Authentic Language Tasks and Authentic Internet Sites for Learning French in Authentic Contexts

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Abstract

"A language," said the German philosopher Alexdander von Humboldt, "cannot be taught. One can only create conditions for learning to take place." (in Dovedan et al, 2000). Today, computer technology and the Internet provide dynamic teaching and learning conditions that enable language learners to interact with real people across the world, have individual access to a variety of meaningful authentic sources, and develop critical analysis and scientific inquiry. According to Smith (2004) "computer technology can provide students with the means to control [their] learning, to construct meaning and to evaluate and monitor their performance". The Internet gives the opportunity to learn useful socio-cultural facts, develop computer skills (Means & Olson, 1995), and use more complex language through exposure to a variety of speech discourse in the target language.

Focusing on the uses of computer technology for language learning, Task-Based Language Teaching principles, and language acquisition theories such as emergentism, in which learners use contextual cues to decode and learn language adapted to their immediate, individual use, this paper aims at demonstrating how authentic internet sites, developed originally for French people (vs. French language learners) can be used for real-life, meaningful learning conditions and tasks.

For this project, 12 internet-based authentic tasks were assigned to 20 elementary French language students at the University of Tehran in Iran. For performing these tasks, learners had to use various search engines and authentic sites, working simultaneously on their reading and writing proficiencies, socio-cultural and pragmatic competencies, and life skills such as planning, searching, creating, manipulating and using information for performing everyday tasks, like opening a boutique in Paris's Champs Elysées avenue or writing the storyline for a youth comics contest. In addition, two questionnaires were administered to students at the beginning and at the end of the course, in which they expressed their attitude towards the use of the Internet for language learning, as well as how class tasks helped improve their language learning and language-use.

Learners' performances on the tasks, and their responses to the questionnaires indicated a positive attitude towards the use of authentic internet-based tasks at the end of the course, as opposed to a neutral or negative attitude at the beginning. In addition, learners demonstrated remarkable improvements in their lexical competency (through exposure and use of dynamic lexicon available at various sites), reading (scanning authentic texts for directed objectives), writing (expressing individual ideas), creativity, socio-cultural competencies (understanding the French culture and practical know-hows), and their savoir-faire or ability to activate and use information for completing the projects, therefore, becoming language learners, and lifelong language users.

1. Introduction and theoretical framework

"A language," said the German philosopher Alexdander von Humboldt, "cannot be taught. One can only create conditions for learning to take place."[1]. Today, computer technology and the Internet provide dynamic teaching and learning conditions that empower language learners with infinite authentic and interactive learning tools and resources not available in the traditional textbook-only-based instruction. Since its introduction to language learning three decades ago, internet-based learning has been the focus of much (action)research across the world because it has revolutionized language learning by providing students and instructors with authentic, real-life learning and interacting situations that contextualize language learning and language use, thus improving learners' motivation, achievement and participation in learning. According to research, internet-based language learning has a positive influence on learners':

- attitude towards learning (Levine, Ferenz, Reves, 2000, Salaberry, 2001; Oladejo, 2001: in Lin 2002[2])
- motivation for learning (Warschauer, 1996)[3]
- autonomous, independent and self-access learning (Brajcich, 2000[4], Schoepp, Erogul 2001[5])
- creativity, novelty and individualization of actions and productions (Lin 2002)[2]

- control over their learning pace and conditions (Lin 2002[2], Smith 2004[6])
- linguistic performances and possibility to work on various competencies and skills at the same time, in a contextualized, authentic language-use situation (Mangenot 1998)[7]
- negotiation and construction of personalized, authentic meaning and production (Smith 2004)[6]
- self monitoring and self evaluation (Smith 2004)[6]
- active participation in learning (Alava, 2011)[8]

In addition, the Internet gives the opportunity to learn about the socio-cultural and pragmatic dimensions of the target language; it elicits and develops higher-level thinking (Mike, 1996)[9]; it requires and improves computer skills (Means and Olson, 1997)[10]; it exposes learners to a variety of authentic resources, situations and speech discourse (Sullivan and Pratt, 1996)[11], and thus it makes learners encounter and use more authentic, complex and dynamic language (Warschauer, 1996)[3]. Students therefore have access to, use and learn more authentic information that help them overcome the decontextualized predicament of [language] learning (Chen 2001)[12] and become lifelong language learners and users.

2. Research method and data collection
2.1 Context
This study was performed at the University of Tehran's Elementary French language classes for undergraduate French majors. Students attended 14 hours of regular language instruction based on the textbook *Alter Ego 1* during the week. At the end of each week, they attended the internet component of their course, in which authentic, real-life tasks were assigned to learners. These tasks:
- were conform to the principles of Task-based Language Learning approach
- were based on the course content and the material learned over the first four days of the week
- were based on public French sites designed for French people, as opposed to educational French language sites.

Over the course of one semester, composed of 12 weeks, ten internet-based authentic personalized tasks were assigned to the twenty students registered in the class; each task was composed of a pre-task/information gathering section, an organizational section, and a final expression section, where students had to compose/prepare a product using the planning and information gathered in the first two sections.

For performing these tasks, learners had to use various search engines and authentic sites, working simultaneously on their reading and writing proficiencies, socio-cultural and pragmatic competencies, and life skills such as planning, searching, creating, manipulating and using information for performing everyday tasks, like opening a boutique in Paris's Champs Elysées avenue, writing the storyline for a youth comics contest, planning their university French courses, or preparing the menu for the restaurant at a cruise ship on the Seine river.

2.2 Data collection and analysis
Our data for this research consisted of two questionnaires administered to students at the beginning and in the end of the course, in which they expressed their attitude towards the use of the internet for learning French. The questionnaire administered at the beginning of the course consisted of eighteen general questions based on the Likert Scale©; those administered at the end of the instruction included the same eighteen initial questions administered at the beginning, as well as four open-ended opinion questions, in which students freely discussed the positive and negative dimensions of the course, their attitude towards the use of the internet for language learning, and the areas in which they believed they demonstrated more improvement by performing these internet-based tasks.

3. Study results and discussion
In this section, the participants' answers to the Likert-Scale© based questions in the two questionnaires before and after the course are presented and commented. We will then reveal students' answers to the open ended questions in the questionnaire at the end of the instruction. A brief discussion of the results will follow each section.

In the first section of the questionnaires (questions 1-8), the main question was "Performing internet-based activities help improve…?" and in the second section, the main question was "Performing internet-based activities help become…?" Students' responses before (B) and after (A) the course are displayed in the following two tables where 1&2 refer to "strongly disagree/disagree", 3 refers to "neither disagree nor agree" and 4&5 refer to "agree/strongly agree".

Table 1: questions 1-8

Questions 1-8	T	1&2	3	4&5
1.Reading	B	55%	35%	10%
	A	15%	15%	70%
2.Writing	B	45%	35%	20%
	A	0%	24%	75%
3.Speaking	B	30%	50%	20%
	A	30%	35%	35%
4.Listening	B	25%	65%	10%
	A	30%	15%	40%
5.Grammar	B	25%	45%	30%
	A	20%	15%	65%
6.Vocabulary	B	30%	40%	30%
	A	5%	25%	65%
7.Culture	B	30%	55%	15%
	B	15%	35%	50%
8.Lifestyle	A	10%	80%	10%
	B	25%	20%	55%

Questions 9-18	T	1&2	3	4&5
9.Independent in learning French	B	15%	75%	10%
	A	5%	15%	80%
10.Independent in using computers	B	25%	25%	50%
	A	15%	10%	75%
11.independent in using/ searching in the internet	B	55%	45%	0%
	A	15%	10%	75%
12.independent in time management	B	50%	45%	5%
	A	0%	30%	70%
13.motivated b/c of personalized tasks	B	85%	15%	0%
	A	10%	40%	50%
14.motivated b/c of using public French sites	B	85%	15%	0%
	A	10%	40%	50%
15.motivated b/c of the authenticity of tasks	B	85%	15%	0%
	A	10%	40%	50%
16.more active participant in learning	B	15%	80%	5%
	A	15%	40%	45%
17.more creative in language use	A	0%	95%	5%
	B	10%	40%	50%
18.overall attitude about the course	A	20%	55%	25%
	B	15%	5%	80%

Table 2: questions 9-18

As indicated in the majority of the results, most of the students expressed a negative or neutral view about linguistic improvements (table 1) and task performance via the internet (table 2) at the beginning of the course. This pessimistic or impartial opinion may be attributed to their not having experienced computer/internet-based and personalized, authentic task-based language learning, having mostly been exposed to traditional textbook-based classes. However, at the end of the course, significant positive differences are observed in students responses: except in listening and reading (table 1), which were not part of this course's objectives, in the other skills (table 1) as well as in performing personalized authentic tasks (table 2) students demonstrate a positive improvement and attitude, which indicates that as anticipated, performing internet-based tasks helped improve (socio)linguistic skills and competencies, computer/internet knowledge and use, linguistic creativity, and time management; in addition, they expressed an increased motivation and a more active participation in their language learning.

In the four open ended questions administered at the end of the course, interesting issues were addressed by the participants: In the first question, which asked: "Which part of the tasks helped more in learning French?", 50% of students mentioned searching for information in the internet, 25% mentioned writing in French, 25% mentioned looking up unknown words and 10% mentioned reading in French, therefore it can be suggested that browsing various sites and looking for specific information was helpful in learning the French language due to its exposing student to a rich variety of authentic discourse not available in their regular textbook, which is limited in its content and subjects.

In the second question, students were asked to express their opinion regarding learning French through authentic tasks based on public French sites, and learning French through educational French language sites, designed for language learning (which were implemented in the course two times). 55% of students indicated authentic tasks based on public French sites because of their rich input, their sociocultural dimension and their authentic nature; 20% indicated educational sites for their exercises on specific grammatical points, while 5 indicated both. Therefore, it can be concluded that despite students initial negative or neutral opinion about using the internet, specifically public French sites, the majority of them were satisfied with their learning via authentic tasks, which, according to their responses, made them apply the information learned throughout the week in real-life situations while giving them a "taste" of the French society and daily life.

In the third question, students had to determine the most positive aspect of the class: (65%) indicated socio-cultural knowledge and learning to perform authentic, real-life activities (such as registering for classes, buying the Eiffel Tower visit tickets, preparing restaurant menu or planning a trip) using French sites; 45% indicated improvements in writing, 30% in vocabulary and 20% in reading. These results seem to suggest that the most important outcome for students was to learn to *use* French in

various real-life situations they may encounter if they travel to France; in fact, this course, as commented by one of the participants, was like an "imaginary trip to France through browsing its internet sites." In addition, our main objectives, which were improving students' reading and writing as well as socio-cultural knowledge and savoir-faire was mostly met, especially in writing, although we expected more positive improvements in reading; this may be due to the fact that most students did not perceive of reading as an individual activity, as it was used for locating specific information and not for developing reading skills.

Finally, a fourth question was asked in order to discover which online resources helped more in performing the tasks. The results are listed below:
- Wikipedia©: 60%
- Public internet sites: 55%
- Search engines such as Yahoo© and Google©: 45%
- Online dictionaries: 40%
- Google Translate©: 30%

These results reveal that the students mostly used online encyclopedias, sites and search engines for searching unknown concepts and information required for performing the tasks; therefore our objective, which was to teach them to use online resources for their needs was achieved, which suggests that online resources/public sites are useful resources for learning to *use* language in various real-life situations.

4. Conclusion

The above-mentioned results seem to suggest that this course, which planned to introduce the use of the internet for performing real-life tasks in learning languages was successful in that we witnessed a significant change in students opinions and attitudes towards the implementation of computers and the internet in language learning, as opposed to neutral or rather negative attitudes at the beginning of the course, which was not due to students' not wanting to use the internet, but due to their not knowing the possibilities that vast world of the internet, public, non-educational sites in our case, have to offer to language learners. Once students were accustomed to performing the tasks and browsing, searching and using internet sites to find information for personalized tasks, they not only expressed more motivation and enthusiasm for performing the tasks, but also introduced amazing creativity and originality in their productions. This was, however, a first attempt at implementing such courses in the regular textbook-based French courses at the University of Tehran.

The results of this study helped us observe in action the strong aspects of internet use in language learning, while understanding the areas in which improvements need to be made, such as the course's lack of an "oral" dimension, where students can work on listening and speaking alongside (oriented) reading and writing. In fact, this course will have a more positive outcome if an interaction time, where students share and discuss their productions in order to work on all four language skills while learning from their classmates.

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