A blended learning scenario to enhance learners' oral production skills

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Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of a mobile assisted blended learning scenario for pronunciation in Korean language. In particular, we analyze how asynchronous oral communication between learners of Korean and native speakers via "kakaotalk" (an open source mobile phone application) may be beneficial to the learner in terms of pronunciation. Our methodological approach is based on task resolution (Ellis, 2003) in peer-to-peer collaborative settings and the spaced repetition concept (Ebbinghaus, 1885, cited by Dempster, 1988). The outcomes of our study show that the learners appreciated the possibility to interact with native speakers but most of them preferred synchronous communication for training their pronunciation skills.

Keywords: Mobile learning, oral skills, pronunciation, task, intercultural awareness.

1. Introduction

The LANSAD foreign language centre at the Université Stendhal Grenoble (France) provides conversation classes in 15 languages. The purpose of these classes is to give students of all disciplines the opportunity to "exercise and improve oral communication skills"[1]. The courses include face-to-face classes and individual practicing on the university's e-learning platform *Esprit* [2]. Students are asked to prepare the face-to-face classes with tasks and exercises based on authentic material provided on the platform. In doing so, the students can collaborate with their peers and ask for support from the tutor on the online discussion forum. Since its foundation, the Lansad centre has aimed to initiate and promote a reflective process in order to improve implemented teaching models and to produce guidelines for best practices in foreign language teaching (Masperi & Hamez, 2013: 13).

In the fall semester of 2013, the Lansad centre opened a conversation class for beginners (A1- A2 CEFR) of Korean as a foreign language. Six French students attended four face-to-face sessions with their teacher and did their training on the *Esprit* platform.

Following the results of the analysis of the fall semester (Clot, 2013-2014 forthcoming), all the students reported being satisfied with the purpose and content of their Korean conversation class. The students particularly appreciated the fun aspect and the authentic use of the language (e.g. speed-dating with a group of Korean students) which was motivating and helped them learn easily. However, the students also pointed out that they would have wished for more systematic input with regards to grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary and more sessions which they considered to be helpful for a more noticeable progression.

Asked about their learning behaviour, our students mentioned the use of applications and the Internet that is accessible via their tablets or smart-phones in order to look up vocabulary and to listen to word pronunciation. We would like to point out that not only

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did all of our conversation class students own a smart-phone, but that they also used the KakaoTalk [3] application regularly to exchange text, audio and video messages with their friends.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Language learning in collaboration with a native speaker has been reported as highly beneficial in particular in *tandem* settings where two native speakers cooperate in order to learn from each other. According to Helmling (2002), *tandem* learning is a contractual situation which binds both partners to respect the principles of reciprocity, i.e. mutual support and autonomy, i.e. learner responsibility of content and method. As many Korean students learn French at the Université Stendhal Grenoble, we decided to take into account these principles for the design of our conversation class.

Our target group is mainly composed of elementary learners of Korean and French. At an early stage of language learning, we consider that training one's memory is important to progress rapidly. We therefore refer to the spaced repetition concept (Ebbinghaus, 1885, cited by Dempster, 1988) which allows learners to memorize items such as vocabulary or sounds effectively. This concept is based on the *spacing effect* which implies that people remember items more easily when they are studied a few times in increasing intervals over a long period of time.

In order to train the skills mentioned above, the conversation class is based on the task based teaching approach (Ellis, 2003). In particular, the topic the students worked on was based on songs which were supposed to enhance the learner's performance in language learning. As Guimbretière (1994: 84, cited by Zedda, 2005: 4) states, "the advantage of using songs in language teaching is a powerful tool to **motivate learners** in the first place. Through songs, learners can **perceive new sounds more easily**. Moreover, music and rhythm can **free learners of certain communication apprehensions** and can thus lead them to **speak more fluently**." (our translation and bold highlighting).

The use of communication technologies in education and especially in language learning is becoming more and more common and the benefits in terms of learner autonomy and customization of learning are regularly pointed out by researchers. We would like to mention a trend in the use of communication technologies which in our view might be promising for language learning and to which researchers refer to as mobile learning (Kukulska-Hulme & Shields, 2008). A large survey conducted in June 2012 by the CREDOC (Centre de recherche pour l'étude et l'observation des conditions de vie - French observatory and research center on living conditions) revealed that 88 % of French people use a web-enabled cell phone (Bigot & Croutte, 2012 : 9). Nearly 16 million people in France own a smart-phone most of whom are between 18 and 24 years old (*op.cit.*: 37). Whereas exchanging short text messages is one of the most common practices in the everyday use of mobile phones, many smart-phone owners also use their phone to browse the Internet (79%), to check their emails (65%) and to download applications (63 %) (*op.cit.*: 47). According to our own observations, more and more people seem to use their smart-phones or tablets to access the Internet in order to update their knowledge, to exercise the brain and to learn a language.

This brief review of some theoretical concepts we refer to in our research leads us to the following hypotheses:

- The participating students will get more familiar with sounds and stress and be able to memorize vocabulary and colloquial expressions more easily.
- The participants will develop strategies to understand spoken language.
- The students will develop intercultural awareness and cultural insight.

- Asynchronous communication might contribute to becoming more self-confident (Kim & Mangenot, 2009) and thus to speaking more naturally.

3. Objectives

Given the suggestions our students made (cf. *supra*), we decided to propose a revised didactic setting which should allow our students to work more systematically on linguistic issues and to learn at their own pace. In particular, the revised setting aims at:

- Motivating students to learn
- Giving incentives to practice Korean at any time and at their own pace

Moreover, we expected the students to develop the following skills:

- language skills (e.g. vocabulary, sounds)
- intercultural competence (e.g. getting to know oneself and discover and interact with the Other)
- methodological competence : learning to learn (e.g. reflecting on own learning, collaborating with peers)

4. Didactic scenario of the Korean conversation class

For the summer semester of the academic year 2013-2014, we proposed a didactic scenario based on the concept of telecollaboration which refers to "the application of online communication tools to bring together classes of language learners in geographically distant locations to develop their foreign language skills and intercultural competence through collaborative tasks an project work" (O'Dowd, 2011). Mangenot & Nissen (2012) point out that telecollaboration can include distance learning (e.g. *Cultura*) and/or blended learning (e.g. *Français en première ligne*).

As the setting of the LANSAD conversation classes follows blended learning principles (Quintin et al., 2009), we opted for a blended solution for our Korean telecollaboration class scenario.

Considering this, the French students work on tasks focusing on linguistic aspects during the face-to-face conversation class. Incorporating distance learning, they cooperate on a one-to-one basis with Korean native speakers using their smart-phones in order to continue working on their tasks anytime and anywhere (Kukulska-Hulme & Shields, 2008). The Korean students were actually attending French classes at the CUEF French language centre of the University Stendhal Grenoble and participated voluntarily in the project. The Korean students were selected according to their motivation and level in French as they were supposed to use French as a *lingua franca* when communication with their French tandem partners. For the exchange was to be beneficial for both partners, all students were invited to choose songs, i.e. French songs for the Korean students and Korean songs for the French students. The French students were then asked to draw by lot a French song to which their tandem partner was associated.

According to the set objectives of our conversation class, the task we wanted the students to work on had to include socio-cultural and linguistic aspects of language learning and also be motivational and fun. We therefore decided that the task should be a karaoke session at the end of the semester. In fact, Karaoke bars, where friends or colleagues gather in separate rooms to sing songs and have fun together, are very popular in Korea. As pointed out by Rousse-Marquet (2012), K-pop (Korean pop) has recently become quite popular in Europe and especially among the young generation in France. Learning Korean with pop songs could therefore be motivational for our French students and also beneficial for developing their overall language skills as mentioned earlier (Guimbretière, *op.cit.*).

The outline of the working plan is as follows. During the first session, the French students work with their teacher on a song in order to learn techniques to identify the chorus line and to learn how to pronounce the words and expressions the song contains. While listening to the song, the students were told to recognize words. The teacher then recorded the pronunciations with a voice recorder of whoever would identify a word.

In order to prepare the second face-to-face session, the students were asked to practice their pronunciation and to send three Korean pop songs of their choice to their teacher. In the meantime, we selected Korean students in cooperation with the teacher of French. Then we gave them instructions of how to proceed and gave them advice on how to learn in tandem with their partners.

During the second face-to-face session, the French students compared their recordings with the original song and repeated the pronunciation of each word they had identified. Finally, all the students sang the chorus line together. The French students also picked the song and phone numbers related to their tandem partner.

Using distance learning, the students worked on their own songs with their tandem partner in order to practice pronunciation. The peer work was carried out asynchronously and supported by the use of the KakaoTalk application as it offers free voice and video messaging as well as text chatting features.

The third face-to-face session was dedicated to individual tutoring. We spent time with each student in order to discuss their learning experience and difficulties they had encountered. We also talked about their learning progress and gave advice for the last distance period to come. The Korean students got the same feedback in a special session we held together with their French teacher.

The last face-to-face meeting was dedicated to the karaoke session where the French and Korean students were supposed to meet for the first time in person. We provided a karaoke machine to enable the students to sing the song with their partners, i.e. one sings the verses of the song and his or her tandem partner sings the chorus line. We also asked the native speakers to evaluate the quality of the performance of their peer students regarding their overall presentation and pronunciation.

5. Methodology

This study is based on an analysis of a blended conversation class in which seven French and seven Korean students participated. The French students had an estimated A1.2 – A2.1 (CEFR) level in Korean whereas the Korean students were ranged at an estimated A2.1 (CEFR) level in French.

Our corpus consists of the French students' testimonies we collected during the feedback session and the written responses of the French and Korean students to a questionnaire we asked them to fill out during the last session. The questions referred to the following issues : i) the satisfaction of the content of the conversation class ii) the learning strategies the students experimented with iii) tandem collaboration iv) their feelings with the mobile blended learning scenario and v) suggestions. In order to objectify the results, we based our analysis method on the principle of "data triangulation" (Van der Maren, 1999).

6. Results

Regarding the learning strategies of listening and pronunciation the students applied, our analysis of the data show that most of the French students mentioned that they referred to written text in order to identify lexical units associated with the sounds they were listening to. Three learners listened to their song several times while reading the lyrics before recording themselves. Three other students first listened to their song,

then repeated orally what they were listening to, and finally recorded themselves. One student told us that he or she listened to the song first, then transcribed the lyrics using Romanization before reading the transcription aloud. This student finally recorded his or her reading several times before submitting it to his or her tandem partner. These responses all reveal that students usually repeated several times and revised their recordings before submitting their oral production which might be helpful for practicing pronunciation.

According to the questionnaire, all students used the KakaoTalk application to record their voice and send the recordings to their tandem partners. One of the French students noted that "I can record whenever I want and the fact that someone answers and gives me feedback later is really motivating". This kind of statement might indicate that mobile learning is being utilized. However, the use of KakaoTalk failed when the students were asked to cooperate from a distance with their tandem partners. Six out of seven French students stated that they had met their Korean tandem partner several times in person in order to work on their pronunciation. Even if the Korean and French students appreciated the possibility to record their voice and to communicate asynchronously with their partners via KakaoTalk, they preferred to meet their partners face-to-face in order to work on the accuracy of their pronunciation. The students mentioned that they communicated via text chat but felt uncomfortable when it came to recording the correct version and to give explanations and advice orally. They also stated that they missed not having instant feedback on their pronunciation when working asynchronously with KakaoTalk. Moreover, according to the French students, the explanations of some Korean tandem partners would not have always been easy to understand. Thus, meeting with their tandem partners in person allowed them to work more intensively on their pronunciation and to communicate more easily. In addition, some students mentioned that they not only worked on their pronunciation but also on the meaning of the lyrics. Only one French student stated having deliberately avoided meeting with his or her Korean tandem partner and said that "as we don't know each other I am less shy [to exchange audio recordings]." Interestingly, nobody mentioned the use of the video recording feature of KakaoTalk with which the students could have filmed their articulatory apparatus in order to give advice on pronunciation. This might be either due to the fear of exposing one's shortcomings to what the student above mentioned, or due to technical reasons. Indeed, one French student wrote that it took quite a long time to transfer video files. Another student noted that the video recording time was very short which didn't encourage him or her to use the video feature.

Regarding the issue of intercultural learning, a French student mentioned that "meeting with a person whose mother tongue is different, who comes from a country with different traditions and where the lifestyle is different from one's own, allows me to learn about the culture and its people and really motivates me to visit the country and learn the language. I could talk about everything with my tandem partner. We were both quite curious and eager to get to know each other and to learn about each other's culture."

From this statement, we may infer that our telecollaboration scenario contributed to some extent to a greater awareness of the self and allowed the students to reflect -at least to some degree- on their own cultural background.

Finally, most participants of the Korean conversation class stated being satisfied with the learning modality. They said that it allowed them to learn several colloquial expressions in Korean, to improve their listening comprehension skills and to practice their pronunciation. They also stated having learned cultural aspects while having a lot of fun. In short, they found this modality "practical, fun, educational, and motivating".

7. Conclusion

All in all, the students seemed to be satisfied with our conversation class. In particular, they appreciated the fact that they could interact with native speakers, which was seen as beneficial in terms of both language learning and learning about cultural aspects. The self-assessments during the feedback sessions and peer reviews by native speakers actually revealed an increase in the quality of their pronunciation. Nevertheless, we have identified several aspects which we think deserve more detailed analysis.

For organizational or ergonomic reasons, most students preferred to meet their tandem partner in person in order to work on their pronunciation. It appears to be more effective for them to receive feedback immediately on their pronunciation practice. Face-to-face meetings to exchange explanations related to the correction seem also to be preferred by the students as this would allow a better understanding of word definitions and meaning, and thus ensure the right understanding of each other. Nevertheless, the possibility to record one's voice and to practice pronunciation alone was generally appreciated. The interviews we conducted during the feedback session have revealed that students had experimented with different techniques to learn how to pronounce and to overcome difficulties. For instance, some students decided not only to communicate asynchronously but also to meet with their partners physically. From that, we may deduce that our telecollaboration setting promotes the learner's empowerment to some extent. Although the tandem partners seemed to communicate and to cooperate quite a lot, which we had supposed to promote intercultural learning, the statements of the students regarding this are fairly implicit. It may be that the duration of the exchange was too short to make students become aware of intercultural aspects (attitudes, behaviours, ways of doing...) or that the evaluation method using mainly written questionnaires was not conducive enough to generate deeper meta-cognitive reflection. *A priori*, such thinking does not occur naturally but requires support from the tutor or has to be explicitly practiced with specific tasks for example.

If we were to repeat the experience, we would advocate keeping the possibility to do recordings which was seen as a great way to practice one's pronunciation and language production. However, we would reconsider the peer work element and particularly the way students collaborate for pronunciation practicing. Finally, we consider it to be necessary to explain intercultural learning and would introduce a logbook, in addition to accompanying intercultural reflection through feedback and peer group sessions with the tutor.

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Notes

[1] See http://lansad.u-grenoble3.fr/

[2] See http://flodi.grenet.fr/esprit/index2.php

[3] See following link for a description of the KakaoTalk application: http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/KakaoTalk