17 Internet-Based Textual Interventions and Interactions: How Language Learners Engage Online in a Written Task

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Abstract

Computer and Internet literacy is often taken for granted in the case of young adults born into the digital world; it is generally assumed that they can all use technology effectively. However, as mentioned by Fowley (2011), "it is easy to forget that in Ireland for example, many of the young people whom we routinely call digital natives have only lived online since 2005 or 2006" (p. 20). This situation is considered a drawback, especially when making use of Internet-based applications such as word processors in an educational setting. This chapter investigates learners' use of *Google Drive*, and more precisely *Google Documents*, an Internet-based word processing tool, while engaging in a written task. More specifically, it observes how twenty learners of French at university level intervened and interacted with their teacher, after being provided with comments on their written performance, while completing a "bilan", i.e., a written account of their autonomous learning activities and a reflection on their learning outcomes. Findings show that although Internet-based tools are useful in theory to assist learners during a written task, in practice, their functionalities are not systematically exploited by learners who are occasionally reluctant to engage and collaborate.

Keywords: internet-based word processing tool, intervention, interaction, language learning, corrective feedback.

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1. Introduction

The constant increase of technology in our everyday lives has attracted much attention from researchers interested in understanding how technology interacts with educational practice with a special focus on human-to-human communication and language learning (e.g., Garratt, 2012). The use of technology not only requires knowledge of the tools' affordances, but also suggests the development of additional skills, such as computer literacy.

As Levy and Hubbard (2005) noted, "[o]ver many hundreds of years we have moved from a finger in the sand (where writing is technology-free) through hammer, chisel and stone, quill and vellum, typewriter and paper to the keyboard and screen" (p. 145). Internet-based technology in educational settings is commonly acknowledged as a positive attribute that enhances learning in general, and language learning in particular.

While Internet users went from a readable to a writable web (Kárpáti, 2009), language learners, over time, experienced various learning "from" and learning "with" technology environments (Reeves, 1998). A *learning from* Internet-based technology implies a relative passivity from the learners, whereas a *learning with* technology infers an up-to-date competence in the use of computers and the Internet. This should allow learners to take an engaged role in learning activities, as well as an active participation.

According to Woods and Baker (2004), "[i]nteraction is at the heart of the online learning experience" (p. 2). Interaction has been categorised into three distinct components: learner-content, learner-learner, and learner-teacher interaction (Moore, 1989). A learner-content interaction designates the learners' internal conversations they have with themselves when reflecting on the content of the study. A learner-learner interaction illustrates the interactions occurring between learners with or without the presence of the teacher, alone or in group settings. Finally, a learner-teacher interaction characterises the teacher's intention to stimulate the learners' interests as well as the learners' opportunities to clarify misunderstandings.

While the use of technology in current research is depicted as "rewarding for both learners and teachers in second language learning classrooms" (Thouësny & Bradley, 2011, p. 3), Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena (1994) have long claimed that to understand how the use of technology impacts learning, one must consider a fourth category of interaction between the learner and the computer; this is still relevant. More specifically, a learner-interface interaction, "in which the learner must interact with the technological medium in order to interact with the content, instructor, or other learners" (Hillman et al., 1994, p. 33), denotes the learners' process of understanding, handling and using the various tools when attempting to complete their learning activities.

Years ago, Moran (1983) accurately predicted that tools such as word-processors were not going to disappear despite the many issues one could encounter when using – what he called – the new technology (p. 115). He added that these tools would "become the norm at colleges and universities" and that they would and "should, become part of the writing classroom" (Moran, 1983, p. 115). Indeed, while most students are familiar with word processors and their editing tools, they now have to face a new generation of web applications that enables users to create and edit documents online while collaborating with others synchronously or asynchronously. However, since writing in higher education may be challenging for first year students, as they may have to adapt themselves to methods of learning and assessment they perhaps did not encounter before, asking them to intervene and interact online with their teacher during a written task may represent a difficult endeavour for some of them. For instance, while 82 percent of Irish young adults aged 16-24 years old knew how to copy and move a file to a folder in 2011[1], only 36 percent of them were able to create an electronic presentation (e.g., *Keynote* or *PowerPoint* presentation) during the same year. These figures unveil the fact that students are not all technologically literate. As recently discussed by Lockley (2012), some digital natives may be more fluent in certain technological aspects than others, mostly depending on their educational level, professional experience, and idiosyncratic differences.

1. Data on university graduates in computing and computer skills of individuals retrieved from Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union at http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/cf/itemdetail.cfm?item_id=7932 and http://goo.gl/DvIfl.

Through the lens of a sociocultural theory, this chapter observes how twenty language learners of French intervened and interacted online with their teacher after being provided with corrective feedback on their written document, i.e., a written account of their learning activities and learning outcomes. Learners' questions and responses to the teacher's interventions, while using *Google Documents* – an Internet-based word processing tool –, were observed and analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively, so as to provide a better understanding of the learners' use of technology with respect to participations in terms of content and frequency.

2. Educational setting and participants

The study took place in Ireland at university level during the winter of 2011. Students were enrolled in various Bachelor degrees, such as international business or accounting finance, in which French language was either an obligatory or a facultative subject. The whole class counted fifty-one first year students learning French as a foreign language. Their language level ranged from high to low B1[1].

As part of their assignment, students were asked to experience the French language on their own and to write an account of the learning activities they undertook as well as to reflect on their learning outcomes; the document was called the *bilan*. These activities could include watching a movie, reading a book, or any other leisure activities as long as French language was a prominent part of the activity. The aim was to give students the opportunity to enhance their independent learning based on their own passions. They were therefore expected to become more autonomous and to engage in the language learning activities that suited them the most.

In addition, students were encouraged to write a weekly report on their activities, which was the basis for their end of semester assignment. The criteria for

1. The Common European Framework of Reference for languages divides learners into three broad classifications which can be further divided into six levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2, where an A level identifies learners as beginners, a B level characterises individuals as intermediate, and a C level recognises learners as proficient.

the assignment were a minimum of eight hundreds words with at least eight different entries, and with no maximum word limit. They were free to write as much as they wanted and were equally free to use whatever software they liked for their typed submissions. They were nevertheless encouraged to use *Google Documents* as their editing tool in order to be able to interact with their teacher during the writing process. While the reflective document was produced as an institutional request, the continuous assessment on *Google Documents* was facultative. Learners had the option to submit their assignment at the end of the semester without showing parts of it beforehand to their teacher.

Furthermore, the concept of autonomous learning was brought to the group through in-class discussions of the activities the students had undertaken. The aim was to provide ideas to those who did not know how to approach the task. In parallel, workshops were independently proposed at the university[1] to help teachers and students alike use *Google* tools. As none of the students had previously used *Google Documents* either for academic or personal purposes, they were strongly advised to participate in these free workshops. However, as students had to register to attend these independent workshops, it became clear that no student in this class took part in them. A short training on how to create, rename, edit, and save a document was nevertheless given during the second week of the semester.

Out of fifty-one students enrolled in this course, thirty of them chose to create and write their assignment in *Google Documents*, the remaining students simply handed in their assignment on paper at the due date. In the event of choosing *Google Documents*, students were aware that the online learner-teacher collaborative work would be stopped before the deadline. Given the fact that this project was intended to be a continuous activity from beginning to end, i.e., from week two to week twelve, stopping the collaboration at the end of the ninth week was believed to motivate students to write their project early. Yet, ten students chose to start composing their document in *Google Documents* during the last week. As a consequence, these students were not provided with

1. The workshops, conducted by Dr. Cathy Fowley, were intended to provide students and teachers alike with information about the advantages of using new technologies in educational settings.

corrective feedback on their written language, and the asynchronous learner-teacher interaction was not initiated. In total, twenty participants created their document with *Google Documents* at the very beginning of the semester, of which seven were female and thirteen were male, all of them Irish students between eighteen and twenty years old.

3. Analysis

From an educational perspective, feedback is more effective "when it focuses on patterns of error, [...] rather than dozens of disparate errors" (Ferris, 2002, p. 50). Lee (2003) further points out that "selective marking" is more suitable for learners than "comprehensive marking" (p. 228). Within this study, learners' written documents were assessed according to five criteria carrying equal weights: (1) content, (2) vocabulary, (3) syntax, (4) conjugation, and (5) reflection. The first category identified whether the texts provided were adapted to the task and whether the instructions were respected. The diversity of the activities undertaken by learners while learning French on their own was also considered. For example, one student confused the meaning of the word *bilan* with the one of a diary. She kept a weekly report in which she described her new experiences at the university and narrated her nightlife without any references to the French language. Other students reported activities that were in fact proposed by other teachers in other courses. One of these tasks, for instance, was to listen to Edith Piaf[1] to try to reproduce the sound that causes one of the most difficulties for English learners, in other words, the uvular trill [ʀ] or uvular fricative [ʁ] sound. The second criterion of assessment acknowledged lexical diversity, whether the vocabulary was sufficient to explain the chosen activities, and whether students used synonyms to express themselves. The third criterion evaluated the syntax of the sentences, whether the structures were simple, including for instance, only one independent clause, or whether they were more complex. The fourth criterion identified whether the verbs were correctly conjugated in an appropriate tense, as there had been a special focus on this grammatical aspect throughout

1. Edith Piaf was a popular French singer in the 50's who is well known for rolling her r's.

the semester. Finally, the last criterion examined the breadth of the learners' reflection on their learning outcomes; whether it was thoughtfully considered as opposed to just saying that they were "learning a lot".

The scale of assistance dispensed within this study for the incorrect lexical and grammatical features was designed from implicit to more and more explicit, as advised by sociocultural researchers such as Nassaji and Swain (2000), who demonstrated that "help provided within the [zone of proximal development] was more effective than help provided randomly" (p. 48). Based on this researcher's previous work, the assistance was designed in accordance with a four level scale of mediation: (level 1) the incorrect word or group of words is highlighted, (level 2) the error type is provided for each incorrect word or group of words, (level 3) detailed explanations about the nature of the incorrect form is given, and (level 4) the correct form is provided (Thouësny, 2011, p. 91). As requested by the learners, the comments were generally provided in English, especially at level 2 assistance. However, if students interacted in French, replies to their interactions were also given in French.

The learners' interventions and interactions after each move from the teacher were observed and counted. A learner's intervention is the action taken by him or her to rework the linguistic input directly after being provided with suggestions at any level of assistance. The action is reflected by a modification of the text. A learner's interaction, on the other hand, shows the two-way flow of information between the learner and the teacher, no matter who started the discussion. Learners' moves, i.e., interventions and interactions were not only counted, but also qualitatively considered in order to appreciate whether, when, and how the mediation was negotiated.

4. Results

No student wrote more than 8 entries in the final document they handed back to their teacher and the amount of words for each entry was roughly comprised between 100 and 200 words. As previously stated, learners' texts were no

longer read and corrected by the teacher after the ninth week of the semester. By the end of the activity, 10 students, for instance, created content for only one entry, while 4 others were able to complete the whole assignment. During the period of observation, learners produced a total amount of 64 entries. Out of 20 participants considered for this study, 11 of them chose to complete their written task with *Google Documents* after week 9. The remaining 9 students stopped using this facility. Another fact worth mentioning is that 14 participants did not use the Internet-based word processing tool to directly type their words in it; rather, they copied the text from another word processor and pasted it into *Google Documents*. This was monitored with the *see revision history* feature of the application, in which the text appeared all at once without any possibilities of tracking changes.

4.1. Learners' interventions

Table 1 below illustrates the amount of interventions performed by the teacher and the learners at all four levels of mediation (L1, L2, L3, and L4), as well as the help given to students on their text content (C) and learning reflection (R).

A first reading of the values shows that most students responded up to levels 1 and 2, incorrect forms highlighted and error types provided, respectively. For example, 41 incorrect forms were highlighted in student #15's text at level 1. The student intervened for 35 of them, the remaining 6 incorrect forms were left unchanged in the text. Since the teacher followed up with 27 incorrect forms at level 2, one can deduce that 8 of the replacements proposed by the learner at level 1 were correct. At this stage, learner #15 was now provided with the types of error for 27 incorrect forms at level 2, for which he suggested replacements to 23 of them. The teacher continued with the third level of assistance and gave detailed information on the 5 forms that were still incorrect, implying that the learner was able to edit 18 incorrect features after being provided with the error types. Since the student did not propose any corrections (0) at level 3, the interventions stopped there; a dash (-) indicates that the teacher could not regulate the assistance further, although it was still needed. In addition, learner #15 received 5 comments on the text content as well as 3 on his reflective

learning; all of these were taken into consideration by the learner, and the text was changed accordingly.

Table 1. Descriptive table of learners and teacher's interventions at all levels of assistance

Students		Entries	Teacher's interventions						Learners' interventions					
			L1	L2	L3	L4	C	R	L1	L2	L3	L4	C	R
1	M	1	8	4	-			1	6	0				1
2	F	2	8	6	1	1		1	6	1	1	1		1
3	F	1	4	3	2	1		2	4	2	2	1		2
4	F	8	63	14	1	-		3	14	7	0			3
5	M	1	8	2	-			1	8	0				1
6	M	1	8	2	-		1		7	0			1	
7	M	1	7	3	-			1	5	2	0			1
8	F	1	8	4	-			1	5	0				1
9	M	1	10	3	-		1		10	3	0		1	
10	M	1	5	-			1		0				1	
11	M	8	37	25	7	-		3	37	25	0			3
12	F	4	59	13	3	1	2	2	31	9	3	1	2	2
13	M	8	36	27	2	0	4	2	36	27	2		4	2
14	M	3	22	18	-		1	1	22	7			1	1
15	M	4	41	27	5	-	5	3	35	23	0		5	3
16	F	8	45	29	7	-	4	2	45	29	0		4	2
17	M	1	7	1	-		3	3	1	0			3	3
18	F	7	0				1						1	
19	M	2	23	12	-		2	2	18	0			2	2
20	M	1	17	-				1	0					1
Total		**64**	**416**	**193**	**28**	**3**	**25**	**29**	**290**	**135**	**9**	**3**	**25**	**29**

Table 2 below demonstrates that learners responded to almost 70 percent of the teacher's interventions at levels 1 and 2, but that the percentage dropped to 29 percent at level 3. In addition, it shows that all learners who were provided with the correct answer at level 4 adopted the teacher's correction in their final version. Moreover, while most students (16 out of 20) did not consider the detailed assistance to push further their editing process, they all without exception took into account the assistance provided about the content of their entries as well as their learning reflection.

Table 2. Percentage of learners' interventions after receiving assistance at all levels

Interventions at Level 1	Interventions at Level 2	Interventions at Level 3	Interventions at Level 4	Interventions at content and reflection level
69.71%	69.95%	28.57%	100%	100%

4.2. Learners' interactions

Besides interventions, the learners' moves were also examined to determine how the teacher's assistance was discussed and negotiated. Table 3 lists all learners' interactions and classifies them into different categories, namely (1) non-feedback related question, (2) feedback agreement, (3) response to query, (4) feedback clarification, (5) replacement confirmation, and (6) feedback negotiation. Seven students demonstrated their willingness to interact with the teacher; a total amount of 17 interactions were recorded. It is worth mentioning that one participant did not use the comment thread to interact asynchronously. Rather, she discussed some of the feedback face-to-face during the class.

Table 3. Descriptive table of learners' interactions

St.	Non-Feedback Related Question	Feedback Agreement	Response to Query	Feedback Clarification	Replacement Confirmation	Feedback Negotiation
1						1 (Level 1)
2				1 (Level 2)		1 (Reflection)
3			1 (Level 3)			
4			1 (Level 3)			
12	2	5 (Level 2)	1 (Level 3)		2 (Level 2)	
14						1 (Level 2)
15				1 (Content)		
Total	**2**	**5**	**3**	**2**	**2**	**3**

A **non-feedback related question** is an independent query asked by the learner, which has no connection to any of his or her incorrect forms. Student #12, for

instance, utilised the Internet-based word processor as a forum discussion tool to ask questions about technology use. In one of her questions, she exposed her embarrassment at not being able to comprehend the tool and asked for a demonstration. The student's query was briefly answered in *Google Documents*, stating that a short presentation on how to use it would be performed in class.

A **feedback agreement** is a form of interaction in which the learner agrees with the teacher on the content of the assistance. Student #12, for instance, let the teacher know that she understood and agreed with the assistance provided at level 2, where the error type is provided. She used short statements such as 'all right', 'I understand', and 'OK'.

A **response to a query** is a learner's return after being asked a question in relation to a specific incorrect form. The teacher generally raised questions at level 3 when providing detailed explanations on the incorrect form. Student #3, for instance, in the case of an incorrect agreement between a pronoun and its antecedent, was asked to reflect on what the pronoun was supposed to replace.

A **feedback clarification** indicates that the feedback may be too complicated to understand and that the terminology used may not be fully adapted to the learner. Student #2, for instance, asked for clarification about the meaning of the term "lexical" in "incorrect lexical choice", an error type which was used to describe an inappropriate selection in terms of word choice.

A **replacement confirmation** reflects a learner's request for approval before in-line editing. Student #12, for example, after being provided with the error type at level 2, suggested replacements in the comment thread and waited for the teacher's approval before including them in her text.

A **feedback negotiation** not only reveals a learner's intention to discuss the assistance, but also demonstrates the idea that the teacher's feedback is not always taken for granted. In such an event, an agreement through discussion must be reached between the learner and the teacher. For instance, student #14 argued that one of his phrases marked as incorrect – as it was incomprehensible

to the teacher – was indeed perfect French. This student further explained that he had had the opportunity to experience the language from Quebec and that what was marked as incorrect was in fact a perfectly correct French-Canadian phrase which was unknown to the teacher. As a result of the negotiations, the learner's expression was accepted.

4.3. Learners' evaluation of the content of the class

As part of the end of semester, students received a questionnaire with the aim to evaluate the content of the class. While the questionnaire was not designed to assess the use of *Google Documents*, it is nevertheless known that some of the students enjoyed the interactional aspect of the tool. To the question "What elements of the course did you find most interesting?", some of them replied in an anonymous way:

> *-Enjoyed doing the bilan, learning something new on my own every week.*
>
> *-Enjoyed working with GoogleDocs. Great to get feedback from lecturer that way.*
>
> *-Bilan – Weekly help from Sylvie using Google Docs.*
>
> *-I like the assistance I received. Like the bilan etc.*

5. Discussion and future developments

Writing activities have considerably evolved with the introduction of web-based technologies in our everyday lives, especially in terms of attitudes towards creating and sharing content. Common challenges in textual authorship and ownership of online collaborative writing, such as understanding "what it means [...] to read and write together" (Hunter, 2011, p. 55), are not precisely applicable within this research, since (1) the document was created and written by one

individual only, and (2) the text, if in-line edited after interventions from the teacher, was exclusively updated by the student. Furthermore, documents listed in *Google Drive* clearly indicated the name of the owner, in other words, the student's name.

On the whole, the *bilan* activity was not totally successful as learners experienced difficulties in getting organised and acting independently with respect to language learning. Recently, Eneau and Develotte (2012) investigated the relationship that links autonomy and identity and pointed out that "autonomy for adult learners learning foreign languages [...] is constructed through a process of exchange and sharing that depends largely on the resources and the environment" (p. 5). This implies the use of "meta-skills" such as the capacity for learners to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, i.e., knowing themselves as a learner and having the ability to learn from others (Tremblay, 2003, cited in Eneau & Develotte, 2012, p. 5). The observations undertaken within this research do not suggest that the students of this particular class, at the time of the study, saw themselves as independent learners as most of them had great difficulties in learning autonomously. It is important to remember that almost all participants were first year students coming directly from secondary school. It may be the case that asking for learning autonomy might be inappropriate at this stage as students may not be ready yet. One possible reason for this could be the fact that they were extremely disappointed not to have grammar drill exercises anymore like in the "good old days", as one student said during an informal meeting. Another explanation could be that they were, in university, facing too many types of independence they had never experienced before. Most of them were now living for the first time without their parents; they were allowed to wear the clothes they wanted (no more uniforms), they could skip classes (attendance is not mandatory), and so on and so forth. Self-directed learning during first year at university might be too much freedom for students.

Nevertheless, the results show that learners intervened during their writing process: they responded to the teacher's corrective feedback by updating their texts in accordance to the assistance provided. While learners corrected or

attempted to correct almost 70 percent of the incorrect forms flagged by the teacher at levels 1 and 2, they followed up with only 29 percent of them at the metalinguistic feedback level. It may be the case that detailed explanations on the incorrect forms were on some occasions too complicated to decipher in terms of linguistic jargon. As found by Lee (1997), teachers often used "a wider range of metalinguistic terms than students could understand" (p. 471). Although some researchers such as Hwang, Ang and Francesco (2002) have pointed out that electronic feedback was perceived as a suitable alternative for shy students who tend to avoid face-to-face feedback for fear of asking the wrong questions in front of the class, only one student asked for feedback clarification through the use of the Internet-based word processing tool. The others might have decided to avoid potential embarrassment by merely skipping the correction process in order not to show their lack of knowledge. It is worth mentioning that participants were Irish students and that Irish students through their educational system, either in primary or secondary school, do not receive any specific tutoring in linguistic knowledge, and tend to have a deficit in terms of metalanguage. To remedy this lack of knowledge, a session dedicated to the explanation of the terminology in use when providing feedback should suitably prepare the students for the comprehension of the language descriptors. Future research should adjust more precisely the level of the meta-linguistic annotations to each individual to ensure a proper understanding of the feedback itself.

Furthermore, the results demonstrated that learners did not interact with their teacher much as only 17 interactions were recorded over the 694 interventions of the teacher. More specifically, only 2.5 percent of the teacher's moves triggered an interaction from the learner. One reason that learners did not interact with an equivalent enthusiasm, aside from the possibility that they did not require any further explanations, could be associated with their different learning styles and preferences, given the fact that computer literacy can be related to students' approach to learning, and that their approach to learning might influence the way they perceive computers and technology (Jelfs & Colbourn, 2002). In investigating the effect of learning styles on course completion in an online learning environment, Terrell (2002) finds that students

with preferences for abstract conceptualisation were more likely to complete the program than students with preferences for concrete experience (p. 345). From a language learning perspective, Felix (2004) demonstrates that some learning styles correlate with the way learners are using the web materials. A future study could first examine learning styles as a means to better understand learners' approach in online text writing and editing, as well as intervening and interacting. Although this study proposed to observe a very limited sample of learners' interactions, a classification of the learners' moves could nevertheless be proposed: non-feedback related question, feedback agreement, response to query, feedback clarification, replacement confirmation, and feedback negotiation. This classification needs to be refined as the data was insufficient to draw any conclusive decisions.

6. Conclusion

In light of a dynamic assessment framework encompassing learner-teacher interactions, this study analysed the interventions and interactions of twenty students – 39 percent of the class – who decided to use *Google Documents* as their main editing tool when drafting a report on their activities and learning outcomes. The remaining 61 percent might have felt uncomfortable with the use of a new application, or it may be the case that the level of user-friendliness of the Internet-based tool did not reach their expectations. While most of the participants copied and pasted their texts into *Google Documents*, using it as a repository instead of a tool to create their assignment, a large majority of them intervened by modifying their ill-formed written language in accordance with the teacher's corrective feedback, mostly at levels 1 and 2 when the incorrect form is highlighted and the error type is provided, respectively. Amongst them, a few demonstrated their willingness to interact with the teacher, but their attempts were rather sparse. Whereas the web has been described as a "viable environment for language learning" (Felix, 2004, p. 246), Hubbard and Romeo (2012) point out that, according to the literature to date, "it is common practice to offer little if any [...] training before turning students loose on a [computer-assisted language learning] software application, task,

or activity" (p. 35). Although it is frequent to find in research publications that younger generations have some advantages in terms of computer literacy over older people (e.g., Rahimpour, 2011), one could posit that a technology enhanced classroom fostering interactions between students and teachers may not be immediately suitable for every language learner, as students might have different levels of digital literacy, as well as different levels of willingness to interact. As Lam and Pennington (1995) commented nearly two decades ago, instructors must show patience with their students in terms of technology use, as the latter will "need time to adapt successfully to any innovative teaching strategy" (p. 65). Depending on the learners' degree of comfort in using technology in general and *Google Documents* in particular, stimulating learners' asynchronous interactions between themselves and their teacher when using online interactive tools is definitely a challenging endeavour that needs further investigations.

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