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# What Influences Reflective Interaction in Distance Peer Learning? Evidence from four long-term online learners of French

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**ABSTRACT** *Researchers in text-conferencing have not yet addressed the relationship between changing task designs and learner behaviour, as few have been able to monitor learners over time. We present a study of four learners of French-as-a-foreign-language, interacting within three task frameworks, including semi-structured, highly structured and unstructured contexts. Based on work on learner reflection (Wenden) and learner interaction (Van Lier), we define a pedagogy prioritising 'reflective interaction'. The main question addressed here is whether reflective interaction is more likely to arise from some task types than others. The findings of this study are based on data gathered over 15 months, and relate a content analysis of learner messages to feedback questionnaires. The results appear to challenge the assumption that task type is the main predictor of the volume of reflective interaction.*

## **Theoretical Context and Literature Sources**

There is now broad agreement within the language teaching and learning community as to the conditions required to create a good language learning experience (Chapelle, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2001). According to these researchers, three types of conditions must be met: psychological, socio-cultural and cognitive (by which we mean cognition of linguistic form). The role of attention to linguistic form in language learning has been part of a 20-year-long debate from which a broad consensus has now emerged, allowing that explicit attention to form is beneficial (Williams, 2001) and that this can be integrated successfully into a communicative curriculum (Ellis, 2001; Fotos, 1993). Most of the debate has been about the effectiveness of teaching learners who know that attention to form is required, within the context of what has been called 'instructed form-focus' (Doughty, 2001). However, Storch (1998) shifts the question away from the influence of direct intervention by instructors and towards task-design, Lightbown (1998) highlights the importance of timely learner-initiated 'noticing' to secure acquisition and Williams (*op. cit.*) departs from instruction altogether in that she chooses to look at form-focus in spontaneous talk among learners.

Additionally, researchers have claimed that the most effective distance language learners are those who make use of reflective strategies (White, 1995), and good practice in the distance-teaching of reflection has consisted mainly in embedding metacognitive training into the distance materials themselves (Hurd *et al.*, 2001; Murphy, 2001). Today, the availability of electronic tools has shifted the question of design to the interactive online setting, although researchers in text-conferencing have not yet addressed the relationship between changing task design and learner behaviour, as few have been able to monitor learners over time. In the study reported here we were able to follow language learners working in asynchronous conferencing mode over 15 months. We studied their use of reflective interaction, by which we mean both cognitive (form-focused) and metacognitive strategies. The investigation has been framed within a wider socio-cultural context that takes account of peer learning, learning preferences and other ethnographic data, as detailed in the next section.

#### *Peer Interaction*

The work of Lave and Wenger (1991) has established that communities of practice are consolidated through peers acting as experts for each other. Jorvel and Hokkinen (2002) have suggested that peer interaction leads to higher-order skill use in teacher education. The value of peer learning of languages, although under-researched, has been asserted by Mrowa-Hopkins (2000). Van Lier (1996) shows that there is learning value in the peer exchanges between learners on what he calls 'contingent' topics, i.e. issues arising spontaneously in conversation, out of the participants' own interests. His insights complement Williams's (*op. cit.*) in that it is claimed that peer-interaction not only assists 'noticing', but also that its affective and motivational impact ensures the sustaining of conversations within which learners can create further learning opportunities for themselves. Lamy and Goodfellow (1999) explore reflective interaction among learners participating in what they call 'reflective conversations', and their findings support Van Lier's claims.

#### *Deep Learning and Orientation to Form*

From educational research we know that learners can adopt deep or surface learning approaches. For example, applied to lexical learning, the surface learning mode might include manipulating and memorising, whereas the deep learning mode requires a critical understanding of material. Ellis (1995) finds that deep processing is one of the most effective strategies for lexical acquisition and Goodfellow (1995) has shown that deep learning is crucial if learners are to develop a system of mental links between lexical items sharing some underlying structural feature and give themselves access to the lexical networks of the L2. Deep learning is promoted by active learner participation and Biggs (1985) has associated deep learning approaches with 'affective involvement' which is supported by interaction. For these reasons in this study, we are interested in the consciousness-raising potential of form-focus rather than in its acquisitional or error-corrective benefits, and our

definition of 'form' is broad in order to capture learner reflections not only about grammar, but also about lexical, semantic and discourse-level structures.

### *Socio-culturally Situated Learning*

Finally, if we believe that cognitive and metacognitive influences are exerted within a socio-affective context, we must also be prepared to consider the socio-cultural factors that might affect this context. In her analysis of a Germano-American group online, Belz (2001) summarises the need for a broad analytic perspective thus: 'By attending to the social and institutional features of language valuation, technological know-how and access, and classroom scripts in conjunction with ethnographic data on individual learners' psycho-biographies and perceptions of situated activities in telecollaboration, I have emphasized the importance of the inter-relationship between structure and agency in interpreting human behaviour in this environment.' Our study will also take account of this inter-relationship.

In the context of the literature surveyed, we have framed the hypotheses that:

- (1) learners who have had experience of deep learning and form-focused strategies are likely to be effective in their language learning;
- (2) learners who have paid attention to form through 'contingent' interaction with peers are likely to be motivated to engage in further form-focused interaction, thus increasing their experience and creating a 'virtuous' spiral of metacognitive learning.

This leads us to ask to what extent task designers can influence this process, that is: what other factors outside their control also come into play. We therefore offer the following research questions:

- (1) Can task design influence distance peer-learners into adopting reflective form-focused strategies?
- (2) What sort of socio-cultural factors impact on the adoption of reflective form-focused strategies by distance peer-learners?

### **Methodology**

To answer these questions, we will analyse conversational forum data, taking account of the surrounding circumstances, both within the educational setting and in the world outside. Drawing upon quantitative and qualitative observations, we will address these issues by presenting an ethnographic study based on the experiences of a small group of adult distance students who learned together over a period of 15 months.

### *The Learners*

This study looks at four part-time students, intermediate-to-advanced learners of French at the Open University, who volunteered to take part in a project (*Lexica*

*Online*) in April–July 2000. They then continued messaging asynchronously as a self-help group until April 2001, at which point they became participants in two different content-focused structured projects (*Simuligne* and *Interculture*), both conducted during April–July 2001 with the collaboration of the University of Franche-Comté in Besançon, France. Thus the subjects all took part in the same three 10-week projects. Although the project cohorts oscillated between 40 and 100, these four individuals were unique in remaining active throughout the 15 months. They thus fulfilled our requirements of exposure to different instructional designs and of participation in sustained peer-exchanges online (indeed, they never met face to face throughout the entire length of the study). All were unaware of our research focus.

#### *Task Delivery*

All the interactions in this study were delivered via asynchronous conferencing tutor-mediated forums. For *Lexica Online* we provided students with standalone software for vocabulary work designed for the project by Goodfellow (Goodfellow, 1995). The conversational part of the project was conducted on FirstClass. *Simuligne* ran on WebCT, as did *Interculture*.

#### *Task Design in Each of the Three Projects*

In *Lexica Online*, focus on lexical form was the explicit aim. Students were required to start by working on set texts, extracting and processing vocabulary items, to report their results on the online forum, to discuss them with the tutors and other students, and then to use francophone websites as a source of further texts with which to repeat the cycle. The aims of this approach were to give support for vocabulary learning, and to promote interaction in the target language and reflection on language-learning strategies.

The *Simuligne* explicit project outcomes were skills development, cultural awareness and enhancement of intercultural competence. Task design was inspired by the pedagogy of ‘simulations globales’ (Caré & Debyser, 1995; Rousselle, 1994) which seeks to restore the natural communicative status of language in educational settings. A typical scenario requires that learners create a small community—such as a block of flats, a village, a circus, an island—based on a teacher-produced manuscript, but developed according to the imagination of the students. ‘Simulations globales’ comprise three stages, which may be played out over any length of time, from a weekend to a month or a whole year. Activities could be building a setting for a small community, creating fictional identities for the members of the community and interacting within the community in order to achieve collaborative projects (such as designing a poster or drawing up a contract) or to solve local conflicts (for example, incidents and problematic events threatening the successful creation of the poster or clinching of the contract). ‘Simulations globales’ are thus different from discrete role-plays in that they frame all the language activities within a unified fictional but realistic framework. In our project, the scenario was the competitive creation of an imaginary French city possessing the attributes required

for the hosting of an Open University summer school. Our learners were assisted in this task by their tutors, and a small group of native-speaker helpers (NSHs). The tutors had a pedagogical role. The NSHs were simply asked to contribute their cultural perspective as residents of the target country. It was also expected that both tutors and NSHs would act as linguistic models for the learners.

In *Interculture*, also involving NSHs, the emphasis was solely on intercultural awareness. Based on the ‘Cultura’ project designed by Furstenberg *et al.* (2001), it included the following steps:

- Two groups (French and British) answered three questionnaires in L1: a word-association exercise, a sentence-completion task and 10 situations to which they had to react (see Table IX for examples of these). All three tasks concentrated on cultural concepts and situations deemed likely to elicit very strong but different emotions from each national group.
- Participants were then pointed to a Web form which returned the responses of the two groups side by side. Juxtaposition allowed students to immediately ‘see’ similarities and differences in cultural attitudes. They then entered into an asynchronous exchange in which they asked for clarification, shared observations and voiced opinions.

Table I summarises the design differences between the three projects.

#### *Data Collection and Units of Analysis*

Our data were drawn from all three conferences, from three sets of student evaluations and from an open-ended interview with each participant. The total number of messages analysed per learner (identified by their initials H, G, M and N) is shown in Table II.

We charted the occurrence of form-focused messages and exchanges throughout each conference. The following types of evidence of linguistic reflection were considered:

- L1–L2 reflection. By this we mean the use of a form together with additional metalinguistic material querying that form. For example ‘*edit*’, *est-ce que c’est le même mot en français?* or ‘*chiffonné*’, *crumpled n’est-ce pas?* (In this example, as in all examples henceforth, student contributions are reproduced verbatim.)
- Autonymous usage: this refers to the auto-referential properties of language. For example, when we say ‘a dog is barking’ we use language referentially, but if we say ‘dog takes an “s” in the plural’ we are using the form dog to refer to the word ‘dog’. In our corpus autonymous usage tends to be confined to single words or short phrases, e.g. the word ‘bio’ in: *Je n’ai pas compris cela des infos, bien que j’aie y mis mon ‘bio’* [I didn’t understand this from the instructions, even although I posted my ‘personal intro’ to that forum], or *la page qu’on peut voir sous ‘le fenêtre de dialogue’ (?) est blanche* [the page that you can see under the dialogue box (?) is blank] [1].

TABLE I. Characteristics of the three projects under investigation

|   | <i>Lexica Online</i>  | <i>Simuligne</i>   | <i>Interculture</i>   |
|---|---|--|---|
| Are students explicitly asked to focus on form?                   | Yes, by explicit instruction  | No, but some sub-tasks involve creating documents in imitation of existing texts | Yes, but in the word-association sub-task only  |
| How does the design of each task relate to form-focus?            | Form-focus is the primary learning outcome                          | In some sub-tasks form-focus is a tool used to aid individual production         | In the word-association sub-task, form-focus is a tool used to aid cultural awareness             |
| How does form-focus relate to peer-work                           | Form-focus is the main topic of conversation on the forum           | In some sub-tasks form-focus is a tool used to aid group production              | In the word-association sub-task, form-focus is a tool to generate debate on intercultural issues |
| Which aspect of form is targeted or elicited?                     | Lexical and semantic relationships and networks                     | Stylistics and register  | Lexical connotations  |
| Where in the structure of the task is form-focused work expected? | In individual work with the dedicated software<br>In peer exchanges | In collaborative production  | In work with the Web questionnaire<br>In peer exchanges   |

TABLE II. Number of messages produced by each learner

|               | H   | G   | M   | N   |
|---------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Lexica Online | 31  | 77  | 29  | 22  |
| Simuligne     | 31  | 101 | 83  | 45  |
| Interculture  | 64  | 176 | 18  | 54  |
| Total         | 126 | 354 | 130 | 121 |

- Communicative mishaps: to identify these, we followed Toyoda’s (2002) methodology for online chat analysis, itself based on a schema devised by Varonis and Gass (1985) for classroom talk. They distinguished between four features: trigger (the initial stimulus to the negotiation), indicator (this signals that there is a communication problem), response and reaction. Table III shows an example from our data.

Using these criteria, we computed the percentage of form-focused messages in each phase of each of the three projects. To compensate for statistical distortion due to low numbers in some phases, we also carried out an analysis of content. In the next section, we report and interpret our findings project by project. Then we move on to a general discussion, in which we present a summary of findings across all three projects.

### Data Analysis for Each Project and Interpretation

#### Lexica Online

In *Lexica Online*, the percentage of form-focused work was high for all four learners, as might be expected for a task which explicitly required it (Table IV).

However, this needs to be qualified after a look at the content of student contributions as the project progressed. The timeline in Fig. 1 shows form-focused messages (expressed as a percentage of all messages) per student per phase.

TABLE III. Example from the *Simuligne* corpus, using the Varonis and Gass analytical model

| Tutor   | coucou  | cooe!                                       |           |
|---------|---|---|-----------|
| Student | Bonsoir, j’arrange mes fenetres!                    | Good evening, I’m sorting my windows        | TRIGGER   |
| Tutor   | Tu fais des rideaux?                                | You’re making curtains?                     | INDICATOR |
| Tutor   | Ou tu fermes les volets?                            | Or closing your shutters?                   |           |
| Student | Non, mes fenetres d’ordinateur— cet a dire, l’ecran | No, my computer windows— I mean, the screen | RESPONSE  |
| Tutor   | :-)   | :-)   | REACTION  |



TABLE IV. Message distribution per learner in *Lexica Online*

|                            | H   | G   | M   | N   |
|----------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| All messages               | 31  | 77  | 29  | 22  |
| Form-focussed messages     | 13  | 37  | 16  | 11  |
| F-f messages as % of total | 42% | 48% | 55% | 50% |

The spread of scores of 20–40% for the four learners in the Start phase reflects their preoccupation with creating French accented characters (é, à, etc.) on their keyboards. This represents a good level of peer interaction, as they shared tips for achieving this. The flat line for N reflects his steady input of messages from the Selection phase onwards, but his messages are either task-reports or error-correction requests addressed to the teacher, rather than interactions with his peers. M's line starts off highest, reflecting a mix of straightforward task-reports and numerous interactive comments on form. However, the line shows a slight dip midway through the Concordancing phase, which is when she twice logged on to urge her then quiescent group to answer her. We suspect that their silence at that point may have demotivated her. The only line to rise in the Web Search phase is G's, reflecting her numerous postings of site URLs (for example a site providing synonyms, a site that she found good for revision of the past historic tense, and several automatic translation sites—some examples are given in Appendix A) and her reviews of their usefulness. These were authoritative and accepted by her peers, possibly because of her status as a professional Webmaster in 'real' life.

Like N, G contributed more reports (on the set tasks and her own explorations) than interactions. H posted the highest percentage of form-focused messages in the

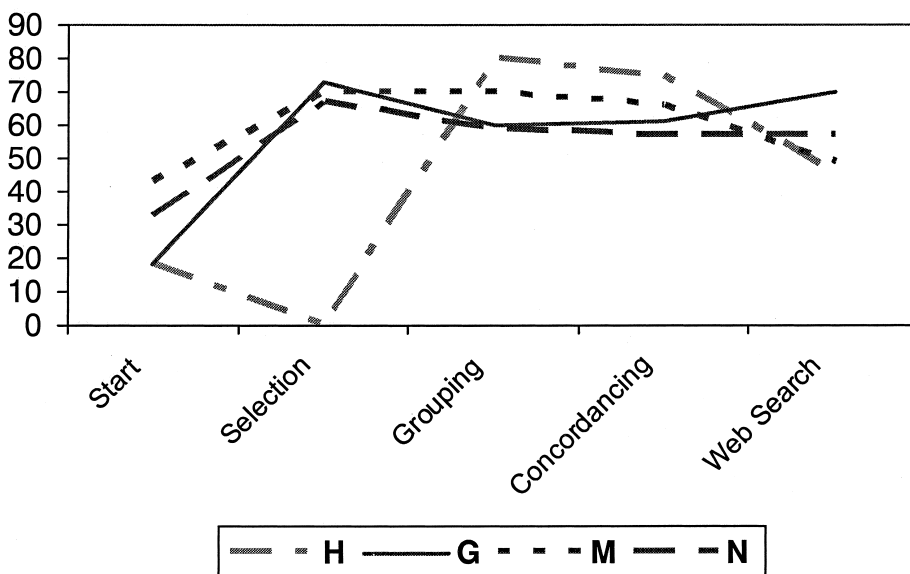


FIG. 1. Lexica Online timeline.

TABLE V: Timing and content of the phases of *Simuligne*

| Phase 1       | Phase 2  | Phase 3  | Phase 4  | Phase 5  |
|---------------|--|--|--|--|
| 2–22 April    | 30 April–13 May                                    | 14 May–3 June  | 4–23 June  | 25 June–6 July   |
| Get connected | 1. How to chat in a forum<br>2. Introduce yourself | 3. Research four French cities<br>4. Imagine a city<br>5. Choose a city together<br>6. Create your character, invent his/her name<br>7. Create your character’s role | 8. Description of the city<br>9. History and anthem of the city<br>10. Making contact<br>11. Interactions<br>12. Unplanned incidents | 13. View and vote<br>14. Publication of vote results<br>15. Feedback from participants<br>16. Award presentation |

middle phases of the project (like M, a mix of task-reports and interactive comments). As we will see later in her feedback, H was extremely positive about the dedicated *Lexica Online* software, so her enjoyment may be the reason why her line is so much higher than those of her peers in the phases which required these tools to be used.

### Simuligne

The *Simuligne* scenario was organized into five phases, and 16 sub-components summarized in Table V.

As *Simuligne* was not designed to draw attention to form, it is not surprising that relatively few form-focused messages were produced. The figures for the four subjects in our study are shown in Table VI.

Content analysis shows that these few form-related exchanges occurred in particular phases. In Phase 1, which was about ironing-out students’ technical problems, they had cognitive gaps and wanted to learn the French equivalents for words or phrases such as ‘download’, ‘edit’ or ‘dialogue window’. In Phase 2, a time for initial socialisation, they talked about their nationalities and their roots, negotiating the semantic and socio-linguistic implications of using terms such as ‘anglais’, ‘britannique’, ‘gallois’, etc. In Phase 4, when co-writing the city anthem, they all wanted to know about the false friends ‘vers’ and ‘strophe’ (‘line’ and ‘verse’ respectively),

TABLE VI. Message distribution per learner in *Simuligne*

|                        | H   | G   | M  | N   |
|------------------------|-----|-----|----|-----|
| All messages           | 31  | 101 | 83 | 45  |
| Form-focussed messages | 6   | 14  | 20 | 5   |
| F-f as % of total      | 19% | 14% | 3% | 11% |

TABLE VII. Pattern of form-focussed messages used on *Simuligne* conference. A gradation of dark grey to lighter grey to white is used to indicate a decreasing volume of form-focussed messages

| Conference phases  | Content of form-focussed messages                | Trigger for form-focussed talk |
|--|--|--------------------------------|
| 1: Get connected   | ICT-related words and creation of French accents | Cognitive gap (language)       |
| 2: Introduce yourself                                      | Nationalities, geography                         | Identity-building online       |
| 3: Create a city, a 'character' and a role                 |  |                                |
| 4: Animate the city (history, anthem, citizens, incidents) | Versification, rhyming, scanning                 | Cognitive gap (language)       |
| 5: Vote for the best city. Feedback from participants      | Types of French read/produced during the project | Reflection on own learning     |

and talked about poetic form (syllables, rhyme, scansion). In the final phase, they discussed stylistics and register, and the different types of French they had learnt. Table VII summarises these observations.

The collaborative activities prescribed within the scenario did not result in any form-focused work, apart from the conversations about verse-writing. Among the *Simuligne* sub-tasks, however, some provided indirect encouragement to discuss form, as they involved learners in using selected websites—for example, as a stimulus for co-writing a pastiche of advertising-speak, or for etymological documentation to help invent plausible French surnames. Our interpretation is that the success (in the terms of this study) of the verse-writing sub-task is due to learners 'noticing' the false friends 'line' and 'verse'. These words acted as the 'indicators' defined by Toyoda (*op. cit.*), exciting their curiosity and generating the desire to plug a cognitive gap.

To explain the greater success of Phases 1, 2 and 5, we suggest that in Phases 3 and 4 the learners were 'in character', engaging fully with the competition within the scenario, whereas in the early and late phases they felt less compulsion to get on with the task, and more freedom to put linguistic queries to each other. Support for this idea comes from data extraneous to this study—one of the synchronous 'chats' organised in parallel to the main *Simuligne* activity, in which learners busy role-playing menus for their fictitious university canteen ignored an NSH's attempts to draw them back into a 'real-world' conversation.

### *Interculture*

In *Interculture* the task consisted of talking about 40 stimuli (18 words or phrases, 12 sentences to complete and 10 hypothetical situations to respond to). The use of L1 was encouraged, but L2 could be used if participants preferred. Table VIII shows a breakdown of messages posted to *Interculture*.

Our participants chose to discuss 17 of the words, all 12 sentences and seven of the situations, which represents a broad thematic coverage, so we were interested in

TABLE VIII. Message distribution per learner in *Interculture*

|                                    | H  | G   | M  | N  |
|------------------------------------|----|-----|----|----|
| All messages                       | 64 | 176 | 18 | 54 |
| Form-focussed messages (L1 and L2) | 17 | 33  | 3  | 13 |
| Form-focussed messages in L2       | 3  | 12  | 3  | 3  |

seeing which of the stimuli triggered the highest number of form-focused discussions. We found that some of those discussions were elicited directly by the stimulus, others more tangentially. If, for example, the stimulus was ‘Community’, and the learner talked about connotations of L1 or L2 words linked to the word ‘community’, we counted this as direct elicitation; but if the discussion was about the words ‘parochial’ and ‘curé’ (priest), triggered by the contingent remark that some communities are narrow-minded, this was counted as an indirect elicitation. Table IX shows a comparison of direct and indirect elicitations, and examples are provided in Appendix B.

TABLE IX. Stimuli eliciting form-focussed exchanges (combined scores for all 4 learners).

| Interculture  | Number of form-focussed messages |                       |
|---|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
|   | Direct elicitations              | Indirect elicitations |
| Stimuli   |                                  |                       |
| Community/Communauté  | 5                                |                       |
| Elite/Élite   | 5                                |                       |
| Authority/Autorité  | 4                                |                       |
| Freedom/Liberté   | 4                                |                       |
| Suburbs/Banlieue  | 3                                |                       |
| Family/Famille  | 2                                | 2                     |
| A fun party is a party where .../Une soirée sympa est une soirée où ...           | 2                                |                       |
| United Kingdom/Royaume-Uni  | 2                                |                       |
| France/France   | 1                                |                       |
| A good citizen is a citizen who .../Un bon citoyen est un citoyen qui ...         | 1                                |                       |
| A good parent is a parent who .../Un bon parent est un parent qui ...             | 1                                |                       |
| Individualism/Individualisme  | 1                                |                       |
| Neighbours/Voisins  | 1                                | 1                     |
| Smoking in a non-smoking area .../Fumer dans une section non-fumeurs ...          | 1                                |                       |
| Power/Pouvoir   | 1                                |                       |
| A rude person is a person who .../Une personne impolie est une personne qui ...   | 1                                |                       |
| School/École  | 1                                | 9                     |
| A true friend is a friend who .../Un(e) véritable ami(e) est un(e) ami(e) qui ... | 1                                |                       |
| Work/travail  | 1                                |                       |

TABLE X. Form-focused messages expressed as a percentage of total messages, per project per learner

|                        | H  | G  | M  | N  |
|------------------------|----|----|----|----|
| <i>Lexica Online</i>   | 42 | 48 | 55 | 50 |
| <i>Simuligne</i>       | 19 | 14 | 24 | 11 |
| <i>Interculture L1</i> | 21 | 12 | 17 | 18 |
| <i>Interculture L2</i> | 5  | 7  | 0  | 6  |

Table IX shows that free association based on lexical stimuli produced more form-focused output than sentence completion, while ‘reacting to situations’ produced none. It also suggests that cognate lexemes (such as Authority/Autorité) triggered more attention to form than non-cognates (such as Work/Travail). Both findings relate to the design of the task, which explicitly asked speakers of French and English (two languages with a high level of cognate lexis) to discuss word connotations. However, explicit instructions do not always result in interactive postings, as we saw in *Lexica Online*, so an additional explanation might be that the words at the top of the table were more interesting because less familiar (thus discussants needed to define the terms of the debate) and very relevant to adults situated in society (thus they were prepared to invest time in this definition work).

In further support of this idea, we note that the three words referring to everyday realities (family, school and neighbours) led only to indirect elicitations, that is there was apparently little desire to explore their connotations, but curiosity was aroused when the conversation moved to unfamiliar issues accidentally or ‘contingently’, to use Van Lier’s (*op. cit.*) phrase. For example, ‘Neighbours’ produced a discussion about the false friends ‘peasant’ and ‘paysan’, led by a participant whose neighbours happened to be farmers.

## General Discussion and Interpretation

### *Influence of Task Instructions*

Of our three projects, *Lexica Online*, which gave specific instructions to discuss form, generated the highest number of form-focused postings (Table X).

However, the majority of these postings were task-reports and comments that were not replied to. The requirement to spend time working alone with the software was a task-design choice which may have inhibited participants from interacting more fully, in spite of explicit encouragement to do so. Of the two projects with an emphasis on culture, *Simuligne* triggered some form-focused exchanges, mainly in its socialisation and reflection phases, when learners were free from the need to concentrate on achieving the outcomes of the activity, while *Interculture* was the most successful at drawing learners into form-focused exchanges—mainly in the activities where instructions explicitly encouraged attention to lexis—and the use of L1 was encouraged.

These results show that task design does influence the production of form-focused output, particularly when the task instructions ask for this explicitly. However, in the course of our study, several extrinsic factors were shown to have influenced learner uptake of reflective strategies. We summarise them next.

### *Socio-affective Factors*

Because this is a non-experimental study, it is difficult to separate the effect of task design from that of increased bonding as time passes. For example, H's remark in the final interview that 'with *Lexica* I felt pretty much alone' may reflect the isolation resulting from the design, or the lack of group bonding in those early days. By the time they started *Simuligne* and *Interculture*, our four subjects were much more experienced conference-users, and we know from forum logs and from their evaluations that although they had never met each other, they felt they 'knew' each other well enough to trust one another to illuminate cognitive issues—particularly comprehension gaps and production problems—arising from different levels of proficiency. For example, more messages involved learners helping each other than tapping into the tutor's or the NSH's knowledge. This echoes our assumptions about expertise-transfer and community-building in the previous paragraph. However, G observed: 'We try to keep *Lexica* going in French. But we email each other privately in English! And we also did it with *Simuligne*!', which suggests that for distance-learners bonding also creates a need to communicate in L1, and that for L2 communication to be sustained over time, further motivational factors must be present. The success of the *Interculture* forum where both languages could be used also attests to this.

### *Factors Relating to ICT Skills*

The need to manipulate the technological tools generated form-focused L2 interactivity and production of delayed modified input. For example, M declared that she did not know how to say 'download'. The answer, 'télécharger', was supplied by G. Later M used the verb in different conjugated forms. In another example, M checked her understanding of the word 'éditer', 'to edit', and used it later to teach another learner how to retrieve the electronic questionnaire (accidentally corrupted in transfer). For learners there may be a multiple pay-off in these exchanges. They need to overcome the ICT obstacle in order to address the linguistic task at all; but there may also be influences such as the recognition that ICT skills are transferable, so it is worthwhile investing time acquiring them. There may also be a social motivation: ICT knowledge is distributed unevenly among project-members, allowing different individuals to become expert helpers for others in turn, which helps with community-building, an important requirement for distance learners.

### *Language Proficiency Factors*

We rated proficiency based on the quality of the learner's French, from a subjective reading of their messages, and on their answer to a question about the time it took

TABLE XI. M's performance throughout the study compared with the other subjects, expressed in percentage of total messages contributed per individual

|                        | H  | G  | M  | N  |
|------------------------|----|----|----|----|
| <i>Lexica Online</i>   | 42 | 48 | 55 | 50 |
| <i>Simuligne</i>       | 19 | 14 | 24 | 11 |
| <i>Interculture L1</i> | 21 | 12 | 17 | 18 |
| <i>Interculture L2</i> | 5  | 7  | 0  | 6  |

them to complete the activities. G (whose productions have a near-native speaker 'feel' about them) said she completed the work 'in the exact amount of time allotted'. M, whose French was more uneven and who frequently asked for help with the language, said she often took longer than planned. H took 'at least twice as long as planned', particularly in understanding task instructions and N often took 'half the time allotted', although he adds: 'Les consignes j'ai trouvé instructives et précises, mais pour moi, à mon niveau de français, elles ont demandé beaucoup plus de temps que j'avait prévu, pour les comprendre' [I found the instructions informative and precise yet for my level of French I spent much longer than I'd expected trying to understand them]. This may indicate that N is a learner who likes to move on fast once the purpose of the task has been understood. For him, comprehension is more time-consuming than production, showing perhaps that when producing he relies on language that he knows already, and although keen to use new forms, is not prepared to invest time in discussing them.

There appears to be an optimum proficiency level for orientation to form. For example, as we see from her scores in Table XI, M was the best sustainer of form-focused discussion throughout the study.

Her self-assessment included the comment 'Il me fallait travailler un peu pour achever les resultants et donc c'était un bon niveau' [I had to work a bit to achieve the results, so therefore it was the right level]. She used the array of strategies that *Lexica Online* was designed to encourage: asking for clarification on forms, then applying them to a variety of socio-linguistic contexts. In her evaluation she shows that she is an active and reflective learner: 'I learn a lot from it [interacting online]: somebody puts up a word and you think oh I wonder what that means and you go and look it up'. M uses these strategies to support her conscious effort towards greater proficiency.

These data support Williams's (*op. cit.*) contention that 'the connection between attention to form and subsequent use of those forms' is affected by proficiency level.

#### *Ethnographic Data and Learner Beliefs*

In her forum messages and in open-ended interviews, H attributes learning value to the arrangements of her domestic study set-up. In the following quotation, collected at the end of the third project, she links this to habits learnt when participating in

*Lexica Online*, 15 months earlier. 'I am still learning every day from *Lexica*. Today I learnt a new phrase! Because my computer is in our "office" (a little way away from the main body of my house) I don't keep a dictionary there. So I compose without the dictionary, which is very good for me. And when someone writes something that I don't understand, I note the words down, then when I'm in the house, I look it up in the dictionary. So I'm always writing words, learning new words.'

The 'social [...] features of language valuation' (Belz, *op. cit.*) also come into play. For example N (who is a UK resident) has these comments on M (a resident of Jersey) and H (who lives in Brittany): 'I keep asking myself what I'm learning. Actually I've learned quite a lot. I've learned from the way M writes. Also from H, because she lives in France day to day, so she puts things a certain way.' N thus 'notices' structures produced by those whom he knows live in or close to the target country. He makes no mention of G, a near-native speaker with whom he frequently interacted, and whose prolific contributions could have provided ample opportunities for linguistic imitation. While there is no evidence to explain this failure to acknowledge G's expertise, one explanation might be that, as she repeatedly mentioned her Polish origins, N might conceivably have assumed that her French was less authentic in some way.

#### *Factors Linked to Learning Style*

Our biographical knowledge of our learners is based on their self-reports and on forum data, so we would want to approach claims about learning style with caution. However, we can offer some generalisations related to H and to N. We note, for example, that H, alone of all *Lexica Online* feedback respondents, mentioned the self-testing tool, claiming that 'with *Lexica* I did learn and retained words. I don't think that *Simuligne* increased my vocabulary in the same way. The testing tool on *Lexica* was very good.' Also, H is the only respondent to display awareness that although *Simuligne* was culturally-focused, there were nevertheless linguistic gains to be derived from it: 'what I learnt with *Simuligne* was varied types of French for different situations (for example having to write in advertising language)'. Of *Lexica Online* H said: 'Je trouve que j'ai fixé dans ma tete (si on peut dire ça!) plusieurs mots qu'avant me donnaient des problèmes, comme évanouir, épanouir, éblouir, piquer, et beaucoup d'autres simplement parce que j'en parlé et ça, ça est plus facile de rappeler' [I find that I fixed in my mind—so to speak—several words that used to cause me difficulties, like évanouir, épanouir, éblouir, piquer and many others, simply because I talked about them and this makes it easier to remember them].

Our assumption is that H's study arrangements, her valuing of the testing tool, her interest in language registers and repeated evidence of her interest in discussing these as learning strategies show her to be a deep learner with a liking for self-testing and monitoring, i.e. for White's (*op. cit.*) 'self-management' strategies.

In contrast, N offers least evidence of participation in, or enjoyment of, form-focused dialogue with his peers (although we saw earlier that he 'notices' and values his peers' French), often preferring to ask teachers for clarification and error-correction, and showing a systematic approach to output production: 'we have



recently learned subjunctives. So I try to put in subjunctives deliberately.’ This is reflected in his less than enthusiastic evaluation of *Lexica Online*: ‘I am not sure of the value as a learning tool.’ This in turn tallies with our earlier remarks about his proficiency level and our interpretation of his use of time to prioritise production over reflection.

### Conclusion and Further Research

We have presented a study of distance-learners engaged in reflective interaction in three different types of tasks online over time. Task 1 (*Lexica Online*) had an exclusive and explicit focus on reflection, Task 2 (*Simuligne*) presented a flexible set of learning aims with no explicit orientation to form, in a highly structured simulation setting, and Task 3 (*Interculture*) had a clear focus on cultural learning, with an explicit focus on form in only one of its sub-components. Task design included work performed alone with dedicated software (Tasks 1 and 3), collaborative production to be assessed by a tutor and competitively by peers (Task 2) and unstructured forum exchanges (all three tasks).

Analysis of our data confirmed the importance of explicitness in task design for distance-teaching. It showed that distance learners cannot easily be persuaded to undertake either solo or interactive reflective work if task presentation is not completely explicit in its expectations that they do so.

There were other, less predictable, task design-related determinants to the non-adoption of form-focused strategies. Metacognitive activities are not well supported by simulations or role-plays, as we saw from our learners’ reluctance to break out of character and violate a Gricean maxim of cooperative dialogue. Additionally, the pressure of producing a collaborative outcome, however motivational in general terms, was an obstacle to form-focus, except at points where learners were engaged in task-management, i.e. negotiating prior to collaborating, debriefing themselves after collaboration, or sometimes in the middle of the collaboration when there was a need for clarification of task wording. The lesson for the designers of such tasks is that they might encourage reflection by building in a psychological and conversational ‘space’ in which learners can be responsible for task-management, as ‘themselves’. We have also seen that our four learners were reflective about language and language learning when they discussed their own study arrangements, past experiences with learning and current learning beliefs, so such a ‘space’ could also provide them with opportunities for sharing these with peers.

Another determinant relates to expertise transfer. We showed that focus on L1 lexis (in which learners are expert) successfully led to reflective talk, particularly when the L1 was used as the basis for linguistic comparisons with L2, including occasions when this happened in indirect or contingent ways. We also confirmed findings from Goodfellow and Lamy (1998, p. 76) that the use of ICT tools, in which our participants were experts to differing degrees, triggered terminological negotiations and long-term retention of vocabulary. Both findings reinforce our hypothesis that there is a connection between expertise-sharing, contingent interaction and the promotion of deep learning.

We conclude that traditional task design, interpreted as instructor-led or materials-led facilitation of reflection, plays only a small part in the promotion of reflective habits, but that such psychological and socio-cultural factors as have emerged from our data are influential determinants in the uptake of these strategies. Finally, our study shows that holistic research influenced by socio-cultural theories produces a very complex picture, even when the population is as small as four subjects. Within the limitations of a non-empirical study such as this, it is not possible to isolate the respective effects of these convergent factors. Controlled research on a larger body of subjects is necessary in order to achieve this, although there are many methodological challenges in working out how to design appropriate tests.

Meanwhile, extensions of our work on the discrete linguistic features of the current corpus are planned and will include investigating the value of L1 interaction in triggering L2 form-focused work, the value of contingent peer conversations in triggering syntactic as opposed to lexical pushed output, and a study of delayed production and recast of linguistic structures brought to salience in peer interactions in early stages of the conferencing.

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## Note

- [1] Rey-Debove (1978) argues that autonomous usage reveals that, for the user, the autonomous form is being given salience as extraneous to his/her code. L1 and L2 forms can be used autonomously, signalled or not by italics or quotation marks, and accompanied or not by explicit comment.

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## Appendix A

Here are three examples of G's active use of the Web as the basis for performing form-focused work and encouraging others to do so. As part of an exchange on a painting, she suggests a study technique:

---

L'Abbaye de Talloires se trouve au milieu de ce tableau. Voici l'histoire de l'Abbaye: <http://www.abbaye-talloires.com/fr/histoire.html>  
Cette page va m'aider à réviser le passé simple (past historic)!

The Abbaye de Talloires is in the middle of that painting. Here's the history of the Abbaye: <http://www.abbaye-talloires.com/fr/histoire.html> This page will help me to revise the past historic!

---

Discussing Zola's *La Curée*, she creates an exercise, comparing a printed and a Web version of the text:

---

J'ai remarqué qu'il y a quelques différences entre le texte sur l'Internet et celui du livre: Internet: 'réchamps ... elle continuait à cligner des yeux ... Sylvia, dans un landeau'. Livre: 'rechamps ... elle continuait à cligner les yeux ... Sylvia, dans un landau'. Mais le mot 'stappers' est le même! Je me demande si c'est un mot qui a été 'emprunté' à une autre langue, peut-être? C'est un mot en néerlandais, mais le sens du mot n'a rien à voir avec les stappers de Mme Daste, je crois. Amicalement, G

I noticed that there are a few differences between the text on the Web and in the printed book: Web: [quotes both texts] But the word 'stappers' is still the same! I wonder whether it's a word that has been borrowed from another language? It is a word in Dutch but with a completely unrelated meaning to these 'stappers' of Madame Daste's, at least that's what I think. Best, G.

(A peer exchange about 'stappers' followed)

---

In a conversation reminiscing about 'cat's cradle', she encourages her group to compare sites giving examples of names of shapes in each language. Her message simply reads:

jeu de ficelle: <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/ecole.mat.hilard/ficel.htm> cat's cradle/string figures: <http://www.csmonitor.com/durable/1998/06/23/p8s1.htm> Amitiés, G. [All the best, G]

## Appendix B

Original messages are in plain font. Participants could use L1 or L2. Our translations are in italics.

Direct elicitation (Travail)

---

Tutor J'ai entendu sur France-Inter ce matin que le mot travail venait d'un instrument de torture romain!

*I heard this morning on France-Inter (a French radio station) that the word 'travail' comes from a Roman instrument of torture.*

G It made me look up my Petit Robert where the first definition for 'travail' is 'état de celui qui souffre, qui est tourmenté; activité pénible'. The second definition is 'ensemble des activités humaines coordonnées en vue de produire ou de contribuer à ce qui est utile'. I guess that in reality work for most people is probably a balance between these two things...

*It made me look up my French dictionary where the first definition for travail is 'state of suffering, torment'. The second definition is 'several different human activities coordinated in order to produce or contribute to a useful end'. I guess that in reality work for most people is probably a balance between these two things...*

---

 Direct elicitation (Banlieue)
 

---

- G Je vois que la banlieue française est considérée comme un endroit plutôt pauvre, tandis qu'en Angleterre le mot 'suburb' est synonyme de 'middle-class'. Je pense que nous, en Angleterre, nous parlons plutôt de 'inner-city' pour décrire les communautés défavorisées. Qu'en pensez-vous? G.
- I see that a French 'banlieue' is thought of as a rather poor area, whereas in England the word 'suburb' is synonymous with 'middle class'. I think that here in England we tend to talk about 'inner-city' to describe disadvantaged communities. What do you think about this? G.*
- H Comme G, je considère que n'importe quel secteur de Londres même est 'Inner City'. Les 'suburbs' sont plus éloignés; Ruislip, Northwood etc. On dit en anglais 'leafy suburbs', ça veut dire presque la campagne. Il y a-t-une différence de la connotation entre la banlieue est 'the suburbs' je pense?
- Like G, I consider that any area in London itself is 'Inner City'. The 'suburbs' are further out; Ruislip, Northwood, etc. In English we say 'leafy suburbs', which means almost out in the countryside. There is a difference in connotation between 'la banlieue' and the suburbs' I think?*
- G Oui, H, je suis d'accord avec ça. [...] Je pense qu'il s'agit d'une question linguistique et peut-être existe-t-il aussi un peu de snobisme à ce sujet?
- Yes, H, I agree with that. [...] I think this is a linguistic issue and maybe there's also a bit of snobbery around this topic?*

---

 Indirect elicitation

Assigned discussion topic: the word 'Famille', leading to discussion of the vocabulary of 'cohabitation'

---

- NSH 1 Pour ma part mon opinion sur la famille est beaucoup plus fondée sur mes relations avec mes frères et sœurs (depuis une bonne trentaine d'années) que sur mes rapports avec ma femme et mes enfants (depuis 8 ans seulement) Pour d'autres c'est peut-être l'inverse! Qu'en pensez-vous?
- For me my views on the family are based more on my relationships with my siblings (over some thirty years) than on my relationship with my wife and children (in the last 8 years only) For others it may be the other way round! What do you think about this?*
- H What a question! I think the English do not take for granted that family = love [...] H.
- What a question! I think the English do not take for granted that family = love [...] H.*
- NSH 2 [...] On aurait pu associer famille [...] à mariage mais pour ma part ça ne m'est pas venu à l'idée une seule seconde! Avez-vous entendu parler du PACS\*?
- [...] We could have made a link between 'family' and 'marriage' but that never occurred to me, not for one second! Have you heard about the 'PACS'\*?*
- H No, what's PACS?
- No, what's PACS?*
- NSH 2 H, le PACS c'est l'union de 2 hommes ou 2 femmes, ils vivent ensemble et peuvent élever des enfants ensemble. Ce sont les nouvelles familles.
- H, 'PACS' is the union of 2 men or 2 women, they live together and can raise children together. They are the new families.*

- H I don't think that a legal status has been given to same sex couples in Britain, and I'm not even sure about the status of those 'living together' who are heterosexual. Certainly in terms of pension rights, I don't think there is a recognition of 'concubinage' as here in France. But I live here and not in Britain so I may be very out of date. Best wishes, H.
- I don't think that a legal status has been given to same sex couples in Britain, and I'm not even sure about the status of those 'living together' who are heterosexual. Certainly in terms of pension rights, I don't think there is a recognition of 'common-law marriage' as here in France. But I live here and not in Britain so I may be very out of date. Best wishes, H.*

[\*Editor's note: Pacte Civil de Solidarité.]

Indirect elicitation

Assigned discussion topic: the word 'Communauté', leading to discussion of terms for 'narrow-mindedness'

- N At first glance, the French concept of 'Communauté' seems to have rather broader boundaries than the English one of 'Community'. Does this reflect the stereotypical concept of the English as essentially parochial?
- At first glance, the French concept of 'Communauté' seems to have rather broader boundaries than the English one of 'Community'. Does this reflect the stereotypical concept of the English as essentially parochial?*
- NSH N, Je ne comprends pas le terme 'parochial', peux tu me l'expliquer?
- N, I don't understand the meaning of the word 'parochial', could you explain it to me?*
- G Parochial: ça veut dire qu'on n'est pas très ouvert sur le monde, qu'on est un peu borné, qu'on ne s'intéresse pas beaucoup aux autres personnes ni aux autres cultures.
- 'Parochial': it means you're not very open to the world, you're a bit limited in your outlook, you're not very interested in other people or other cultures.*
- H G a dit la vérité, ça vient de parish (en France paroisse) ça veut dire un petit secteur desservi par une église, un curé. Mais c'est vrai, que la connotation est d'esprit étroit et conservateur. H.
- G is right, it comes from 'parish' (in France 'paroisse') which means a small area served by a church, a priest. But it's true that the connotation is of narrow-mindedness and conservatism.*
- G Il faut dire que le sens du mot 'parochial' que nous avons utilisé ici n'a rien à voir avec l'église—on n'est pas tellement religieux ici!
- It has to be said that the meaning of 'parochial' that we've been using [in this forum] has nothing to do with the church—we're not very religious around here!*

