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Dramatic activities and ICTE in language acquisition:

Learning a foreign language for professional/specific purposes through Role Plays and Online Games

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The value of dramatic activities in language classes has been demonstrated for numerous years now. Researchers have laid the stress on the motivation of learners who can express their creative fiber freely. Drama and dramatic activities promote the development of general competences along the lines of the Common European Framework for language learning. They help learners to broaden their knowledge on the world, to strengthen or acquire new skills and know-how, to consolidate their existential competences as well as their ability to learn. They also promote the improvement of communicative language competences (in terms of linguistic skills, sociolinguistic abilities and pragmatic capacities). They are particularly relevant in the context of an action-oriented approach to language learning for students in Business English. Putting students into realistic situations through dramatic activities facilitates their learning of English.

However, it cannot be denied that the differences of capacities and personalities among learners might hamper their acknowledgment of all the benefits of drama. Therefore the increase of IT tools with a pedagogical purpose multiplies the strategies to strengthen the competences above mentioned. Indeed, the creation of avatars on online games like *Second Life* might be an alternative or an additional channel to improve the learners' competences.

In this paper, I shall present my observations on an experience carried out over three months with two groups of 2nd year students in Business English. They were given the same pedagogical scenarios, they had the same pragmatic and linguistic objectives, but the pedagogical devices differed. One group was to practice online, the other in the classroom.

After explaining what the preparation phase consisted in so as to determine the extent to which drama activities and online games both improve the communicative language competences, I shall examine from the feedbacks I got from the students how both devices lead to the autonomy of the learners in real business situations.

1. Preparation phase

I took the Common European Framework as a reference document and the starting point for my experience. My objective was to make my students feel they could become independent communicative social and professional speakers in English. After studying the educational value of drama for a long time, I thought I could couple it with a new increasingly popular device in language learning, serious games. I have been interested in the ludic aspect of language learning (or « edutainment ») as I got inspired by the work of Johann Huizinga who wrote about the value of play in humanity across the times in *Homo Ludens* or the writings of Winnicott who thought that “playing facilitates growth and therefore health” (56). Winnicott stated that playing involves creativity and in being creative, we discover ourselves. (Winnicott, 72) Then discovering ourselves helps us to be aware of our capacities and therefore learn better. (Winnicott).

In this part, I shall explain briefly the steps to implement the plays and the games, what the scenarios consisted in and what was expected from the students.

a) creating the scenarios

The idea of devising pedagogical scenarios for theatre plays and online games originated from a lecture I was in charge of at the beginning of September 2013 about customer relationship management. Since I did not have enough hours to have the students practice the course, I asked for nine volunteers to participate in the scenarios. The notion of scenarios is really important if we use video games for an educational purpose. As a matter of fact, in his PhD thesis, Julian Alvarez explains that the pedagogical scenario, which meets a pedagogical objective, is the condition for a video game to become a serious game. (Alvarez, 14)¹. I did not have any difficulty in finding them even though that meant for them from three to five supplementary English classes. I think the students were seduced by the multi modality and the ludicrous qualities of the devices. The plan was to create three groups of three students: one practicing online, another only in class, and the last, alternatively in class and online. My idea was to check which method was the most effective. Indeed, plays and games are moments when they can be creative and free., which are motivating factors in language learning.

As I did not master and was not aware of the best and most accurate games that could be used online for free, I asked for some advice to a couple of colleagues I had met at e-learning gatherings previously. Not only were they ready to help me, they also insisted on joining me in my pedagogical journey. That is how we made up a team of specialists: I, being the English teacher, was in charge of

¹ « Quoi qu'il en soit, ce "scénario pédagogique" qui entre en jeu dès la conception de l'application pour répondre à un "objectif pédagogique" nous semble être la composante qui pourrait peut-être spécifier le serious game, sur le plan informatique. Avec cette approche, nous pouvons avancer l'idée qu'un serious game se distinguerait ainsi du jeu vidéo dont on détourne a posteriori le principe d'utilisation. Puisque dans ce dernier cas, il s'agit d'ajouter l'objectif pédagogique a posteriori, par une approche purement cognitive, sans implémenter de ce fait un "scénario pédagogique " ».

checking the linguistic competences of the students, a teacher in marketing, Marie, was the specialist in CRM, the vice director of the virtual university of Lyon 3, named Gerald†, and another teacher in virtual learning, called Jean-Paul, were the administrative experts; lastly a sound and light engineer, Thierry, was in charge of the technical support. The five of us met many a time before the games and plays started because many details had to be agreed upon: notably the scenarios, the objectives, the dates, the places, the tasks. They recommended resorting to the software called *Second Life*. Advertisers of the software write that “training simulations are incredibly powerful in *Second Life* because they simulate complex, processes in the physical world and avatars can take on different roles to enhance learning ». This, as well as the fact it was free, is one of the reasons why the experts advised to download it. I really was curious to see the potential of that software. Since it took a long time to get ready, the team agreed to have only two scenarios and not three as originally thought. The teachers and the students had to create their own avatars, which enabled them, as players, for the first time in history to become the spectators of their own actions (if I translate Serge Tisseron). The students were thus both actors and spectators! (an idea that echoes the concept of “spect-actors” coined by dramaturg Augusto Boal).

The avatars of the students were all members of a virtual company I had imagined called “Copets”. On *Second Life*, the technical expert built the offices of the company while in the classroom, we could not materialize it concretely. The activity of the company was the selling of toys for pets in the UK.

The first scenario consisted in managing the anger of a dissatisfied customer calling the headquarters of “Copets”. This customer (played by me) was angry due to the possible death of her dog after it played with a toy bought at one of “Copets” ’ stores in London. The customer explained that a

part of the toy had come off engendering the suffocation of her dog. The students had to deal with the customer and find solutions for both the customer and the defective toy.

The second scenario was linked to the first one. It took place three weeks after. The members of the marketing department of “Copets” realized that due to numerous incidents with toys from one supplier in particular they had lost customers (this information was given to them). They needed to find a new strategy to win customers back. So they gathered and discussed new plans.

Because the software was not particularly easy to master, and because some students could not download it correctly or could not use either a microphone or a headphone properly (due to technical problems that the technical expert could not fix), only 6 students could participate to the experience. The decision to create two groups of three was made, and the idea of a blended learning was abandoned.

b) what was expected from the students

Right from the beginning the students were told what was expected of them and what they were going to be evaluated on in terms of general and linguistic competences. They were indeed given a summary of the scenarios. Therefore they had been advised to go through the marketing lectures and English courses they had learnt before and that would enable them to communicate properly in the situations indicated. Once again, I followed the recommendations of the Common European Framework as far as the learning of languages was concerned so that the students were taught in the most appropriate manner. On the other hand, using new technologies also helped them meet the recommendations of the European key competencies for lifelong learning document (key competence 4: digital competence).

The courses were based on a series of tasks that would enable the students to reach the objective of the scenarios progressively. Added to this, my personal objective was to help them transfer their knowledge, and put into practice what they had learnt before but with a professional purpose and still in the context of the learning process (not in reality)².

The skills and abilities that had to be consolidated were classified along three groups: grammar, vocabulary and pragmatics. In this respect, both video games and dramatic activities had their importance since they required the students to work not only with their minds but also with their bodies, therefore to manage space. Dr Joelle Aden, who has long demonstrated the values of drama in English classes, indeed observed that the bodies of students are not mere standard lamps which would carry thinking heads.³ The interaction that was advocated by the teachers could thus be verbal or non-verbal or both (especially when they could not remember a word in particular), the goal was to make oneself understood. *Second Life* was here again the perfect choice since the publicists would write that “*Second Life* was designed as a social networking platform — to encourage social interaction. It enables deeply immersive, meaningful, and memorable experiences.” And we personally think that this experience was memorable if we look at the feedbacks we got.

²notion de transférabilité, Bourdet, 43 Nous proposons, pour ce faire, de réfléchir à la notion de potentiel de transférabilité, ce qui renvoie à la construction d'un ensemble d'attitudes (au sens de la psychologie sociale qui coordonne ici représentations et schèmes d'actions). C'est l'existence de ces attitudes qui va permettre, en contexte différent, d'appréhender les variations et de reformater ses schèmes pour s'adapter à la situation en tirant parti de compétences : on recourt à des compétences déjà éprouvées et, de fait, on les conceptualise en les réinvestissant. 52 développer une transférabilité de pratiques conceptualisées.

³ Aden, J., p. 179 : “il est temps que l'école s'intéresse aux apprenants dans leur globalité et qu'elle cesse de considérer leur corps comme des lampadaires qui soutiendraient des têtes pensantes.”

2. Feedback (what skills and competences consolidated ?)

I would first like to give you the impressions of the team of teachers and experts supervising the experience before giving an account of what the students felt.

a) from the teachers/ impressions when implementing the scenarios during and after the experience

From my personal viewpoint, I can reckon many advantages of the devices as far as learning was concerned. The students could express themselves freely, they had to be creative, when words or grammar were missing, they could rely on body interaction. It is true that body interaction was more resorted to in the classroom than on second life, but the students managed well to express what they wanted to express. However, I could see some limits to both practices. And I consider it more important to underline the obstacles so as to offer solutions and devise a more efficient plan for next year.

Firstly, I must say that the programme was time consuming. In such an experience, one must take into account the time spent before the learning situations. The preparation required a lot of organisation since it was necessary to draw up an agenda, create the scenarios, build up the team etc. Then, it was crucial to try the software and teach the students how to manipulate it. Because of the various capacities of the students, this training did not cover only one hour, but many. Even during the performance, there were still technical problems, despite the intervention of the technical expert. My wish would have been that the online game was not synchronous but it was impossible.

I ended up realizing that the dramatic techniques were far easier and faster to implement than serious game because there were obviously fewer technical problems.

The marketing teacher could not stay until the end of the experience because she had other responsibilities calling her elsewhere. I deeply regret this situation. So it is really important to find a reliable team right from the start so that the learning process might be more coherent for both teachers and students.

In the light of all this, the team of teachers became facilitators to teach linguistic and general competences. This idea is supported by Alvarez when he asserts that the presence of a medium is a master component⁴ of the learning process.

b) from the students

Now as regards the students' opinions. It was really important for me to get some feedback from them about the experience. Indeed, I wanted to know if I could keep on using both devices the following year.

I can classify their remarks along two lines: the improvement of their linguistic competences, and the development of their general abilities. The students who participated in the online game are called a, b, c and those who practiced in the classroom are students d, e and f⁵.

- the improvement of their linguistic capacities:

⁴ Alvarez, p. 117: "Ce qui nous renvoie à l'approche de Winnicott et à sa notion « d'*aire intermédiaire* ». Ainsi le jeune apprenant se situerait entre ce qu'il peut apprendre par lui-même et ce qu'il peut apprendre grâce notamment à un tiers. La présence de ce dernier semble donc être une composante maîtresse dans le champ de l'apprentissage."

⁵ student a, Michael / student b, Thomas / student c, Charlotte / student d, Elodie / student e, Florian / student f, Clara

= student a (who was one of the best students) liked the fact that he could practice English in a small group. Indeed, his English was good before the experience but he did not dare talk in front of the whole class.

= student b said he was relieved not to have to talk to real people. It was better for him to find his words and care about his grammar and pronunciation. He felt no pressure so he could take his time to think about what he was going to say and how he was going to say it.

= student c asserted that she liked the fact it was a small group. Through this experience, she could realize how spontaneous and reactive she became when it came to speaking English.

= student d was an anxious student, always ready to participate in experiences so as to improve her English level. As a matter of fact, her grammar was not reliable but she learnt by heart all the words I had told them to learn since their first year. So she did not lack any vocabulary. She had phonological problems though. She said that she felt reassured by the smallness of the room which facilitated the proximity between the students right from the start and so enhanced confidence. She really appreciated the fact that she could support her colleagues when they were at a loss for words. She liked the fact that she could talk freely without being marked by the professor. Yet she regretted the fact that the atmosphere was too relaxed at times and because of the lack of some seriousness, her linguistic performances were not at their maximum.

= student e appreciated the fact that he could practice in a realistic situation what he had learnt before. He could then realize that he was able to talk in English for one hour even if his grammar, phonology and lexicon were not reliable enough. He liked the fact that the performances were recorded because he could criticize what he had said, how he had behaved.

= student f could see that she could rely on the others when she lacked words.

Concerning their general competences now, the feedbacks were as follows:

= student a was frustrated not to know how to use the software to its full possibilities. He wished he had had a better training before and fewer technical problems.

= student b praised the freedom he had throughout the whole experience. He was the student who knew to use the software best.

= student c had a lot of problems (technical mainly) with the software and because of that, could not concentrate on and follow the conversations.

= student d also praised the freedom they had in finding solutions, proposing strategies etc, the relaxed atmosphere (but to some extent only as she had already observed), the correction by her peers.

= student e also pointed out the degree of creativity required and liked the ludicrous aspect of the device,

= finally student f really appreciated the fact that she was immersed in the situation and had to cope with all she had.

Generally speaking, the students would recommend the use of such devices but advised the teachers to give the full detailed scenarios well before the performance to avoid silences (on *Second Life*) or misunderstandings (one student thought that the dog was dead when she had recovered). They also shed light to the importance of having a feedback from the teachers right after the performances so as not to make the same mistakes in the future.

It is thus precisely because they are complementary that both theatre plays and online games lead to the autonomy of the learner. I do not think that online games convey autonomy alone since it is real-

ly important to interact with real people, and I am sure that some people cannot freely express themselves through dramatic activities from the start and that sometimes they need some distance from the learning process to be able to get back to it in a more efficient manner.

To conclude, I would say that technological devices such as online games are good pedagogical devices for the best students (or even professionals) because they need to master the new technologies of information and communication (which might be a new obstacle for learning languages) and that dramatic activities and theatre plays are best for students less at ease with new technologies because there is nothing to master. In the future, the team of teachers agreed to start a reflection on the segmentation of competences so that all kinds of students may access both devices. I deeply encourage this practice and will inscribe my experience within a blended learning next year with new chosen students I think.

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