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Integrating interaction through CMC for French as a second language in the Anglophone context in Cameroon: the Melff project at the University of Buea.

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Summary

English and French are both official languages of Cameroon. After independence, a series of events occurred that caused the Anglophone community, a minority, to consider that French was becoming the dominant language. Part of the elite continued to galvanize "Anglophone nationalism" (Dobegang, 2009). The University of Buea is situated in one of the two Anglophone regions. It is one of the few Universities where students and lecturers are obliged to work in English. In the framework of the promotion of bilingualism and national integration, English and French are taught in all state universities.

It is within this context that Functional French, a level A2 (CEFR) course is offered at the University of Buea. The course is compulsory for the validation of Bachelor degrees in order to enable the students to communicate in a French-speaking environment, i.e. the majority of regions in Cameroon. These goals are never met because of many problems related to student attitudes and motivation, and the conditions in which the course is taught: time allocated to the course is limited (40 hours over two semesters), mixed-level groups, and large groups up to 80 students. With respect to the total number of students registered, many retake the course. Language competences almost exclusively focus upon reading and listening comprehension with little or no interaction.

The Melff project aims to improve this situation by introducing blended learning using two online platforms: *Moodle* and *VoiceForum* (Fynn, 2010); a forum for posting text and audio with a space for teacher feedback. Melff coordinates the contents of face-to-face classes with weekly sessions in the computer resource centre (plus extra private home access). In Moodle, besides individual exercises, discussion forums aiming to develop written interaction involve students, the teacher and a selection of students who have a higher level of French or English. Hence, English will be present besides French in a limited amount of

resources and board discussions in order to avoid presenting French learning in opposition to the English language. On *Voiceforum*, the focus is on oral interaction and will involve the same participants.

With this design we aim, while keeping constant the amount of mandatory teacher and students workloads, to offer students the first occasion for real interaction in the second language. Tests will be made in order to compare achievement in the former learning context and the new blended context. By increasing students' levels we expect to reduce the number of students who fail the course and, thus, reduce the number of years they have to wait before validating their Bachelor's. In turn, we hope to reduce the class sizes (because of exam success).

We are now in the pilot phase which will finish in June 2012. This phase involves two classes - a sample of thirty students. In our communication, we will report on this pilot phase based on the oral and written forums and questionnaires concerning participation, motivation and learning benefit. Our challenge, similar to that of many other language teachers in developing countries, will be to introduce real oral and written communicative situations using CALL, despite time and resources being limited.

Keywords: French as second language, Interaction, ICTE, CALL, CMC