"Remettons nous-y": the challenges of online language upskilling

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> *"Debates on e-learning often begin by comparing apples with oranges. The 'theatre of the classroom' and the rich social tapestry of the campus are contrasted with a barren, solitary, inhuman online experience consisting of no more than downloading texts and submitting assignments." (FELIX, 2003)*

This paper reflects upon the opportunities and challenges of setting up a flexible distributive blended learning language upskilling course for Primary School teachers. Published in December 2002, *Languages for All: Languages for Life A Strategy for England*, set out the Government's 8 year plan to transform the national language capability. The cornerstone of the strategy was the introduction of an entitlement for all pupils ages 7-11 to learn another language by 2010. It was expected that the language teaching would be done by private tutors, secondary school teachers or even by parents. In reality, most of the language teaching taking place in Primary schools today is undertaken by the class teacher, and the choice of language has often been driven by the languages available among the teaching staff. CILT (the National Centre for Languages), in partnership with other stakeholders, produced up skilling specifications targeted at training providers, including HEIs, Adult Education providers, Local Authorities, Specialist Language Colleges, the Cultural Institutes, private providers and others.

The online up skilling course set up jointly by the Open Language Programme at London Metropolitan University with five Local Authorities in North London (Camden, Islington, Haringay, Barnett and Enfield) was an attempt to explore a delivery style which could be flexible and easier to integrate within the demanding work routine of a Primary school teacher. The course (60 hours in total) consists of - 4 days of face to face tuition, 20 hours of online asynchronous learning and 20 hours of online synchronous learning over a five month long period. Its curriculum was based on the up skilling specifications created by CILT.

Learner Needs Analysis

My first point of research was a local primary school where initial meetings revealed a sense of panic mostly arising from teacher resistance to having another dimension added to an already demanding curriculum. Moreover, it was apparent that the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach underpinning the Key Stage 2 Framework for languages was not fully understood, providing yet another source of anxiety. The only up skilling provision that had been set up was twilight courses run by another HEI in the local CPD centre. The dropout rates were high and progress was slow as teachers were often too tired to attend regularly and struggled to fit in any learning in between weekly taught sessions. Freeing teachers from their classroom was only considered an option for immersion courses - a costly option for schools in terms of supply teaching costs alone.

If a flexible mixed delivery online course seemed a compelling alternative, visits to schools and preliminary discussions with Language Consultants from the Local Authorities made it clear that Primary School teachers, whilst being on the digital frontline teaching learners Prensky would see as "digital natives" and using numerous digital tools in their day to day teaching, do not, however, necessarily have any experience of being online learners in a digital world using a Learning management System (LMS) or Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Nonetheless, the affordances of a LMS/VLE, particularly in terms of collaborative learning, remained appealing, as the possibility of building an online community of practice that could create sustainable links is considered to be highly beneficial. The teachers would learn from within a Vygotskian proximal zone of development (Vygotsky, 1957) through problem solving and tasks to be carried out together and with the guidance of more competent peers.

Essential to the design of this course was the fact that it addresses teachers as learners. Woodall and Geisler (Woodall & Geisler, 2009) insist upon the fundamental importance of informal learning among teacher learners and Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick, 2001) highlights the importance of individualised assistance. The collaborative facilities within the VLE are precious tools to create a proximal zone of development that encompasses all levels of learners, and the use of private spaces, such as journals shared by learner and teacher alone, create opportunities for individualised assistance and situated peer learning through discipline-relevant exchanges of ideas and experiences. In addition to the tools provided by the VLE, it was essential for such a project to include the possibility of live oral communication for language practice through the use of *Skype*, an online real-time collaboration application. A few face to face sessions were included to ensure the necessary guidance to accessing and using the VLE platform, particularly the LMS but also to create opportunities for non-mediated communication in the target language as well as intervention from other potential participants within the University such as

language teaching colleagues and Modern Foreign Languages PGCE students within the Department of Education.

Designing with WebLearn (Blackboard LMS)

The online module designed on WebLearn, the colloquial name for Blackboard's Vista learning management system, for this course allows for two different learning pathways: one is linear and follows the outline of the CILT up skilling specifications (Learning Modules in WebLearn), the other is non-linear and encourages the learners to explore language learning resources to create their own language learning programme and acquire sound language learning (and teaching) strategies through structured links on the home page.

The majority of languages curricula in UK remain based on a grammar and topic centred progression but such approaches often fail to take into account many of the findings from research in second language acquisition and limit progression to a linear pathway which many learners find frustrating. Rather than enabling the expression and production of meaning, such structured linear curricula lead to the limitation of the expression of meaning and run the risk of learner disengagement. It has long been argued that a notional-functional curriculum needs to be introduced (Wilkins, 1976). In this context, the syllabus for the course described here is perceived from the outset as negotiable and learner centred. It is designed to gradually unfold through the "learning modules" in response to the progress, needs and difficulties encountered by the learners as they attempt to construct and express meaning and priority is given to the aims and objectives of the specifications.

The coexistence of collaborative and individual learning spaces is key for the purpose of language learning, as it is not uncommon for learners to suffer from what is now commonly referred to as "Foreign Language Anxiety" (Horwitz, 2001) which may or may not come about as a result of poor language learning strategies. Foreign Language Anxiety inhibits active participation and engagement in group and class activities. As much as it is important to develop collaborative learning practices, nurturing spaces where learners feel that they are not on public display, plays an important role in enabling different learning styles to come to the fore.

Although relatively little research has been done to date on this point, the digital mediation in online synchronous voice conversations with clear options as to whether to be heard and seen or just heard, offer a type of interaction which differs strongly from face-to-face or even from telephonic exchanges. Learners who in face-to-face situations seem to suffer from some level of Foreign Language Anxiety appear to be much more able to contribute in digital mediated interaction. The ability to use text tools (written chat tools) to support live conversation (as in *Skype* for instance) is a useful way of supporting learners with tips or vocabulary as they speak without disrupting the flow of speech.

Empowering Learners

One of the first tasks the learners on this French Upskilling course had to embark upon was a self-evaluation of their current level of language competence through the use of the general and skills specific evaluation criteria proposed in the CEFR - which then lead to goal setting and reviewing / monitoring activities. Using the CEFR level descriptors for self-assessment is not an easy task and many learners will have a tendency to either inflate their own competence or to under value it, but the aim of exercise is not to produce accurate records but rather to involve the learners in all the processes of learning: "One of the key arguments for self-assessment is that it provides an effective means of developing critical self-awareness. (Nunan, 1988, p.116.). A resulting advantage of this is that learners are better able to set realistic goals and direct their own learning. A second argument is that, in a learner-centred approach, by definition, "learners need to be involved in all the processes of learning, including the process of evaluation" (Little, 2005, in Bullock, 2010, p.322.).

The affordances of WebLearn are particularly well suited to setting up this iterative process in language learning between self-evaluation, goal-setting and monitoring of achievements. Learners can access the CEFR descriptors online when they wish, and use a personalised journal space to record their self-evaluation and goal-setting. Alternately it is possible to set quizzes in WebLearn based on the CEFR descriptors and to embed links to relevant and authentic texts or media that exemplify the competences. The teacher can then easily interact with the learners input and support them in the setting of realistic achievable targets for themselves without controlling content. Modelling tasks on a VLE can often lead to better engagement than through the usual face to face means but needs to be a done in a non-invasive way. Here a model was given which also included a series of questions to further stimulate learner reflection.

In terms of embedding a crucial pedagogical tool for self-evaluation and goal setting, a VLE with its mix of collaborative and individual dimensions in the hands of a skilled educator often offers far better results than face to face teaching, where learners often feel that this is not part of learning a language, and certainly not "teaching a language".

Online Teaching Presence

> *"Teaching presence is charged with shaping the right transactional balance and, along with the learners, managing and monitoring the achievement of worthwhile learning outcomes in a timely manner."*(Garrison and Anderson, 2002)

Facilitation and Moderation are essential in the context of a flexible distributed learning course such as this one and take many forms. Direct instruction too still has a strong place in the equation or we run the risk of "dumbing down" the subject

specific expertise that inevitably draws learners to Higher Education. Arguably, this is possibly the most time consuming and misunderstood aspect of online teaching. As Felix rightly argues, the notion that online teaching will be cheaper than face-to-face teaching shows a lack of understanding of the new roles that the online teacher needs to embrace. (Felix, 2003)

Facilitation takes place through all the tasks that are necessary to ensure that the learners are able to use the online platform, to create their own learning journey, take responsibility for it, and make the most of the opportunities offered through online learning. In the case of this course, it proved to represent the first stumbling block. After the first face to face session on January 14th, 2010, 2 of the 7 learners in the group had not visited the VLE even once, nor had they responded to any communication sent them via email or telephone. Facilitation of interactions in an online module requires a lot of projecting into the role of the learner without making too many rigid assumptions - such as "these students just don't want to do any work outside the classroom"- but looking for potential solutions to address the problems without pre-determined ideas of why this aspect is arising. The learners on this course are adult learners who work full time in tiring and demanding jobs, and many of them also have young children who need childcare, and it is important to handle this first aspect of facilitation (getting everyone on board) with sensitivity. Being digitally harassed by the teacher is not what will help learners join the group. In order to manage this dimension, the planning of the initial frequency of face to face sessions is essential and a degree of flexibility in the amount of time spent on online synchronous sessions must also be taken into account. Maintaining the engagement of the learners who are making good progress, and hopefully successfully facilitating access for those who have so far not engaged, are often to be juggled simultaneously by the facilitator.

Moderation is the process through which a form of online teaching cognitive presence emerges. Again this is a richly delicate area where it is essential not to take control of the learners' cognitive process but rather to acknowledge learners contribution and progress whilst encouraging them to find ways of taking control and responsibility for their learning. The approach needs to be inquisitive rather than declarative, suggesting and not telling, accompanying rather than dragging. One way of interacting with the learners online as an e-moderator is to highlight areas requiring correction and ask participants (themselves or others) to make suggestions as to possible corrections. This creates opportunities for deep learning, collaborative support, and trust, and requires reflection and analysis instead of a mere top down transmission of knowledge unlikely to empower learners by creating a counterproductive dependency on the teacher as authority.

The transactional approach as advocated by Garrison and Anderson (Garrison &Anderson, 2002) requires a careful balancing act whereby, as learners develop control and responsibility for their learning, they will also increasingly be

empowered to make choices that are independent from the traditional expectations of teacher authority.

E-teaching also is an important role to maintain in an on-line environment. In the context of language learning, much of the emphasis in the teaching role is on modelling language, giving explanations, feedback and corrections and creating opportunities for meaningful practice but also, as mentioned above, in equipping learners with individually sound language learning strategies. The instructional dimension of this course is intended to manifest itself through the availability of dedicated resources which are explored by the learners in collaborative inquisitive tasks (for instance in relation to given linguistic structures); through interaction in the discussion towards specific questions and bringing together the different components of participation; and via personalised feedback on communicative tasks carried out in class or over *Skype*. The ultimate goal of the role of the languages e-teacher, however, is to create autonomy in learning and to enable the learners themselves to develop their own teaching presence. This approach is suggested by Garrison and Anderson (2002), and certainly applies to the letter to the aims and objectives of this particular up skilling course. "The categories of teaching presence provide a template that can be of considerable value to structuring, facilitating, and directing an e-learning experience. Notwithstanding the essential role of a teacher, it needs to be emphasised that in a community of inquiry, which frames all of our discussions in the course, all participants have the opportunity to contribute to teaching presence. In fact, if the ultimate goal is to learn to learn, students must be encouraged to become self-directed and to manage and monitor their own learning appropriate to the task and their ability.

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