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Blended learning through the eyes of Malagasy students

Hoby ANDRIANIRINA – Anne-Laure FOUCHER

Clermont Université, Université Blaise Pascal, Laboratoire de Recherche sur le Langage, EA999,
F 63057 Clermont-Ferrand, France

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The aim of this paper is to report on the impressions and practices of Malagasy learners on their first experience of French at University Level in a blended learning environment. This is part of a wider action research study in the Didactics of Languages and Cultures focusing on learner practices and providing help to language trainers in designing blended learning courses. The premise here is that design should be based on real knowledge of the practices.

A blended setup is characterized by face-to-face teaching linking to distance work and also by collective distance activity with online interaction (Mangenot, 2010). The blending brings two factors into play: the human or mediating factor and the CMC factor (Peraya, 1999). Furthermore the collaborative work is defined as a collective knowledge building approach where the group plays a supporting and motivational role (Henri et Lundgren-Cayrol, 1998). The blended course in our study brought into contact, in the first semester of 2008-2009, thirty Malagasy students, non-specialists in French and twelve students, future teachers of French from our university for ten contact teaching and three distance learning sessions.

The two groups were asked to work on two collaborative macro-tasks. The human mediation was done in the contact sessions by the coordinating teachers and the paired Malagasy students and in the distance sessions by the French student pairs. The computer-mediated activity was supported by a learning environment and in particular by the two communication tools: chat and forums. The computer-mediated character of the course was given a special dimension, though, due to the fact that 70% of the Malagasy students had no experience of ICT and that computer provision was rather inadequate.

To know how the Malagasy students perceived the blended nature of the environment and the resulting practices, we will draw on elicited data (Van der Maren, 1999): on the one hand the

replies to the final evaluation questionnaire and on the other the computer-mediated exchanges in the chat sessions and forums and data from video recordings made during a session. Generally, the Malagasy students expressed satisfaction: the computer-mediated session conditions were not an obstacle to learning and the “composite” mediation by the coordinators and the French and Malagasy pairs was appreciated. This perception, however, needs to be questioned or nuanced. On examining the interactions and practices, we find many explicit or implicit references to their computer-mediated working conditions in the direction of the French students (who had better facilities) and quite creative ways of adapting to the characteristics of the computer-mediated activities.

The Malagasy students also expressed a feeling of frustration. To conclude, even if the computer-mediated conditions were not perceived as problematic by the Malagasy students, the imbalance between the distant groups did pose a problem and did impact the mediation with the French pairs. This leads us to suggest that in a collaborative approach, the blended nature of a course setup should be thought more in terms of interdependence for the human mediation and technological balance than of performance with the computer-mediated tools.