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Enhance chinese students' initial motivation through communicative activities based on cefr and elp purposes. case study at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China

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Abstract

This article describes how French language tutors at The University of Nottingham Ningbo China have used different tools to shape the French language curriculum to improve communicative language competences and motivation. The French curriculum used the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages as its organizing principle to promote students' self-study development and make them aware of the key objectives of the European Language Portfolio.

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1. Introduction

The University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) is an English-medium university that runs a Preliminary year of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for the majority of its students. When students pass this foundation year they progress onto their main degree subject where communicative ability in speaking and writing English is considered important to the extent that they are able to express content knowledge. The Centre for English Language Education (CELE) has therefore a sub-division called the Continuing Support Centre (CSC) that holds voluntary workshops and seminars to aid students who are no longer required to pass specific English language assessments. The majority of these students are Chinese native speakers with intermediate to upper-intermediate English skills and have therefore communicative competence in the world's two most spoken languages.

Nonetheless, the studying of modern foreign languages at UNNC has become very popular. Teaching of modern foreign languages started in October 2004 with approximately one hundred students divided between French, German, Japanese and Spanish. Since then the number of student has continued to grow rapidly.

However, a survey conducted during academic year 2006/2007 by Peter Waters (2007), a language tutor teaching both EAP and French, revealed a number of factors that contributed to reduced motivation of learners. Waters wrote that 'at 73.5%, the vast majority of students have chosen to study a second foreign language to further their career prospects in some way [...] Clearly many students feel that studying an extra language ab initio is a worthwhile undertaking for them'. However, this motivation was significantly less for students of French at '55.4%, many of whom made comments about the supposedly romantic nature of the French language. This might be useful in

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improving motivation during the learning process but could lead to future disappointment when faced with the reality of modern day France' (Waters, 2007).

The following year 2007/2008 this initial motivation waned and we realized that French students were highly unmotivated. Many reasons contributed to this lack of enthusiasm. For instance, although, we were using a communicative approach, we were still working with an outdated textbook adapted neither to students' intercultural interests nor to the language curriculum that from September 2007 was implemented in conjunction with the Language Centre (LC) of Nottingham UK where language teaching is based on interactive methods of independent study.

Similarly, the extra resource in the library comprised a great number of French classical novels in their original unabridged versions and was consequently inadequate for and not accessible to our students. Peter Waters' survey (2007) had highlighted this issue the previous year showing that students were desperate 'for more reading, listening and study materials at an appropriate level'.

We needed, therefore, to give our students more opportunities and material to practice French and at the same time to give our part-time tutors, some of them undergoing their first teaching experience, a clear guide to be followed.

We decided, therefore, to design a new French curriculum focusing on the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) and on the general pedagogic functions of the European Language Portfolio (ELP).

This article will describe, therefore, which principles of the CERF and the ELP have been followed; how we designed our curriculum and some of the activities that have been planned in order to match students' need.

2. The CEFR

The CEFR is a document that has a list of easy to understand descriptors that show the competences students 'can-do' at each level and that comprehensively outlines the competences necessary for communication, the related knowledge and skills that aid communication, and the situations and domains of communication. It distinguishes two different kinds of competences, the general competences – declarative knowledge, skills and know-how, existential competence, ability to learn – and the communicative language competences – linguistic competences, sociolinguistic competences, and pragmatic competences.

The general competences are important non-linguistic abilities since they play a central role in communication as they help learners to open themselves to the other and to a new culture (Rosen, 2007). These kind of competences imply the knowledge of the country or countries in which the language is spoken, the knowledge of their society and culture and the awareness of the similarities and differences between the students' culture of origin and the culture of the target countries – declarative knowledge. This knowledge is practical as well as theoretical and is directly linked with motivation. Students must be able to manage their knowledge to communicate effectively with the target language community – skills and know-how –, be able to adapt their personality to the new environment – existential competence –, and be able to learn autonomously from the new experience they are living – ability to learn.

The communicative language competences are the skills directly linked with the language. The formal knowledge helps learners to communicate with correct and significant sentences using the right vocabulary, the grammar rules, the ability to organize the sense of the sentences, to write with the right orthography of the words and to be able to read with the right pronunciation and rhythm – linguistic competences. However the perfect knowledge of these linguistic competences needs to be integrated with the capacity of the learner to use the language with the right register in the different social situation: formal and informal, official and friendly, professional and familiar – sociolinguistic competences.

Finally students must be able to manage their knowledge to organize the discourse – pragmatic competences (Common European framework, 2001).

3. The ELP

The ELP is a document in which those who are learning or have learned a language – whether at school or outside school – can record and reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences. It is composed of three parts: a language passport which the owner regularly updates; a grid on which the learner's language competences are recorded with reference to the CEFR 'can do' common criteria accepted across Europe; and a dossier where the learner keeps examples of personal work that demonstrate language competences. The ELP aims to enhance learners' motivation by helping them to plan their learning and to learn autonomously according to goals they set themselves or with their teacher. These goals may be intercultural and pragmatic as well as linguistic and theoretical, and may cover different media and involve various projects – both assessed and student created (Schneider & Lenz, 2000).

4. How we design the curriculum

To design our curriculum based on these two documents, our first step was to choose a textbook adapted to the CEFR criteria on the basis of the quality of the pedagogical guide and the quantity of extra material given: the Hachette multimedia series *Alter Ego*. This series of textbooks outlines an optional didactic approach that new tutors can employ, but is clearly exploitable in different ways by experienced teachers and clearly explains which competences are covered in the material, and which goals students should achieve and through which interactive situations they can reach them. It has also an introductory section to the use of the ELP at the end of different sections that help students to gradually become familiar with the ideas of self-assessment that is a key skill to be acquired by students if they want to be able to use the ELP independently.

The second step, centred on the further introduction of the ELP, has been to give students a variety of extra material available in the library. The aim driving these choices has been to help student's self-study development and make them aware of the key pedagogic functions of the ELP: plan their learning, learn autonomously, seek and enhance intercultural experiences (European Language Portfolio. n.d.).

We were, however, in the middle of the semester, and it was impossible at this stage to change our textbook and to have an adequate number of reference books adapted to our student's levels in the library until the next academic year. Therefore, a series of activities to motivate students were proposed. These activities needed to be adapted to both the Chinese students' needs and the LC program at UNNC.

In order to decide which activities we needed to establish we continued to follow the CEFR and the ELP purpose that we had already used to choose the textbook and the extra material for the library. Our aim was to create a template that in the future could be adopted by the different languages taught in our University.

5. Activities

We will present here two of these activities – French Reading and French Movies – that have been put in place in order to motivate and improve the general and communicative language competences of our students.

5.1 French reading book

The French language teachers designed a French reading book activity that clearly highlighted the difference between Chinese and Western approaches to learning and at the same time enhanced Linguistic Competences.

The first book we asked students to read was the adapted novel *La belle et la bête* (Beaumont, 2007). The challenge experienced was that when they were asked to give presentations of it they did not summarize the text and they did not have enough vocabulary to discuss it. They just memorized a part of the book and repeated it in front of their classmates. To avoid this problem the next reading book we choose was an adapted comic version of *Cyrano*

de Bergerac (Rostand, 2000) where the direct speech enabled students to memorize and repeat it in class. Their task was to transform the story into prose. This time, however, students showed a really difficulty in putting the story in chronological order. We finally needed a reading book that gave us the possibility to combine the traditional Chinese desire to memorize in conjunction with the western communicative methods to show to learners the difference between these two approaches and to help them to become familiar with the interactive methods. Therefore, we introduced a play, *L'avare* (Molière, 2004), as set text. The method outlined below shows how the students were made aware of the difference between memorization and the interactive approach.

Students were asked to approach the play in five different ways: they read the play; they prepared a PowerPoint presentation where they were not allowed to use the same vocabulary present in the text; they presented this PowerPoint presentation to their classmates but they were not allowed to use the same vocabulary of the text or the same vocabulary in the PowerPoint; they answered the questions their classmates asked them; finally students acted a scene of the play they had memorized.

By using the interactive approach in this way, students have been able to improve their vocabulary skills as though they had used the memorization method and, at the same time, they will understand the difference between the two methods and their application. To check if our hypothesis was right we asked students to complete a questionnaire.

The results of it show that when students were asked which book they felt helped them the most to improve their vocabulary? 63.6 % of them chose *L'avare* by Molière (2004) while 27.3% chose *La belle et la bête* (Beaumont, 2007) and only 9.1% the comic version of *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Rostand, 2000). These feelings were confirmed by a question asking students to translate a list of words into English or into Chinese Pinyin when they did know the English translation. We put into the questionnaires 10 words from each book for a total of 30 words that students were supposed to know because they used them in their presentations. Students were able to translate 9 out of 10 words from *L'avare* (Molière, 2004) with 4 of them translated by more than 66% of respondents, 6 out of 10 words from *La belle et la bête* (Beaumont, 2007) with 3 of them translated by more than 66% of respondents and 3 out of 10 words from *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Rostand, 2000) with 2 of them translated by more than 66% of respondents.

In addition, students showed a great understanding of the differences between the traditional Chinese method of memorization and the western communicative methods.

When they were asked which activities they thought was helpful for learning new French vocabulary by ranking them 1 to 4 from the most to the least helpful, 50 % of them ranked 'Using new vocabulary in oral presentation' at first and 50 % of them ranked 'Memorizing vocabulary lists' as least helpful.

Finally students were asked to rank for each story the different learning style they have found to be the most helpful for them in their study of the French language.

As far as Learning by heart was concerned only 9.1% of them ranked it in the first position when they were asked to do it for *L'avare* (Molière, 2004) while 16.7% of them ranked it in the first position for *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Rostand, 2000) and 25% of them for *La belle et la bête* (Beaumont, 2007).

Learning by Speaking got respectively 66.7% for *L'avare* (Molière, 2004) 58.3% for *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Rostand, 2000) and 50.0% for *La Belle et la Bête* (Beaumont, 2007).

Following these results, *L'avare* (Molière, 2004) is a permanent reading book in our second year module and reading books in general are part of our curriculum. That means that the introduction of a reading book in our curriculum and in our exams has been fully recognized as good practice.

5.2 Foreign language film

The French Film activity has been created to improve students listening, to encourage student to become independent learners and to improve their general competences – declarative knowledge, skills and know-how –, communicative language competences – linguistic competences – as well as socio cultural knowledge. Considering that many of our students will spend up to one year in western countries, there is then a real need for cross-cultural training. Otherwise they may be able to discuss academic theories in a seminar but be unable to respond effectively in social-settings.

We show French movies with subtitles in French rather than English or Chinese in order to improve students listening and reading skills. This approach has obviously created some frustration in students who have stated that they were unmotivated after the second or the third movie because they were not able to follow the whole plot. To

address this problem and in line with one of our central goals of this activity being to help students become independent learners, after an initial period where the teacher was leading the activity, students were asked to organize it. They have to prepare a presentation for each film and they are welcome to organize the French Film program for the follow semester.

From the students' perspective this responsibility became central because it gave them the opportunity to develop a co-operative relationship between them and the teachers. They have more opportunities to speak and use French with the teaching staff outside the classroom. By doing so the full understanding of the plot becomes secondary; the primary goal of creating active rather than passive learners is achieved. This links with existential competence as it encourages integrative rather than instrumental motivation – that is the positive attitude to learning for its own sake rather than for social or economic reward; and it develops the ability to learn – *savoir-apprendre* – the skill of incorporating new knowledge into existing knowledge.

As far as general competences are concerned the French Film activities improve students' world and socio-cultural knowledge. Movies like *L'auberge espagnole* (Levy, B. & Cedric, K., 2004), for example, educate learners about European Union policies in education and the French educational system while also showing how European university students interact with their peers, family members and people from different culture.

In addition the improvement of students' communicative language competences is also involved in French Movie Night activities because it gives a wide range of information that tutors can use in class during the following days.

6. Conclusion

The consequences of designing our curricula based on the CEFR have been an exchange of ideas across disciplines, increased intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and the development of autonomous learning. Other foreign language tutors have adopted aspects of the CEFR or created activities for students and introduced them in their own curriculum. In addition, students have approached the French tutors with a proposal to create a French society to start leading French extracurricular activities.

Although students are more and more involved in their language learning through all these activities, the introduction of the ELP for fostering students' autonomy is still a challenge. The basic reason is that Chinese students are ill-prepared in managing their own time and setting their own self-study goals. However, one of the students who found the ELP beneficial in his French Studies suggested that the CSC introduce a similar project for English. This led to the formation of Passport to Autonomy in Collaboration with Tutors (PACT) whereby a dedicated tutor trains a group of mentors who in turn train other students in how to set up the ELP. This example shows that students that had realized the benefit of using ELP in their own studies see the value in using it.

In 2011 the LC has inaugurated a self-study program whereby students are directed to engage in self-study together in a physical location, such as a computer room, supervised by one of their tutors. This program is monitored by tutors from the self-study committee who have devised goal-setting and reflective questionnaires that are designed to improve students' ability to set achievable objectives and manage their time efficiently with the final goal to improve students' autonomy and promote the ELP. The work of this committee is based on the successful use of the ELP that the French tutor Giovanna Comerio (2011) described in her paper 'Seeing Yourself in Another World: Coping with Otherness. The European Language Portfolio and the Development of an Intercultural Self'.

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