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Interactive task design: Metachat and the whole learner

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Interactive task design: metachat and the whole learner

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1. Introduction

In this chapter I focus on conversations about language between adult learners online, in synchronous and asynchronous[1] postings. I use socio-affective and social-semiotic perspectives, thus distancing myself somewhat from cognitive ways of looking

at tasks. I developed an interest in the pedagogical potential of metalinguistic conversations for two reasons. Because adults come to the task with diverse knowledge of both L2 and L1, I expected that metalinguistic interaction would enable them to swap expert and novice roles with each other within the constantly changing dynamics of the classroom (Dias, 1998: 25; Morita, 2004: 598), which would advance an educational agenda favouring learner-directedness. Secondly, as metalinguistic conversations developed in directions that the learners felt like following, greater contingency could arise. This I regarded as motivational for adults, and also as progressive, following van Lier (1996: 180) for whom in a contingent conversation "the agenda is shared by all participants and educational reality may be transformed". However, in seeking to satisfy his condition of contingency, the problem of designing tasks for greater spontaneity proved difficult (Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999b: 60).

Here I provide an ethnographic account of metalinguistic conversations by learners engaged in an online task, *Simuligne*, designed to address this difficulty. After studying data from the project forums, chat rooms and emails, I introduce a new perspective on the function of these conversations, which holds pointers for task design.

2. Metachat

Van Leeuwen (2004) outlines two ways of understanding metalanguage. In the first the emphasis is on form and on metalanguage as a register of specialist terminologies, whose use for language teaching, prestigious in 19th and early 20th century academic settings, was contested by the communicative movement and deleted from the

repertoire of most language teachers. In the second approach the "metalinguistic function is seen as one of several simultaneous functions of linguistic communication. […] As a result, metalanguage is here not a scientific register. No special training is needed to communicate about communication" (2004: 108). I adopt this functional interpretation of metalanguage and I concentrate on its use in conversation, calling it 'metachat' to reflect its interactive and informal qualities.

Here are examples to illustrate different types of metachat.

2.1 Directed metachat

This example is from an asynchronous forum thread in Lamy and Goodfellow's (1999b) study. The task involved:

- selecting any L2 text (the only condition being that students found it interesting)

- studying it individually, then

- discussing its language with peers on a tutor-facilitated asynchronous forum

Student 1 chose a page from *Vol de Nuit*, by Saint-Exupéry, and reported to the forum his puzzlement about the word *apprivoiser* (to tame). A conversation followed, (Appendix A), in which participants collaborated in refining their understanding of the verb's functioning in this context.

In such a reflective task, the pitfalls of traditional instructed metalinguistic activity are avoided, i.e. the teacher's expertise is backgrounded, and metalinguistic talk is not decontextualised. Instead it is contextualised within a process of personal inquiry and inter-personal engagement, which is considered to be one of the requirements for initial learning, see Batstone (2002: 3).

Although the conversation flowed from Student 1's personal interests, the *apprivoiser* metachat was not spontaneously triggered, but was 'directed', i.e. a metalinguistic task was prescribed: conversing about vocabulary. Judging from this example, the design of the task had been successful. However, many other learners in the study had actually failed to engage in the task. Those who commented metalinguistically did so in simple responses to their teachers, and the informal student-directed talk that we hoped to 'seed' via the task did not generally materialise, hence our remark: "*the difficulty lies in creating the conditions for learners to be* [...] *gradually led towards "fully contingent" conversational interaction which is nonetheless reflective on language and learning issues*" (Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999b: 60).

2.2 Spontaneous metachat

This example is also taken from the 1999 study and shows metachat happening serendipitously rather than instructed within the task. A teacher had declared herself 'sidérée' (stunned) by the quality of learners' work. Learners C. and E. metachatted to discover the meaning of '*sidérée*' (Table 1).

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

2.3 Semi-spontaneous metachat

Between a 'directed' exchange like the *apprivoiser* discussion, and the 'spontaneous' conversation about *sidérée* is a category which I call 'semi-spontaneous metachat'. Here the task provides the conversational orientation, but the learners are allowed freedom and time in order to develop both task-convergent and task-divergent (contingent) threads. Thus in the current data, metachat about *foot and mouth disease* developed from a remark about *pig swill*, brought on by shared reminiscences of school food. The 'directed' task was to talk about differences between *schools* in the UK and *écoles* in France.

3. The study

3.1 Research aims and questions

Earlier I proposed a gradation from 'directed' to 'free' along a dimension of control, which is a task parameter. Differences between controlled and free conversations can also be theorised so as to highlight their social functions. Eggins and Slade (1997) distinguish between 'pragmatic' and 'casual' conversations, the former tied to a transaction (commercial or educational), the latter "simply for the sake of talking". They claim that although casual talk presents a "sometimes aimless appearance and apparently trivial content", nevertheless casual conversations, like pragmatic ones, are "highly structured, functionally motivated semantic activit[ies]" (1997: 6). In this chapter, I explore metachat in various controlled, freer, pragmatic and casual contexts, to understand how it constructs the participants' online social world and what learning opportunities it affords them. I investigate how different tasks from the online project *Simuligne* help generate and sustain metachat. Various responses, from formal written production to spontaneous

conversations, were elicited to see whether metachat would occur, including spontaneous sustained metachat. I ask the following questions:

1. whereabouts in the online environment did the metachat occur? (e.g. did directed metachat occur within the more tightly instructed tasks, and did spontaneous metachat happen in what Bannink (2002: 281) calls the "cracks and seams" of the task?)

2. what was the metachat about and how did this relate to the learner's experience overall? (e.g. did learners metachat ~~in~~ differently when exchanging messages 'in character' within role plays, and when socialising?)

From these reflections I derive epistemological insights into the role of metalanguage and draw pedagogical implications about its facilitation through task design.

3.2 The participants

During April-July 2001, 40 part-time intermediate-to-advanced learners of French volunteered to take part in a project run by the UK Open University in collaboration with the University of Franche-Comté, France. Participants were UK-based and mainly (though not exclusively) native speakers of English. They were split into three groups, each with an online tutor. Each group included two French Native Speaker Helpers (NSHs), who were to act as cultural informants, taking care to avoid overlapping with the 'official' tutorial function.

3.3 The task

The project consisted of two tasks: a structured simulation (*Simuligne,* which gave its name to the overall project) and a semi-structured cultural task (*Interculture*). *Simuligne* was a 'simulation globale' (Caré and Debyser, 1995), in which communication is supported by a scenario requiring that learners consensually create a small community through role plays and other activities including collaborative assignment production. *Simuligne*'s scenario was based on the competitive creation of imaginary French cities possessing the attributes required for hosting a residential course. Table 2 summarises the simulation's phases.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Five of the 16 subtasks in Table 2 were designed to elicit metachat. These were expected to generate:

- onomastic and toponymical discussions [sub-tasks 5 and 6]

- talk about jobs vocabulary and associated pragmatics [sub-task 7]

- grammar and style negotiations (consistent with collaborative writing) [sub-tasks 8 and 9]

At three points during the 10 weeks, learners, tutors and NSHs also took part in *Interculture*, a web-based exercise coupled with an open-ended forum discussion, inspired by *Cultura* (Furstenberg *et al.,* 2001). This task could be completed in L1 if participants preferred. It was made up of these steps:

- UK learners and French NSHs individually answered questionnaires designed to bring emotions into play: free-associating with vocabulary likely to resonate with adults (e.g. *patriotism/patriotisme*, or *freedom/liberté*), a sentence-completion task (e.g. *a hero is someone who...*), and ten provocative situations to react to by saying what you would do next (e.g. *You see a woman slapping a child in the street*).

- participants consulted a Web form which juxtaposed the responses of the two groups. Juxtaposition allowed them to immediately 'see' similarities and differences in attitudes. They then debated the results asynchronously.

Neither in *Simuligne* nor in *Interculture* were students explicit told to talk about words. The aim in *Interculture* was to have metachat emerge 'naturally' from talk about other topics. As Gardner and Wagner (2004: 2) observe: "experimental settings focus on second language speakers' lack of competence and often make them look less competent and resourceful than naturally occurring data show them in fact to be". Although the context of the study was educational and not 'naturally-occurring' language, by backgrounding the nature of my research focus I aimed to avoid the anxiety that language learners associate with the technical terminologies which many assume are needed in order to talk about language.

The design and planned function of the various 'spaces' of the online environment are represented in Figure 1. Vertical black lines show where the less and more structured spaces of the project were. Grey oval shapes symbolise unplanned inter-communication

between spaces, as participants carried conversation topics across from their group forum

into the plenary forum, or from a chat session into an email, etc.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE]

Figure 1. The spaces for discussion and their relationship to the activities

4. Data collection and analysis

All interaction data, including private emails[2], were collected. Firstly I produced a

broad content analysis of the learners' messages (i.e. excluding those from tutors and

from NSHs), to assess how much metachat appeared in the different spaces and tasks of

the project. Secondly I analysed the metachat qualitatively, using a coding system

distinguishing between directed, semi-spontaneous and spontaneous metachat.

4.1 Quantitative analysis

Messages containing metachat represented 43% of the total learners' postings (n =

1894), contributed by 13 individuals out of the total population of 40. Table 3 shows the

quantity of metachat in the tutor group forums (the other spaces will be examined later).

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The tutor groups yielded low and high percentages of metachat, which prevents a clear picture from emerging, though in general Group 2 and Group 3 produced no or little metachat while role playing, and slightly more while socialising (before the role plays) and evaluating (afterwards). In contrast, Group 1 produced metachat during all these phases. Scrutiny of the content revealed that Groups 2 and 3's metachat exclusively reflected their preoccupation with naming the technological features (e.g. the French for *smiley*, *download*, or *hyperlink*). When the table was rewritten omitting the technology-related metachat from all groups, the pattern was clearer:

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Table 4 shows that Group 2 rarely metachatted and Group 3 never did. Group 1 is very productive of metachat. Given that the groups had the same number of participants and the same task but different tutors, one explanation of the differences could relate to tutors (although the analysis of tutoring issues is beyond the scope of this paper). Instead I suggest another explanation, related to group membership. Two members of Group 1 (M. and G.) had also participated in an earlier project run for 12 months in 2000-01, reported in Lamy and Hassan (2003), where they had been keen communicators. Two other assiduous participants in the 2000-01 study, N. and H., are also among the present cohort. Membership of the 2000-01 project is relevant to the present cohort's participation patterns, as confirmed by Figure 2, which shows total language-focused messages for each of the 13 individuals who metachatted. Veterans from the 2000-01 study are

identified by letters, everyone else by number. G., M., N. and H. are clearly more productive than newcomers, except number 3.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE]

Table 5, which includes the synchronous chat room sessions data, shows the extraordinary productiveness of the chat session in row 10. This featured a chat between two of the veterans discussed above, G. and M., and their tutor.

[INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Factors other than group dynamics also impacted. To show this, I now revisit the data, using task-design related criteria involving the parameters 'structuring' and 'control'.

Table 6 shows the extent to which the task involved a directed process and required structured outcomes. Row 1 shows interactions that were highly structured, because they were integral to the role plays. The next group (row 2, 3 and 4) shows more loosely structured interactions. In these, instructions were issued but the expected outcomes were open-ended. The third group (rows 5 and 6) shows unstructured activities where the initiative belonged to the learners.

[INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

The most metachat occurred in the semi-structured spaces, particularly in *Interculture* (row 2). I look at this task in greater detail shortly. First, I explore one more possible determinant of metachat productivity: the use of the L1.

Table 7 shows as separate groups those spaces where the L2 was prescribed (rows 1 and 2), those where L2 was encouraged but L1 was accepted (rows 3 and 4), and those where L1 was encouraged and L2 accepted (row 5). Because there was no instruction which language should be used in emails, these appear separately (row 6).

[INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE]

More metachat occurred when the L1 was encouraged or accepted. Row 5 shows that encouragement to use L1 (both as a means of expression and as a resource) produces the highest result (14%). The next highest impact is in the chat sessions, in row 3 (10%), where the choice of language of communication was free and code-switching was frequent.

In sum, task design parameters influencing levels of metachat are:

- task content (role plays, socialising, technological chat);

- complexity of task structuring;

- language used in the task.

Implications for task design are drawn in Section 6 below.

4.2. Qualitative analysis

I started the qualitative analysis by studying metachat content produced under varying conditions of task prescription: in *Simuligne* (highly-structured, with a prescribed

outcome), in *Interculture* (semi-prescribed, with an open-ended outcome), and in task-free spaces (chat rooms, emails). I searched for differences between messages exchanged 'in character' when role-playing, and others. It soon emerged that no such differences existed, as participants posted messages 'indiscriminately', i.e. metachat could occur in any space in the environment. So I moved my focus from degree of task structuring to degree of spontaneity, using the categories 'directed metachat', 'semi-spontaneous metachat' and 'spontaneous metachat', summarised in Table 8.

[INSERT TABLE 8 ABOUT HERE]

4.2.1 Content of directed metachat

The *Simuligne* role play forums yielded some metachat as expected in sub-tasks 5, 6, 7 and 9 (see Table 2 *supra*): creating the roles and producing the assignments. The collaborative construction of an anthem triggered discussion of the false friend *vers* (which means 'line', not 'verse'). When creating fictitious characters, learners explored vocabulary. For example, a participant decided to become 'Mme Moreau', commenting:

Moreau. Tête de Maure, c'est la couleur brun foncé. Ce n'est pas un nom imaginaire – c'est la couleur des cheveux. [*Moreau. Moor's head, referring to the colour dark brown. It's not a fantasy name, it refers to hair colour.*]

4.2.2 Content of semi-spontaneous metachat

Interculture provided the opportunity for learners to start with a prescribed topic and move on contingently. The prescribed topics that generated the most sustained

contingent metachat were *famille/family* and *école/school*, providing rich conversational environments in which learners reminisced about their childhood and plugged cultural gaps for NSHs. Discussion of a pair like *communauté/community* led on to personal narratives about one's role in one's community, going on to metachat, e.g.:

Mon travail s'agit plus d'eviter les accidents que les crimes. Vous savez sans doute que le mot « securite » se traduit en deux mots anglais. [*My work is more about avoiding accidents than preventing crime. As you probably know, the word 'sécurité' has two translations in English]*

4.2.3 Content of spontaneous metachat

Four productive mechanisms were identified in the spontaneous metachat: emotion, self-deprecation, taboos and linguistic advice.

(a) Emotion: i.e. postings about how to convey emotions experienced within the online community, such as frustration or, as in the forum below, laughter.

D.   I also chuckled (comment on dit en français?) [*I also chuckled (how do you say this in French?)]*

NSH   Ça pourrait être 'j'ai pouffé de rire' [*It could be 'I burst out laughing'*]

D.   J'ai pouffé de rire I believe would translate in English as 'to burst out laughing' or 'to be in stitches (fam)'. The Oxford dictionary definition of chuckle is "chuckle v. laugh quietly or inwardly; n. a quiet or suppressed laugh". Entre autres mots, deux genres de rire, un est bruyant, l'autre est discret (chuckle). [*In other words, here are 2 kinds of laughter, one*

noisy, the other quiet (chuckle)]

G.   I looked up my dictionary and found there is a difference between 'un rire étouffé' (a chuckle, smothered laughter) and 'étouffer de rire' (to choke with laughter). I learn something new every day with this Simuligne... :-)

D.   Simuligne is now a daily tonic for me. I am learning so much and I laugh so much each morning. Thus I have found the following in Oxford/Hachette: [he then quotes 16 lines of examples, idiomatic phrases and proverbs from the semantic field of *rire* to be found in this source] Bonne dimanche!

G.   All different kinds of 'rire' here: http://clicnet.swarthmore.edu/rire/lexique/r/rires.html

(b) Self deprecation: by calling themselves *oddball*, *bonkers*, *plonker*, *cinglé* (mad) or *tarte* (idiot), both national groups triggered explanations and translations.

(c) Taboos: words like *Gollywog* (Debussy's piano piece) or *dick* (spotted dick) triggered queries, hypotheses, suggested translations and multilingual comparisons.

(d) Learners provided linguistic expertise to NSHs. Typically, a learner would use an English phrase which a NSH then queried. These exchanges led to interlingual comparisons and sociolinguistic comments.

In sum, task design parameters influencing levels of metachat are:

- degree of control embedded within task instructions (directed process versus spontaneous process),

- task content (cultural comparison, personal revelations, emotion and taboos);

- language used in the task (learner linguistic expertise).

Implications for task design will be drawn in Section 6 below.

4.3 Summary of findings

I now map these findings onto my research questions. The answer to the first question (where in the online environment did the metachat occur?) is: everywhere, but mainly in the spaces reserved for more loosely structured tasks, where L1 was tolerated, particularly when the participants had had a prior opportunity to become acquainted with each other, albeit online only.

Relating to my second question (what was the content of the metachat and how did this relate to the learner's experience overall?), I found that through metachatting, participants explored their identity and familial biographies. I also found that the conditions that led to longer exchanges were those in which NSHs were involved, not – as had been planned – because they 'helped' learners access the L2 culture, but because they put themselves in the position of novices, allowing learners to display L1 linguistic and sociolinguistic expertise.

Redefining the term 'context' in communicative pedagogies, authors such as Batstone (2002), Belz (2001), Breen (2001) and Yonge and Stables (1998) have argued in favour of broadening it considerably, to include pre-task and post-task activities, as well as what goes on during the task but isn't directly related to it, thus accepting "as educationally valid the more complex, mitigative, interweaving of social and cognitive material" produced in the context of the educational experience (Yonge & Stables, 1998: 67). My scrutiny of the wider context of interaction among the learners in this project has shown that metachat and L1 use belong to that socio-cognitive material. However, to

support the notion that this material is educationally valid, we should also, as Verschueren (2004: 54) says, "demonstrate that the reflexivity involved is neither fortuitous nor trivial". To do this, I now offer a social semiotic perspective on some of my findings, highlighting the socio-cohesive function served by metachat, and the importance of L1 tolerance in sustaining threads.

5. Discussion

Like Gardner and Wagner (2004) and Belz (2002) I view the adult L2 speaker in educational settings not as a conversational beginner but as a fully fledged conversationalist whose panoply of linguistic, pragmatic and strategic resources is different but not inferior to that of a native speaker, and "whose focus is on the successful prosecution of their activities, using whatever means available" (Gardner & Wagner, 2004: 3). This is particularly true of adults who, as the literature on the post-compulsory sector stresses, bring to the learning their experience as professionals, family members and citizens, shifting in and out of these roles recursively and dynamically.

Epistemological and pedagogical consequences flow from this. To start with the pedagogical: the teacher no longer focuses on helping learners acquire the resources that are assumed to be possessed by native speakers, but on organising a setting in which they can successfully prosecute their activities and constructively confront their resources with those of others. Metachat is one of the means available to them in this endeavour, as it allows them to exercise agency through enacting real roles such as linguistic novices seeking support or linguistic experts conferring it, co-constructing knowledge from resources that are textual (the messages in the project), intertextual (books or web sites

alluded to) and autobiographical, thus promoting their self-expression and self-construction as 'whole' learners.

Epistemologically, I propose that we can understand the function of metachat by looking upon conversations as semiotic processes (for the participants involved in them) and semiotic objects (from the point of view of the analyst). In the semiotic process we use "the formal elements of language, the linguistic signifiers, as a resource for 'doing something with words', where 'doing' includes, of course, representation." (van Leeuwen, 2004: 123). *Simuligne* participants represented language and, through this representational function, they 'did something with words', i.e. they 'enacted' group relationships.

Applying a social semiotic perspective to four examples from my data, I suggest that metachat incorporates the learner's representational activity as well as his/her enacting of relationships with other resource-holders. The first example shows an Anglo-Colombian participant using her multilinguality to aid the semiotic process:

C'est a dire concubinage? Est-ce que vous utilisez ce mot en francais? En espagnol est un mot tombé en désuétude. [*Does this mean concubinage? Do you use this word in French? In Spanish it's an obsolete word.*]

Acquisitionists, might theorize code switches in terms of interlanguage, socio-cultural theorists in terms of intercultural awareness, and critical discourse analysts in terms of resistance (Norton, 2001). A social semiotic interpretation additionally accommodates the construct of identity, seen as created through the meaning-making processes that

underpin discourse. For example this learner represents the signifier *concubinage* in order to query both its denotation and its sociolinguistic status, marshalling her Hispanic resources to contrast *concubinage* with its Spanish cognate. Also, through her use of the plural 'vous', instead of 'tu' (used universally to single addressees elsewhere in the forum), she is enacting her relationship to some community[3]. By choosing 'vous', she is constructing her identity as an outsider, while through other pragmatic input (asking a direct question, offering relevant information), she simultaneously signals her readiness to work collaboratively with the resource-holders in that community. Further, to quote Belz (2002)'s study of learners playfully hybridising L1 and L2, our learner is also "conceptualising herself as a multicompetent language user with respect to all languages she knows, as opposed to a deficient communicator with respect to only her L2(s)" (2002: 32)[4].

The learner in the second example, a musician, is sending her tutor an audio file of one of her recordings, during the pre-task socialisation phase.

> Voici un tout petit morceau de 'Golliwog Cake Walk' by Debussy. La traduction du titre n'est pas très polie, donc, je le laisse en anglais. [*Here's a very short extract from Debussy's 'Golliwog Cake Walk'. The translation of the title is not very polite, so I'll leave it in English.*]

Her academic resource is her knowledge of the sociocultural value of the word *Golliwog* in English. By displaying this form, while hinting at its taboo status, she is

enacting some form of social relation[5] to the tutor and to the group, who responded by

requesting (tutor) and offering (group) clarification about its connotations.

Here are two more examples, showing longer interactions.

The first comes from a thread devoted to discussing the words *France/United*

Kingdom. One of the discussions concerned the phrase *Union Jack*. Note the code switch

at line 3.

Learner 1   il a des connotations négatives [*it has negative connotations*]

Learner 2   ça me fait penser au Front National [*it reminds me of the National Front*].

Learner 3   I differ. I am proud to be English

[Learner 3 goes on to explain his role in WW2 as well as the radical changes in society since those days]

Learner 2   I hope that nobody takes what I say TOO seriously

Learner 4   Just to lighten the tone a bit! I remember a French girl getting very upset at the term Great Britain. She thought the British were being arrogant, saying that their country was "great"… An interesting linguistic misunderstanding!"

[In subsequent threads, all return to using the L2]

Here the metachat supported the enactment of relations of power (over whose

vision of 'Britishness' is more legitimate), but also of loyalty to the group and concern

for its continuing welfare (see Learner 4's reference to the emotion in the thread and her

stated desire for a return to a calmer tone).

The following example also involves identity-building, as G. concludes a

discussion by making a statement on behalf of the community[6].

N.	At first glance, the french concept of 'Communauté' seems to have rather broader boundaries than the english one of 'Community. Does this reflect the stereotypical concept of the english as essentially parochial
NSH	Je ne comprends pas le terme 'parochial'? [*I don't understand the word 'parochial'*]
G.	Parochial: ça veut dire qu'on est pas très ouvert sur le monde [...] [*Parochial: it means you're not very open to the world [...]*]
H.	G. a dit la vérité ----- Ça vient de parish (en France paroisse) ça veut dire un petit secteur desservi par une église, un curé. Mais, c'est vrai que la connotation est d'un esprit étroit et conservateur. [*G. is right , it comes from 'parish' which means a small area served by a church, a priest. But it's true that the connotation is of narrow-mindedness and conservatism*]
G.	Il faut dire aussi que le sens du mot "parochial" que nous avons utilisé ici n'a rien à voir avec l'église - on n'est pas tellement religieux ici! [*It has to be said that the meaning of 'parochial' that we've been using has nothing to do with the church - we're not very religious here*]

Code-switching may effect various processes:

- cognitive, e.g. "scaffolding assistance" (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003:

  760);

- sociodynamic, e.g. integrating oneself into a group or helping outsiders to come in (Mondada, 2004: 38);

- socio-political, e.g. gaining "the other party's trust" (Morgan, 1997: 433).

I have shown that metachatting in different languages creates these affordances and additionally allows participants to exercise agency while transforming their understanding of their relationship to each of the languages that make up the wider context within which they operate.

6. Task design implications

I now turn the findings of this study into proposals for integrating metachat into learning programmes. How much of a learning programme should be dedicated to metalinguistic work is a question that only teachers can answer, so my suggestions are qualitative only.

I have shown that learners can turn any topic into an opportunity for metchatting. I will now identify the conditions under which this happens and I will draw some implications from three perspectives:

- task parameters (task structuring and control, task sequencing, face validity and task modelling);

- time and space for interaction;

- reinforcement of learner control and reduction of learner anxiety.

6.1 Task parameters

6.1.1. Structuring and control.

Tasks characterised by simple structures and lighter control from teachers should be favoured. Avoid building in many stages requiring what Crooks & Gass (1993, 19) call 'convergence'. Role-plays pressurize participants into resolving issues 'in character' hence may inhibit free exploration. Simulations demand completion of sub-tasks by certain milestones to ensure the timely progress of the collaborative outcome, risking curtailing student-led exploration. But as several writers have observed teachers may feel uncomfortable in reducing controls, through fear of loss of focus during class. For Furstenberg *et al* (2001), teacher control produces "a reassuring expectation […] that at some point the chapters will have been covered, the relevant questions asked and answered. With *Cultura*, of course, the questions are many and the book is being written as the course unfolds. The data produced by students varies and is enriched from day to day, making the process of interpretation itself the focus of the class." (Furstenberg et al, 2001: 82). Norton (2000) addresses the issue from her point of view as teacher of English to speakers of other languages but identifies a similar dilemma: "the lived experiences and identities of language learners need to be incorporated into the formal curriculum. I have noted, however, that essentializing student experience will compromise the conditions necessary for reflection" (Norton, 2000: 145), unless a mechanism is created to foster this reflection. Like Furstenberg and Norton, I consider that tasks in which pressure to cover the teacher's programme is removed or lessened, such as inquiry-based tasks or open-ended discussions, including tasks legitimating the adduction of personal memories, are supportive of this reflective aim. Metachat fulfils these requirements whilst additionally offering L2 knowledge enhancement.

6.1.2. Task sequencing

To further contain possible loss of focus, sequences should be constructed as a mix of cognitive, discursive and social concerns, which as *Cultura* and *Interculture* have shown are better than mono-parameter tasks at leading learners to assume control. A good pattern would be to start with a reflective cognitive phase, requiring analysis and comparison, followed by a phase dedicated to both cognitive and socio-affective exchanges. A consequence of taking seriously the teacher's new role, i.e. facilitating the creation of a setting in which learners can authentically work with their own resources and those of their peers, is that emotions and contentious topics should be viewed not as conversational parasites, but as part of the context that supports the learning. Teachers should be encouraged to work with rather than against these sensitive topics.

6.1.3. Face validity and task modelling

Tasks should have face validity. They should "be contingent upon learners sharing an interpersonal orientation to context which supports and *validates* [interpersonal] behaviour" (Batstone, 2002: 6, my emphasis). Face validity is important in shaping a shared orientation to metachat, as this participant comment illustrates: "We're learning from each other. Though in a sense you could say we are not focused, we're dilettante-ing around, wandering from one thing to the next". A strategy for legitimating metachat to the learners might be to introduce the project via sessions aimed at raising awareness about metalanguage, using electronic sources as stimuli. For credibility and entertainment value, short topical pieces from a popular expert could be

used (with the proviso that this will not give students the opportunity to 'see' a thread in action and model their interactivity on it). Examples for French are Alain Rey's column at:

http://www.radiofrance.fr/chaines/france-

inter01/information/chroniques/chronique/archives_rey.php?chronique_id=50

and the CIEP's (International Centre for Pedagogical Studies) page at http://www.ciep.fr/chroniq/index.htm. To provide an interactive task model, conversational extracts from electronic discussion lists could also be proposed, following Fant (2001: 91) (with the proviso that learners will need to be warned that content is not always authoritative). A non-moderated example for French is *Franc-Parler*, a portal for "the world community of teachers of French", at http://www.francparler.org/forum/ . A moderated example for multilingual debate through the medium of English is LANTRA-L, a free password-protected email list for translaters and interpreters (joining information at http://www.geocities.com/Athens/7110/lantra.htm).

6.2 Time and space for interaction

This study has confirmed Lamy & Goodfellow (1999a: 468) in showing that the more time is allowed for social induction and the establishing of group membership, the higher the number reflective interactions. Conference access should be arranged so that learners 'meet' socially before course start. The induction phase will hold different interest for distance learners, for whom this is an opportunity to counter their isolation, and for campus-based students who may know each other well already. For these too,

however, community-building is valuable, though it may rely rather more on sharing

immediate concerns such as local activities and events.

Data analysis and Figure 1 have shown that metachat occurred in different spaces

of the project, and were not confined to sub-tasks that were meant to produce a

metalinguistic outcome. Students metachatted wherever and whenever the opportunity

arose, which supports the requirement for flexibility of task structure. However, we also

know that good practice in online conferencing involves strong structuring of forums,

with thread topics clearly identified by appropriate headers. To resolve this dilemma,

provide the architecture and navigational aids (for reassurance), but expect them to be

subverted and be prepared to support the metachat wherever it occurs.

6.3. Reinforcement of learner control and reduction of learner anxiety

Insights can be drawn from the way that, in this project, three sources of anxiety

were addressed.

First, there was no pressure to use technical linguistic terminology. Task

instructions should be written with no explicit requirement to use metalanguage. A

priority on cultural comparison or personal experience will, without contriving a

metalinguistic exercise, produce sufficient lexical gaps to foster metachat.

Second, there was time to discuss technology-related anxieties. A mixed strategy

involving task design and teacher training can be used:

- Ensure that sufficient time was available, both before and during the task,

  for learners to discuss technological procedures. Some will spontaneously

  adopt expert roles and provide procedural guidance to their peers. A space

could also be created for FAQs, to be populated by participants'
contributions.

- Teachers should refrain from providing the technological answers, but
  instead encourage L2 peer advice and if appropriate be prepared to make
  the technological processes themselves a metalinguistic focus of the class.

Finally, participants' mastery over more than one language was valued and
legitimated.

- Build the use of L1 into some of the tasks. In *Interculture*, use of L1 is
  triggered by a sequence involving a specially-designed lexico-semantic task
  and sentence-completion exercise, leading to an information-gap-based
  metachat. Alternatively, use a different lead into the metachat: for example
  close analysis of a text or film extract.

- Where possible, take advantage of group multilingualism by seeking pre-
  sessional information about participants' linguistic profiles and arranging
  groups so as to maximise cross-linguistic contact. Web-based environments
  make this easy to organise, as L3 populations and materials can be harnessed
  more easily.

Reducing anxiety in these different ways helps learners to seize control of all the
meta-linguistic resources available within the group, express their identity and exercise
their agency.

7. Conclusion

Working from a socio-cultural framework towards one informed by social semiotics, I have presented metalinguistic conversations as vehicles for the simultaneous pursuit of cognitive and socio-affective negotiations, and the realisation of learners' sense of self and orientation to the community (whether the local learning community or the wider target language community). In this outlook, the metachatting learner's role shifts from recipient (to whom the information is transmitted) to autonomous agent. Through analysis of interactive learner data, I have demonstrated that metachat is "neither fortuitous nor trivial", and offers rich possibilities for identity-building and enactment of agency within social settings, while discharging its traditional function as a source of information on the L2. Accordingly I have made suggestions for task designers and teachers who are interested in adding metachat to their L2 teaching repertoire.

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Appendix A: Metatalk

'Apprivoiser' conversation, with English translation below.

Learner 1	Le mot 's'apprivoiser' m'intéresse. Apprivoiser veut dire 'to tame, domesticate or to make more sociable' et s'apprivoiser, 'to become more tame or sociable or to become accustomed to'. Je l'ai chercher dans le Petit Robert *[...]* Mais je fais une digression. Que veut dire**,** **'**à tout ce qui, s'apprivoise pour l'éternité'
Learner 2	Peut-être le fait qu'il risquait sa vie tous les nuits qu'il volait, et lentement il s'accoutumait à l'idée d'une autre vie qui durait plus longtemps. Je ne suis pas sûr. à bientôt. A
Learner 3	[…] Je voudrais proposer que dans le contexte vous citez des pensées de Fabian, St Ex. l'utilise en façon très ironique, ou, peut- être philosophique. […] Donc ma traduction de votre phrase 'à tout ce qui, s'apprivoise pour l'éternité' est 'everything that prepares us for death' ou 'everything that gets us ready for eternity'. Sans aucun doute, tout cela est bien évident à vous et soit il y a des autres interprétations, soit je me trompe. Amitiés, R
Learner 1	[…] Merci de vos idées pour la traduction de la phrase que j'ai citée. C'est intéressant. Richard a proposé quelque chose d'autre. Toujours, on peut lire St. Ex aux niveaux différents.[…]

Learner 1	The word 's'apprivoiser' is interesting to me. Apprivoiser means 'to tame, domesticate or to make more sociable' and s'apprivoiser, 'to become more tame or sociable or to become accustomed to'. I looked it up in the Petit Robert dictionary *[...]* But I digress. What is the meaning of **'**à tout ce qui, s'apprivoise pour l'éternité' ?
Learner 2	Maybe the fact that he risked his life whenever he did a night flight and slowly he was getting used to the idea of some other life, lasting much longer. I'm not sure. Bye for now, A.
Learner 3	I'd like to propose that in the context that you mention, the thoughts of Fabian, St Ex is using irony or may be is talking philosophically. […] So my translation of your quotation 'à tout ce qui, s'apprivoise pour l'éternité' is 'everything that prepares us for death' ou 'everything that gets us ready for eternity'. No doubt this is all very obvious to you. But I think, although I may be wrong, that there are different interpretations. All the best, R.
Learner 1	Thank you for your ideas for the translation of the sentence that I quoted. It's interesting, R. has come up with yet another idea. St Ex may always be read at different levels.

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[1] Online synchronous exchanges happen in real time. They may be written (e.g. 'textchat') or spoken (e.g. Internet telephony). Asynchronous exchanges happen as and when the user wishes to communicate. They may be written (e.g. discussion groups on the Internet) or spoken (e.g. audio file attachments).

[2] With participants' permission.

[3] 'Some' community, because it is not clear whether 'vous' represents the NSHs in the project, or the French in general. Picking up on Norton (2001)'s terminology, we could say that 'vous' is the 'imagined community' of which this learner is not a member.

[4] In the plural in the original.

[5] A finer-grained interpretation, specifying the effects of the learner's pragmatic choices in this situation (e.g. to hold back an explanation of 'Gollywog', thus excluding the tutor from the expert group, and to affirm membership of the L1 community by displaying her adherence to its sociocultural codes) is beyond the scope of this paper.

[6] This community may be the turn-takers in the discussion, the tutor group or the UK population.