

# **The integration of the Information and Communication Technologies project in the teaching of French as a Foreign Language (FLE) to young learners**

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Project 1.3.3, “Information and Communication Technologies and young learners”, contributes to the growing field of information related to computer-assisted teaching of languages where the teacher allows the pupils a large degree of autonomy. Implemented in four French classes (one per country) in Armenia, Lithuania, Poland and Andorra, it casts a new light on the concept of French as a Foreign Language courses where the relationship between the learners and the teacher has evolved towards a basis of mutual confidence and creative work by the pupils.

It is difficult to propose technical “evolution” and even more so technical “revolution” in an establishment and a class not prepared for it. The institutional context and the school environment played a major role. Time was required to convince, explain and identify the relevant advantages of the project compared to usual practice in the various schools. This preparation work took place at two levels: it targeted the human contacts and relationships and addressed the field of didactics, the focus being placed more on the learning process than on teaching. The issue that the teachers also raised at the outset of the implementation of the project was how to introduce the activities based on the story of the stars into the school curriculum.

The preparation stage began by obtaining the consent of the educational community. Consequently, the directors of all the schools welcomed the project with enthusiasm, which was a significant achievement given that the implementation of the project involved an unusual organisation of the classes, excursions, supplementary activities to the courses and also access to technical resources: computer equipment, internet connection, sending packages with the toy star together with souvenirs.

The launch of the concept through the website (<http://stars.ecml.at>) with the varied characteristics and personalities of the individual stars gave rise to a wealth of pedagogical activities, mostly suggested by the learners themselves. The commitment and the fascination for this new way of learning the language aroused the curiosity of teachers of other subjects (geography, biology, computer science, art and the librarian were those cited most frequently in the evaluation forms), who subsequently became involved by suggesting their own activities. This valuable assistance allowed the project to be extended beyond the language classroom and resulted in special

collaboration among the teachers themselves and between the teachers and the pupils. The latter was based on a “contract of close complicity”, to use the term coined by Michel Boiron <sup>1</sup>. Seeing the enthusiasm of their children, the pupils’ parents were active in offering both moral and material support.

It is noteworthy that at one of the schools, which had a number of teaching-practice students (future teachers of French) they also became actively involved in the search for ideas and the work with the learners. This enabled them to see a new aspect that information and communication technologies could bring to the teaching of languages, new approaches going beyond their specific study programme. This collaboration and synergy between the different actors in the project, to a large extent absent in traditional teaching (through lack of motivation and not having a fundamental reason for being there in the first place), was profitable from the very start, and took the form of a voluntary and unconditional commitment by all the participants, which resulted in a website rich in both content and ideas.<sup>2</sup>

In what way was the change in the teacher/pupil relationship reflected in the teaching/learning of the language?

Creativity requires an atmosphere that allows it to seed and develop but at the same time creates favourable conditions for expression. These activities then enable a climate that encourages contact and relationships between the group members. They make them into participants rather than learners, sharing in these activities with their own being and personality.

Bernard Dufeu, Pour une pédagogie ouverte, FDM, No. 246

The work of the learners is based on a story which constitutes the point of departure for the pupils’ pedagogical activities. In fact, it is the learners themselves who, by studying the character of the stars, propose activities together with the teacher. It is a relaxed process but demonstrates a large amount of confidence by the teacher in his learners, a pupil-centred task, with the pupil genuinely and actively involved in the choice of the didactic material for his learning. This gives the pupil great satisfaction, giving him/her value, importance, and giving him/her a say thereby achieving a much higher level of motivation. The teacher also allows the pupil a great deal of autonomy in the conception and development of the activities “Instead of relying on what you have, it is more essential to live what you are” – Bernard Dufeu.<sup>3</sup> This finding is reflected in the reality of the four classes where the role and the position of teacher changed to the benefit of greater pupil autonomy, greater confidence and cooperation at a number of levels since they work together not only in class but also consider themselves

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1 Michel Boiron, CAVILAM Vichy, La relation enseignant(e) apprenant(e): vers un contrat de complicité attentive, Vichy, January, 2001.

2 stars. ecml.at/fr

3 « Au lieu de conjurer l’avoir, il est plus essentiel de vivre l’être », Bernard Dufeu, Pour une pédagogie ouverte, FDM, No. 246

responsible for organising social events, evenings and other extracurricular activities. The teacher is no longer the main protagonist, instead becoming the manager of the didactic process, accompanying and assisting his/her learners, but generally allowing them to choose the means and techniques that they wish to use in order to learn. This is possible and provides a great deal of satisfaction, greater still since the way of organising the activities eliminates stress. The work is carried out in groups of two, three or more, with each pupil sharing in the responsibility. The teacher ensures the follow-up (according to a pre-determined grid of tasks allocated to each pupil), managing and evaluating the learners' products before they are published on the site. For the learners, the foreign language becomes a living and authentic means of communication. They pass from the learning process itself to putting into practice the knowledge acquired. This approach tests their linguistic knowledge in a multi-disciplinary way, without learning by heart as often applied in traditional methods. In this way, the result is a simple and painless passage from competence to performance, so sought-after in learning. Furthermore, the production is published on the site and read by fellow-pupils in other countries. In this way the learner becomes a co-author of the site. Being aware of the responsibility of the task to be carried out, the learner applies greater effort in both trying to understand and making him/herself understood.<sup>1</sup> The language that s/he has learned is part of the learner's life, the life and real world discussed with fellow-pupils in distant locations via the internet. In this way, the learner steps beyond the language of the textbooks, "a language mostly sterilized for didactic needs and imported into the classroom by virtue of criteria that are external to the group."<sup>2</sup> The learner begins to communicate spontaneously and in a manner appropriate to the natural needs that give birth and life to learning. In this way, there is an advance towards *learning* and a move away from simple teaching. This approach, often neglected in every-day practice, rapidly found support among public authorities, teachers, learners and the parents who genuinely participated in school life, pleased to see their children's learning anchored in reality, in the needs that challenge them to react and to learn "useful" things.

The following are a number of trends that determine the role of the teacher and the pupil in traditional teaching and which have evolved towards greater learning autonomy in computer and internet assisted learning/teaching.

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1 The project aiming at communication in a foreign language.

2 Bernard Dufeu, op. cit.

**Teacher**

- determines the content to be taught
- transmits knowledge
- the textbook is the teacher's basic tool
- complete management of the execution of the tasks
- starts from the basis of what has already been learned to add new material
- occupies the central position in the relationship with the learner
- puts the pupils in a competitive situation
- does not take account of the learners' interest and hobbies, implements his own programme
- accumulates information to be transmitted to the pupils without context

**Teacher**

- allows the learners' participation in selecting the content to be learned.
- plans courses together with the learners
- proposes work based on an attractive and interesting website, the computer being the driving force for interest and motivation.
- places the learner in a meaningful context that facilitates the learning of knowledge
- focuses on the application of the knowledge learned
- challenges the learners
- coordinates the execution of the tasks: helps the pupil, with suggestions, focusing work, listening to the pupil, accepting suggestions
- provides assistance to active and autonomous learning
- introduces the interdisciplinary dimensions into the teaching of the language
- creates a learning community around the tasks to be carried out, readily responds to challenges

## Learner

- learns voluntarily and consciously in order to acquire knowledge
- carries out the tasks, most often individually
- remains in competition with the others
- does not feel secure in his learning
- has inhibitions when faced with the task
- is not aware of the practical use of what he is learning
- learns a great deal by heart or by repeating structures
- likely observations of the kind “I do not need to learn that” or “What use will that be to me?”
- is not aware of the presence and the role of his/her fellow pupils in his learning
- an attitude of protest towards the teacher
- knowledge acquired about the world remains detached from reality

## Learner

- unconsciously acquires skills
- feels like a partner of the teacher in the learning process
- suggests what he likes and is able to do
- is actively committed to the tasks
- acquires skills in an active situational context
- learning is closely linked to finding answers to problems
- tries to take up challenges
- carries out the tasks spontaneously
- does not consider the task as a “burden” but rather as a pleasure
- is motivated by the task and feels responsibility for it
- works and learns in cooperation, consequently feeling reassured, (which is also of great importance at the level of human relationships)
- understands and is aware of the objectives of what s/he is learning
- has great confidence in the teacher, on whom s/he can rely
- feels a member of the learning community
- puts into practice computer and other skills
- is happy to see own work published on the site
- is encouraged to carry out research to “go further”
- acquires practical knowledge related to individual needs

- creates instead of quotes
- updates and acquires knowledge about the world through the language that s/he is learning
- acquires new experiences

How do the project activities fit into the learning strategies in the curricula?

Chapter 3 of the Common European Framework of Reference for the Learning and Teaching of Languages “is based on the analysis of the use of language in terms of the *strategies* used by the learners to implement both *general* and *particular communicative competences* in order to engage in *activities* and *processes* to *produce* and/or *receive* texts in relation to themes enabling them to accomplish tasks in given circumstances that arise in the various domains of social life.”<sup>1</sup>

Within the context of the “Information and Communication Technologies and young learners” project, these strategies<sup>2</sup> of acquiring skills remain in correlation to the official curricula. The only difference compared with traditional practice is that the means of access to knowledge and skills change. Every activity is linked to the story that is accessible on the website, every learner task is anchored in a situational context close to reality, all production has a communicative objective that encourages learners to try out their creative skills and linguistic competences. The learner has content to communicate and to publish on the site and wishes in return to receive the production of others. This is achieved through the internet and electronic mail.

In accordance with the principles of the Council of Europe, teaching/learning revolves around key topics contained in all the curricula. This thematic work must nevertheless cover the integration of a number of competences. Alongside comprehension and oral and written production, attention is focused on the development of interaction permitting dialogue, the adaptation of language to the specific communication situation, the latter going beyond the classroom or the borders of a country, a communication enriched and complimented by the intercultural factor which is so important in today’s world. It is therefore a question of accepting one’s own culture, liberating oneself of one’s cultural complexes, knowing, understanding and accepting the others and tolerating differences.

Furthermore, the desired parameter is that of the authenticity of communication, which is linked directly to interdisciplinarity. It is important that the pupil can integrate the knowledge acquired in other subjects into communication acts in French and learns to face up to the requirements of real life situations and human relationships.

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1 Common European Framework of Reference, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 1996

2 Considered as “an ensemble of operations implemented by learners to acquire, integrate and re-use the target language”; definition by Paul Cyr, *Les stratégies d’apprentissage d’une langue seconde*, coll. « Le Point sur ... », éd. CEC, Quebec, 1996.

The activities carried out and published by the young learners on the site (<http://stars.ecml.at/fr>) seem to develop modern learning/teaching strategies utilising information and communication technology and seem perfectly adapted to the contents of the curriculum, conforming with the European dimension.

Communication forms in French as a Foreign Language (national curriculum)	Lexical and communicative activities developed in the project and published on the website	Nosy	Brightly	Brainy	Bouncy
1. Presenting oneself, presenting someone/something, making contact with someone	Presenting:				
	▪ one's family, one's country, one's town, one's school	X	X	X	X
	▪ list of expressions of politeness in a number of languages	X			
2. Naming objects	Objects:				
	▪ contents of the bag	X			
	▪ birthday presents		-	X	X
	▪ Christmas presents				X
3. Situating locations; indicating direction	Moving in town:				
	▪ walks in town accompanied by photos or maps of the town	X	X	-	X
4. Describing places (situating locations)	Description of:				
	▪ the house (young architects competition)	X			
	▪ a bedroom/the kitchen				X
	▪ the school/the classroom, computer room, chemistry lab, the library, the dining hall	X	X	X	X

Communication forms in French as a Foreign Language (national curriculum)	Lexical and communicative activities developed in the project and published on the website	Nosy	Brightly	Brainy	Bouncy
5. Talking about a person, describing a person	Parts of the body:				
	▪ parts of the body in a crossword	X			
	▪ parts of the body in songs	X			
	Describing a person:				
	▪ suggesting a hairstyle for the star (competition)		X		
	▪ describing the stars in the form of a guessing game	X			
	▪ play based on the character of the star			-	X
	▪ drawing the star on the basis of its characteristics				X
	▪ game: qualifying adjective to be found in a grid following comprehension of a description				X
	▪ poems about the star	X	X		X
	Clothing and colours:				
	▪ drawing and patterns of clothes for the stars/colours		X		X
	▪ fashion show		X		X
	▪ fashionable clothes		X		X
	▪ puzzle: guess the name of the item of clothing			X	



Communication forms in French as a Foreign Language (national curriculum)	Lexical and communicative activities developed in the project and published on the website	Nosy	Brightly	Brainy	Bouncy
6. Questioning; asking questions	Professions and their representatives:				
	Interviews with:				
	▪ the headmistress	X	-	-	
	▪ the nurse	X			
	▪ the secretary	X			
	▪ at the doctor's				X
	game based on "Question for a champion"			X	
7. Giving advice	▪ advice in the form of a poem about school life		X		
	▪ medical advice	X			
	▪ health guide			-	X
8. Learning to define	▪ definitions of the seasons of the year in the form of a riddle	-	-	X	-
9. Making a suggestion	Suggesting a recipe:				
	▪ preparing dishes				X
	▪ games based on the names of the ingredients	-	-	-	X
	▪ Traditional meal				X
10. Describing; situating in time	Seasons of the year:				
	▪ seasons in the form of riddles			X	
	▪ descriptions of the weather of each season			X	

Communication forms in French as a Foreign Language (national curriculum)	Lexical and communicative activities developed in the project and published on the website	Nosy	Brightly	Brainy	Bouncy
11. Narrating; talking about daily life and leisure time	Ways of spending leisure time:	X			X
	▪ “during the break”			X	
	▪ the weekend with the star				X
	▪ at the pizzeria				X
	▪ at the disco				X
	▪ poll about favourite activities		X		
	▪ people’s leisure	X			
	▪ star’s travel diary	X	X	X	X
	▪ star’s visits to the pupil’s home		X		
	▪ in the park				
	▪ summary of the visits				
	Favourite sports:	X	X	X	X
	▪ cartoon: "The star plays football"				X
	▪ skiing				X
	▪ basketball		X		
	Shopping:				
	▪ at the supermarket				X

Communication forms in French as a Foreign Language (national curriculum)	Lexical and communicative activities developed in the project and published on the website	Nosy	Brightly	Brainy	Bouncy
12. Discussing hobbies and interests; expressing one's taste	Poll or presentation on hobbies and interests:	X	X	X	X
	▪ "my favourite book"			X	
	▪ "my favourite film"		X		
	▪ interview concerning favourite music		X		
	▪ musical instruments				X
	▪ composing a song			X	
	▪ favourite classes	X		X	
	Internet: for and against (poll)			X	
13. Describing, narrating: situating in time and in space	Festivals and traditions:				
	▪ descriptions of the festivals and the related traditions in the countries participating in the project	X	X	X	X
14. Learning through song*	▪ Christmas carol		X		
	▪ Song about parts of the body	X			
	▪ Composing a song: "A friendly wolf"			X	-

Singing is very popular in the French as a Foreign Language class, especially with younger classes.

The table above shows that the project facilitated the development of the principle communication and lexical acts as in the curricula for French as a Foreign Language. Compared to traditional teaching/learning (and the less interesting textbooks used in the respective countries, highlighted by the teachers in their assessments), a basic difference must be highlighted: The information and communication technologies present in the classroom genuinely motivated and encouraged the pupils to improve their work in an atmosphere which was modern, cooperative, playful and illustrated the

pleasure of learning. In addition, the grammar – such a burden upon the pupils – "disappeared" behind the task and the desire to improve and complete the communication, a fact that does not prevent all the points of grammar from being interlaced naturally and in an enjoyable manner into the pupils' productions. All the basic *tenses and moods* are addressed:

- Present
- Present perfect
- Future simple
- Immediate future
- Imperfect
- Conditional present
- Even the present subjunctive

All the necessary *determiners*

- Definite and indefinite articles
- Possessive adjectives
- Demonstrative adjectives;
- Partitive articles and interrogative adjectives

All these points of grammar are integrated more or less subconsciously into the activities, which are so rich in the techniques and the forms suggested: descriptions, private diaries, travel diaries, games, riddles, crosswords, cartoons, drawings, puzzles, opinion polls, competitions, songs, poems, plays, recipes, guides, tourist itineraries, clothes' patterns, fashion shows, word grids, phrases to complete, jokes, interviews, lists of expressions in a number of languages etc.

## **Formal organisation of the activities with the site**

### **Timetable**

All the participating classes have two to three compulsory hours of French per week. (One of the classes had an extra hour for computer work thanks to the project). The activities related to the project were proposed either on a regular basis or every 8 to 10 days (depending on the technical possibilities for integrating the project into the curriculum). Independently of the frequency of contact with "the stars", all the classes worked and suggested a wide range of activities.

## Number and age of the learners

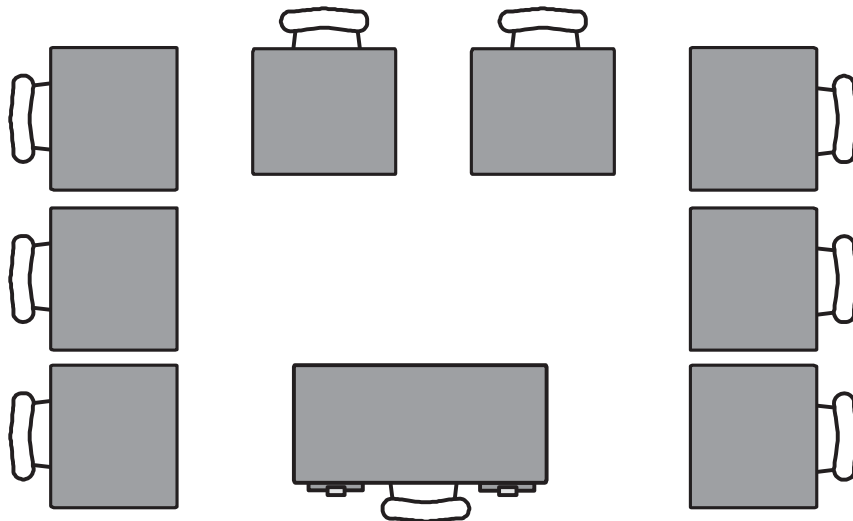
The classes participating in the project were somewhat heterogeneous from the point of view of age and the number of pupils. However, it is important to mention that the age differences by no means hindered communication between the classes. On the contrary, this type of communication seems to have been very lively and enriching.

	Andorra	Lithuania	Armenia	Poland
Number of pupils	15	8+15	20	27
Age of pupils	6-7	9-11	10-12	12

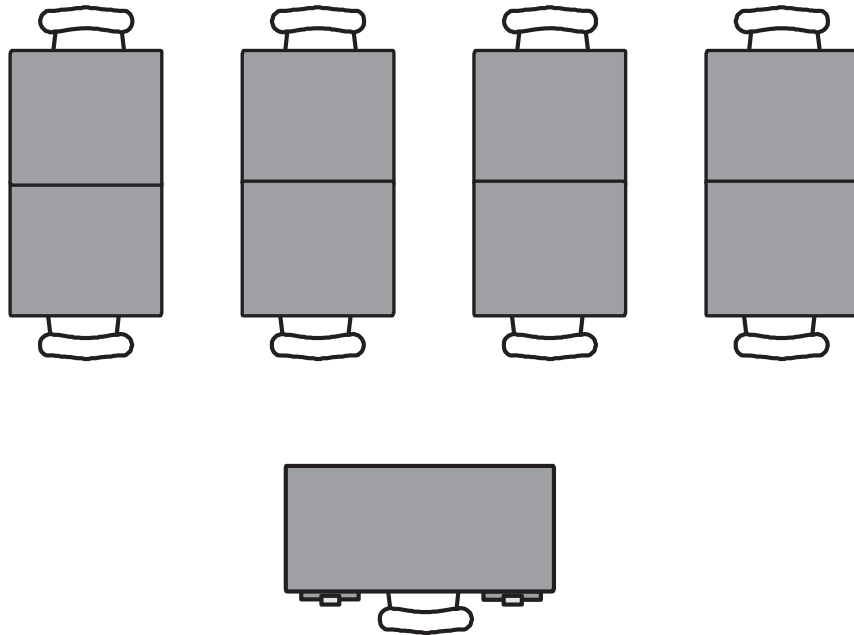
## Logistical arrangement of the classroom

The four walls of a classroom seem to define a space attributed to the learner (at the back) and to the teacher in front of the pupils. However, taking account of the number of pupils in each class and above all the wealth of forms and techniques of the work proposed, it was necessary to arrange this space differently. The traditional rows of tables were replaced by an arrangement that was more adapted to group work (2 to 6 persons) and to encourage contact and exchange between the pupils. It was no longer forbidden to sit on the floor or in a circle and the teacher was not in the middle but among the learners. The most frequent layouts for tables are represented graphically:

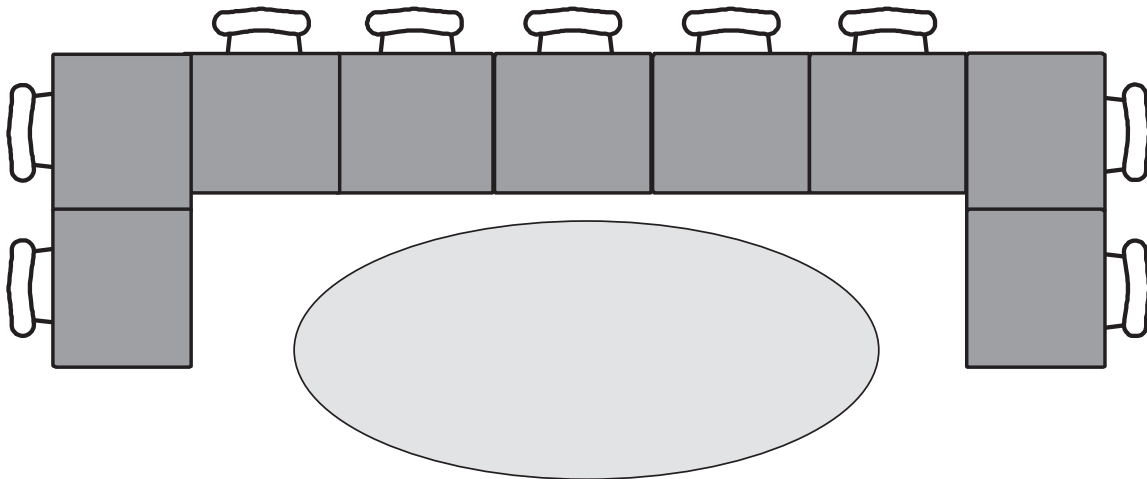
### *Layout 1*



*Layout 2*



*Layout 3 (for instance for performing the play).*



These table (and furniture) arrangements not only facilitated the pupils' work, but also enabled the teacher to move, to circulate freely amongst the group, to help them, to supervise them and correct their productions, or when necessary modify the instructions.

In this way, the classroom became a more agreeable and practical space, where the pupils felt freer and at greater ease to carry out their work, which they considered not

as a duty but as a means of self-instruction to develop both their skills and personalities.

### **Evaluation and publication of the learners' production. Difficulties.**

Before being published on the website, the tasks and exercises carried out by the pupils were corrected and assessed by the teacher. The assessment related to all types of work: *written production and expression* (drawings and their description, poems and riddles, plays and drama, games, crosswords, questionnaires for polls, etc) and *oral expression* (for presentation in class). In the majority of cases, the activities and the way work was carried out were beneficial to the *assessment of the learner's ability* and not of their knowledge. The teacher took into account what the pupil was capable of doing or what s/he knew in terms of application to the real world. However, the pupils were also subjected to regular *lexical tests* (for each topic studied) that involved the assessment of knowledge and corresponded to what was taught with respect to the work carried out over a specific period.

The majority of the activities were then published on the website according to the pre-determined timetable. This was generally possible in the library or in the computer room, during or after classes, depending on the establishment's equipment and the availability of the room. To begin with, internet access was often cited as an obstacle to work. Nevertheless, in the course of the project, the teachers also succeeded in planning and organising sessions in which the pupils could publish their productions on the site themselves (assisted if necessary by the teacher). The implementation of the project nevertheless gave rise to a number of difficulties. In order to locate the learning process in a context as close as possible to reality, the star toy – present in class for a specific period – was sent by post to the next country. This exchange constituted a weak point reflected in the fact that classes A and C and C and D never sent each other the star toy. This limited the contacts and had a considerable influence on the decline of interaction between these classes. These interactions sometimes took second place to simple production. From time to time, very interesting ideas for interaction opening possibilities for reaction and exchange were proposed but were not taken up, if not totally abandoned (even if certain responses were sent by email and hence were not put onto the site).

Aside from the minor difficulties, the project itself undoubtedly contributed to a genuine application of open pedagogy in the “French as a Foreign Language” classes. The results of the project as published on the website as well as the “invisible” results – on a human level – seem to fully justify the observation that a favourable climate permits effective communication. Thanks to task-based teaching and by maintaining the principle that all linguistic work published on the site originates from an extra-linguistic reality or has a direct link to the latter, the teachers together with the learners succeeded in creating an atmosphere of mutual listening and exchange, where there

were neither good nor bad suggestions, but where instead there were personal, imaginative and original productions. The language taught and learned thus changed in importance. Associated with an individual, it became a *means* and not the end; the means of expression of what the individual lives, feels and wishes to share with the others via the internet.

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