Internationalisation at home through virtual exchange: an encounter between distance language learners and trainee language teachers

Xavière Hassan[1], Annie Eardley[2], and Christelle Combe[3]

Abstract. Undergraduate language students from the Open University (OU) and master's degree students from Aix-Marseille Université (AMU) participated in an innovative Virtual Exchange (VE) as part of our institutions' internationalisation at home strategy. Due to the pandemic, the one-week Residential School (RS) abroad, which is part of the Bachelor of Arts (BA) in modern languages at the OU, was replaced with an Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) – a one-week online intensive programme which included a VE. Its objectives were to support the development of OU students' French oral skills, and the professionalisation of AMU students, by developing their pedagogical and digital skills. Qualitative and quantitative data collected showed a high level of participants' interaction and collaboration, and positive feedback highlighting an increase in motivation and confidence to speak French (OU students) and a valued experience in developing professional ethos, and digital teaching skills (AMU students).

Keywords: virtual exchange, internationalisation at home, professionalisation.

1. Introduction

This VE linked 67 language undergraduates from the OU with 25 postgraduate students from AMU training to become specialists of French as a foreign language as part of their master's degree in language learning and teaching pedagogies.

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At the OU, the BA in modern languages integrates international and intercultural dimensions into its formal and informal curriculum, with an academic content covering a wide range of resources and viewpoints from the French, Spanish, or German speaking worlds, as well as a compulsory one-week RS taking place in the relevant countries. A six-week online alternative is available for students who cannot travel. This forms part of an internationalisation at home strategy, as defined by Beelen and Jones (2015).

During the pandemic, the traditional week abroad was replaced with an online, intensive ALE. This six-day programme included a VE that recreated the learning experiences and intercultural encounters of the face-to-face RS version.

Besides fostering VE key competences such as "digital competence (the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively online), foreign language competence, communication skills, media literacy and the ability to work in a diverse cultural context (Jager et al., 2019, p. 7), our objectives were to help OU students develop their French oral skills while working in pairs or small groups, and AMU students their language teaching and digital skills through tutoring actual undergraduates.

The overall ALE included tutorials led by OU tutors, student-led synchronous and asynchronous collaborative sessions, periods of independent learning, and the VE during which OU students were in groups of three to four to maximise speaking opportunities. Most afternoons were dedicated to preparing a collaborative project. This consisted of producing, by the end of the ALE, a PowerPoint and group oral presentation focusing on a specific aspect of Aix-en-Provence (e.g. its cultural life, environmental issues, local politics, or social issues). For OU students, this project, based on personal research, collaborative work, and VE participation, is a necessary output to 'pass' the ALE, which is a compulsory element of their qualification.

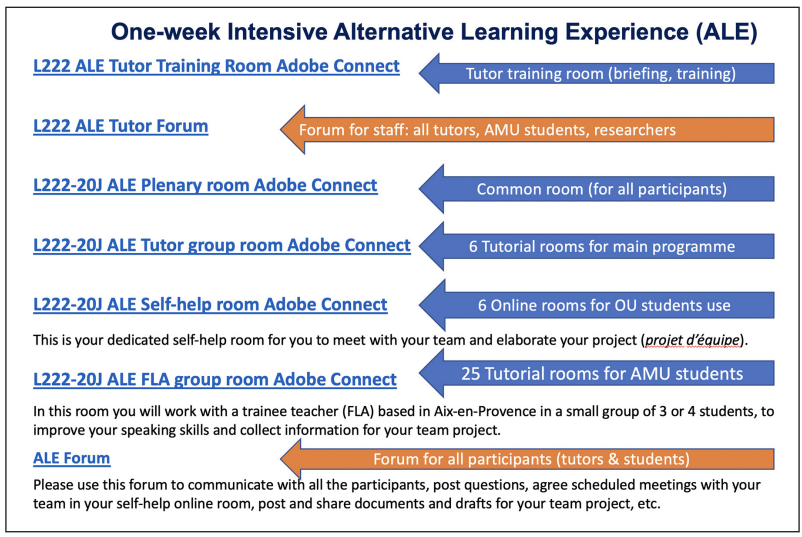
For AMU students, the VE tasks included the preparation of a self-presentation video, a 45-minute tutorial – delivered to two different groups – and a participation in a 30-minute online conversation led by OU students that would feed into their group oral presentation. These VE tasks conclude a module on Online Language Tutoring and contribute to developing the AMU students' techno-semio-pedagogical competence as defined by Guichon (2012). Taking part in this VE then feeds into their compulsory end-of-module assignment, which is a reflective evaluation based on their experiences as online tutors.

2. Method

Relevant briefing documents were distributed to all participants, ahead of the VE. A training phase followed, during which AMU students learnt to use the OU platform. Pedagogical questions related to the specific needs of mature distance language learners, including accessibility, were also addressed.

A Moodle-based infrastructure was built for the ALE and the VE to store texts, audio, and videos, and support asynchronous and synchronous communication, independent as well as collaborative work, and tutor-led as well as student-led sessions, with two types of online rooms – standard and advanced – to allow different levels of rights and affordances to different categories of participants (Figure 1).

Figure 1. VLE infrastructure



The VE was then carried out over two afternoons for its synchronous part and until the end of the week for the asynchronous part (forum). AMU students were advised not to prepare an action-oriented educational scenario, but to focus instead on activities that encourage oral production, aiming at B1-B2 level, using authentic, newsworthy documents related to one of the topics studied by OU students during the year.

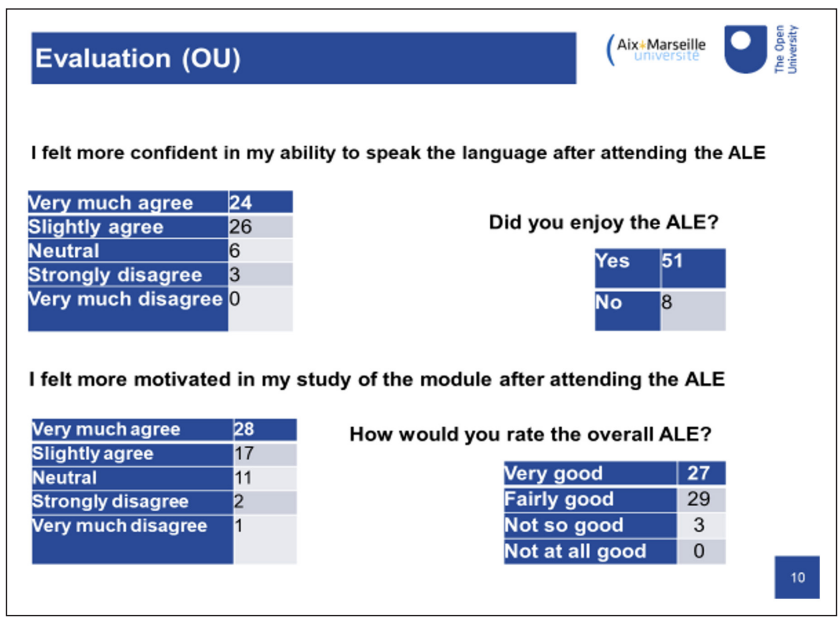
Feedback was collected at the end of the programme using an evaluation questionnaire for OU students, and a reflexive evaluation for AMU students; 59 out of 67 OU

students returned the questionnaire and 25 out of 27 AMU students submitted their reflective evaluations. Interaction on the student forum, OU students' output, and video recordings of the VE sessions provided further informal feedback.

3. Results and discussion

Overall, the evaluations received were positive (Figure 2). Most OU students enjoyed the opportunity to speak with students based in France, as in a real-life situation, even if they found exchanging with native speakers sometimes challenging, while 86% of OU respondents (n=59) said they very much enjoyed the programme, one of the students describing it as an "almost perfect replacement" (to the RS).

Figure 2. OU students' responses from the evaluation questionnaire (n=59)



Qualitative feedback complemented statistical data, with OU students commenting favourably about the VE and its positive impact on their learning. The VE boosted their confidence and motivation, as illustrated in these quotes:

> "The opportunity to speak to the language assistants [AMU] really boosted my confidence: I used what I had and successfully conveyed my ideas/

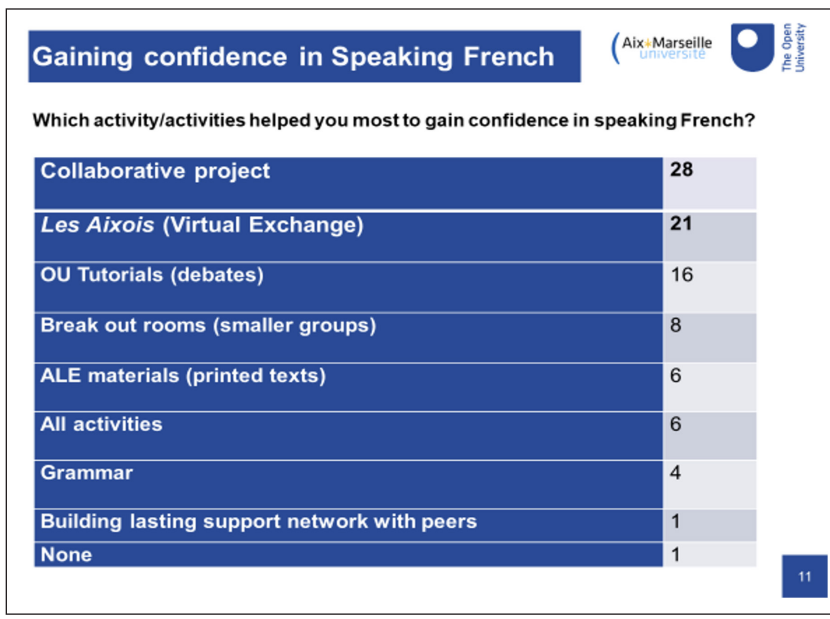
input to a native speaker and to then have that understood and reciprocated was very validating and satisfying".

"The key activities in my opinion that helped me improve my speaking of French were the two meetings with the French assistants [AMU] and the group session preparing presentations".

"The conversations with the Aixois language assistants were very useful".

The feedback revealed that participating in the collaborative project and the VE were deemed the most successful activities in terms of gaining confidence in speaking French (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Activities that helped students gain confidence in speaking French (n=59)



For AMU students, the VE experience was valuable in terms of gaining professional training, developing their professional ethos, and understanding the importance of planning a tutorial to respond to students' specific needs.

"I see the experience with the OU as a series of attempts that have served me to target my tutoring ethos".

> "The second session was very different, not only thanks to a new structure (which made me much more comfortable) but also because the two new learners were much more curious and much more talkative. From there, we can already conclude that the choice of documents and the course will only be better, by really knowing my audience".

Also mentioned was the impact of using a webcam on self-consciousness when teaching online.

> "Having to do this session via videoconference was stressful, as I saw myself on the screen. It made me more aware of how I can feel. After a while, I managed to forget my screen because both learners were listening and responding to me, and I was able to conduct my session properly. We even finished early and were able to take advantage of having more time to discuss other things: tourism, architecture, gastronomy, among others".

Other feedback revealed a mismatch in the brief given to the participants: OU students were told the conversation with AMU students would focus on life in Aix-en-Provence while AMU students were expecting to share personal interests and passions in life. This created some misunderstanding during the VE. The pandemic led to a further complication as some AMU students, confined at home – often in a different city or region – did not know Aix-en-Provence!

4. Conclusions

The analysis briefly presented here revealed that OU students very much valued the VE and intercultural encounters with AMU students; most reported an increased level of motivation and confidence when communicating in French. The OU students' group oral presentations produced solely online were of a higher quality than those produced during face-to-face RS. Judging from the feedback, the VE played a significant role in this success.

AMU students reported that this experience helped them develop their professional ethos, increase their confidence in using a variety of online conferencing platforms, tools, and affordances, and become more aware of their target audience, including accessibility needs.

The VE, mirroring the contacts that usually take place in the face-to-face RS, proved to be a welcome addition to the online ALE. It allowed authentic, valuable

interaction and intercultural encounters. It will now serve as a blueprint for other OU language modules and will be repeated in future years. It will remain a valid option once face-to-face RS programmes resume.

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