coastline online French language courses but who have participated only rarely in the required minimum number of minutes of chat have retained the Anglophone tendency to want to cut to the chase, to keep things germane, never to change a subject, arguing in a linear way, while those who have been chatting away for more than a decade have become more comfortable with the francophone vermicular reasoning process, accommodating side questions as evidence of others' interest rather than disdaining them as distractions. Coastliners are asked more than once during each sixteen-week semester to participate in a free, simple learning styles survey (http://www.businessballs.com); although learning patterns do not generally change much throughout one's life, the students of French language and culture who have persisted most have been able to discern slight shifts from the pragmatic, top-down notions of American thinking toward the argumentative, vermicular, Descartes-meets-the-absurd processes of the francophone mind.

Computer skills and 'Net surfing competence

It would be hoped that a student who had been working online for more than a decade to learn something would enjoy the ancillary benefit of improving his computer skills, and this is exactly what has taken place in Coastline Community College's online community of French language and culture students. Inclusion of audio and video links during chat sessions, quick "surf-asides", and facile cutting and pasting have become common, as have typing speed and the ability to attend to more than one window on the computer monitor. It has even become apparent over the years that learners are able to perform more credible research techniques while they are chatting than they might have done early on; they ask one another the sources of quotes or cut-pasted materials and then examine those sources right there live, actively engaging themselves in evaluation as they search, thinking critically and conceiving responses to what they find. Happily enough for their instructor, they have conducted increasingly thorough research by employing francophone resources, too.

Implications for practice

Learning a secondary language requires time and effort (Blake, et al., 1998); there is no such thing as "fluency in seven days" or "speak X in 30 days." Learning a language online involves the added frustration of inadequate access to face-to-face speaking skill improvement. But as is the case with other educational processes, that of acquiring a new mode of communication is multi-modal, involving not only speaking and gesturing but writing, reading, hearing, and understanding; sounds combine into syllables, syllables make up words, and words join together into phrases, all enrobed in culture. With French particularly, the written word and the manner of argumentation comprise credibility as much as, or even more than, does speech (Baudry, 2003).

Thus, it makes excellent sense to use an electronic live chat to augment foreign language learning. An easily accessible tool for engaging students in their learning process, live chat can offer immediacy at any learnable moment.

Conclusion

Although there are pros and cons to any learning mode, and although learning a foreign language exclusively online cannot provide the paralinguistic and kinesic cues that make up much of any linguistic message, it appears that persistent participation in electronic live chat can comprise a low-cost alternative with high benefits. Online learning of French may be particularly facilitated online, not only because of the aforementioned tendency of francophones to attend to argumentative design to the written word, and to vermicular reasoning. That is, the French government has for more than fifteen years been encouraging through grants and loans the advancement and the enhancement of the "eighth art", that of Web design and Web-based communications. The Ministry of Culture has set aside festival days and financial rewards to highlight France's place in cyberspace; even the newly launched Europeana digital culture database is more than 50% French (http://www.europeana.eu), even though the European Union comprises twenty-seven members in 2009. Fortunately for Coastliners, the Internet has provided a convenient, cost-effective, current, contextually relevant, creative place to improve communicative competence, cognitive processes, and even computer skills as they string together multiple topics of discussion and evaluations, arguments, discussing those topics while exploring new ideas, feeling for themselves how the vermicular pattern of reasoning that characterizes French thought can dissolve *interlinguistic* barriers, offering fresh, alternative perspectives to any subject matter, whether it be technological, scientific, or humanistic.

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