

## Collaborative Activities in a French Language Distance Learning Course

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**Abstract:** *The method of collaborative distance learning has been applied for years in a number of distance learning courses, but they are relatively few in foreign language teaching. The context of this research is a hybrid type distance learning of French for specific purposes, which combines different activities for the realization of a common problem-solving task. The study focuses on learning activities carried out in small, tutor-led groups by means of a distance learning platform. By analysing the learner's perceptions of the realised training, we have tried to see to what extent the collaborative type learning activities and on-line interactions contribute to the development of the competence expectations at the end of the course, as well as to assess its impact on the learning process.*

**Key words:** *Distance Learning, Collaborative Activities, Online Learning, Foreign Language Learning*

### INTRODUCTION

Online distance learning has been used for over a decade in university contexts, providing access to high-quality education for an increasing number of students. What sets it apart is its considerable flexibility exhibited at different levels: content, structure, setting, mode of distance guidance, monitoring and control. Bringing together pedagogical innovations and multimedia technologies, its development represents a twofold evolutionary process: both in technological and pedagogical aspects.

The present research is related to the context of a hybrid type distance learning of French for special purposes in the area of tourism - FOS Tourisme which combines different learning activities aimed at the accomplishment of a common task in a situation: a problem solving situation.

The aim of the research is to find out to what extent the collaborative learning activities planned in the learning scenario contribute to the development of the competences expected at the end of the course and what their level of efficiency and adequacy is with regards to the initially set targets.

### The Collaborative Approach

The Collaborative Approach has been applied in numerous distance learning courses in different subjects for years but those in foreign language teaching are relatively few and new, due to the long-standing domination of the Communicative Approach. Nevertheless, in recent years the number of distance learning courses in foreign languages with collaborative orientation and online interaction has been on the increase.

Generally speaking, modern distance learning in foreign languages focuses on working in small groups to develop knowledge in collaboration and is synchronized with the Action-Orientated Approach, a didactic method underlying the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) of the Council of Europe, which currently defines the trends in European foreign language didactics [3].

Collaborative learning is an active approach where the learner is required to work to construct knowledge using the group as a source of information, a motivational agent, a means of mutual aid and support and a preferred place for interaction for the purpose of gaining knowledge collectively [6].

Usually learning is stimulated by socio-cognitive conflicts and knowledge is constructed by reconsidering the viewpoint as a result of discussion, argumentation and exchange of information and ideas among the learners.

Deaudelin and Nault stress the importance of the creation of learning community and the collective (cooperative and collaborative) construction of knowledge, underlining

that in collaborative learning students “share a common goal consisting of enhancing the collective knowledge in the framework of the learning community and, at the same time, aid the individual gain of knowledge by each learner by being part of that same community” [5].

There are three main reasons why we have chosen the Collaborative Approach:

- First, because one of its major features is the mutual complementation and interdependence between the individual and collective character of learning. As Henri and Cayrol point out, collaborative learning is an active process aiming at progressive construction of knowledge which takes into account both the individual and reflexive character of learning, on the one hand, and the social relation through interaction in the group, on the other [6]. Here, the group is the catalyst of learning. By setting a common goal and undertaking a common task, the group learns and constructs its knowledge. At the same time, this allows each learner to come up against the ideas, views and opinions of the rest of the group, which, in turn, bolsters his or her learning;
- Second, because collaboration puts learners in real-life situations and makes conditions for intensive interactions that allow the joint construction of knowledge. The activities planned in the learning scenario for FOS Tourisme are related to the real professional world for which our students are trained and where team work is of paramount importance;
- Third, because the collaborative type of learning combines most efficiently with the action-orientated approach, which focuses on the realization of a common “social” task through joint work in a foreign language.

### **Context of the research**

FOS Tourisme is a distance learning course in French for special purposes. It was initiated as a project during the Master UTICEF<sup>2</sup> and continued four years after a series of changes and improvements. It is taken by students of Management in Tourism who are at level B1/B2 of the CEFR. As they are trained to become managers in the area of tourism, the course aims at providing them with the necessary competences for successful integration in professional life, where they will have to use the foreign language for work purposes, including with native speakers.

This is a hybrid online course which includes an alternation of classroom and distance learning periods, the distance learning ones (delivered through UNIV-Rct<sup>3</sup>) comprising its main part – about 80%. The hybrid type of learning combines classroom and distance learning phases in a different degree, with the latter realized by means of integrated e-learning environments and including innovative elements both of technological aspect and regarding design and scenario writing [2].

The choice of the hybrid type distance learning was determined by the specifics of the subject to be taught, a foreign language, where the development of some competences related to the use of spoken language is more difficult to some extent in a distance learning environment.

As has already been mentioned, most of the work on the course is done distantly. Short classroom attendance is required only at the beginning, the middle and the end and each of these periods is devoted to a particular task: learning how to use the platform, coordination of distance learning activities; further development of speaking skills; and completing a final test and a course assessment survey, respectively.

Students work together in small groups or teams of three to four under the guidance of an online tutor or instructor to carry out a common, real-life professional task in the target language, which leads to creating a common output. The aim is to develop a range of linguistic, cognitive and metacognitive competences. The task is a

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<sup>2</sup> Master UTICEF – “Using ICT for Education”, Master degree of the University of Strasbourg, France.

<sup>3</sup> UNIV-Rct – distance learning collaborative platform created by the Multimedia Labs of the University of Strasbourg.

complex one and has to be performed in consecutive stages using an assortment of interrelated activities. It is also authentic (a typical professional activity), has the objective of generating a particular output in a particular context and is oriented to achieving a common goal through collaborative work. Online interactions which are outlined in the learning scenario are of the type: learner ↔ learner, learner ↔ instructor, learner ↔ team, instructor ↔ team. In practice, during the working process, they overlap and form the collaborative learning dynamics of the training (Fig.1).

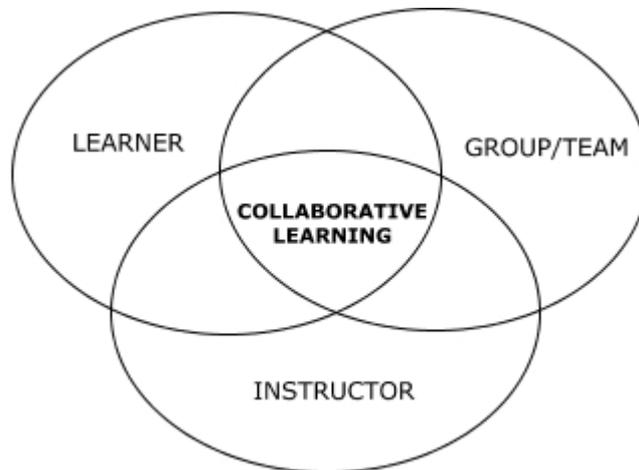


Fig. 1 Collaborative dynamics in the distance learning course FOS Tourisme

The learning scenario is based on the social constructivist model and has at its core the Collaborative Approach. The scenario includes the alternation of individual and collaborative activities which are also interdependent. On the basis of their individual activities and individual output, students join forces and work together as a team to resolve a problem situation and realize joint output. The collective output is a result of a number of interactions among the learners within the group and with the tutor (Fig.2).

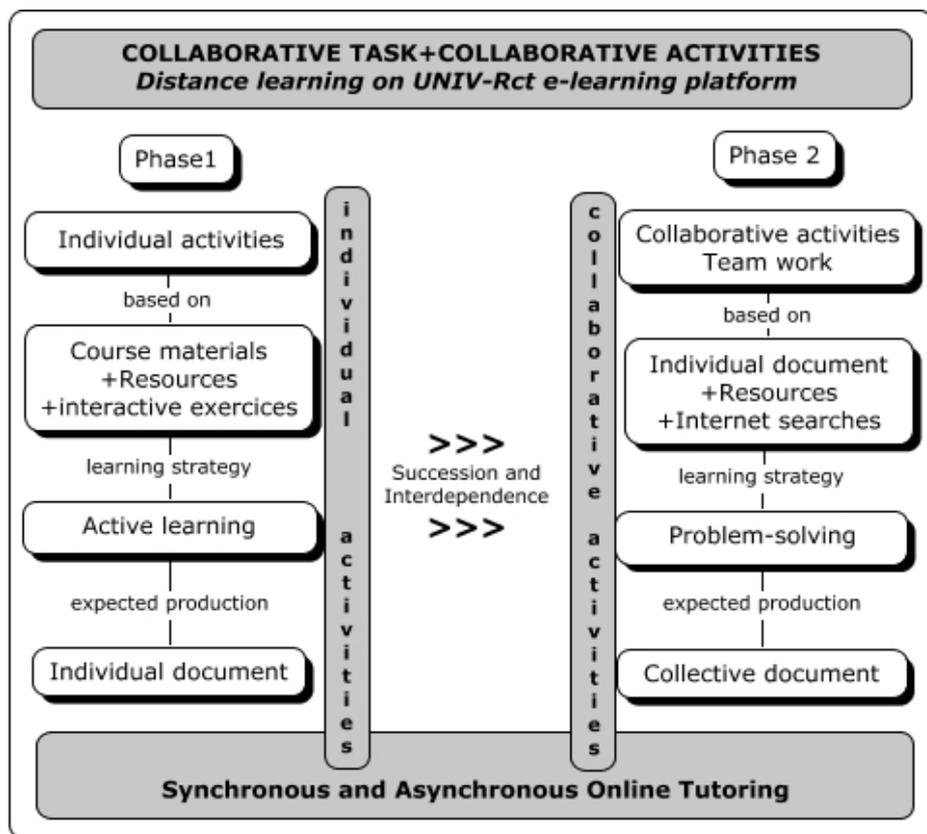


Fig. 2 Collaborative activities in a distance learning course - FOS Tourisme

Students try to take into account the views and ideas of each team member. The aim is that they reach, through sharing information and resources, discussion and argumentation, agreement and a common standpoint and, foremost, a consensus regarding the joint output and the group model of knowledge reflecting the different views.

The interactive communication is carried out entirely in the target language and is an integral part of the learning process. The tutoring is proactive and/or reactive depending on the learning needs and stage of the course and is an integral part of the learning scenario.

### **Methodology of the Study**

The study is based on quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data obtained from a survey done by students at the end of the course with the aim of finding out their opinion regarding the efficiency of the learning activities performed and the nature of the realized interactions.

As a result of the analysis of the data supplemented with the tutor's observations and experience (participatory analysis), we were able to obtain both a general and a detailed picture of the applied pedagogical practices.

### **Results and Discussion**

The course was taken by 21 students, for whom distance learning was a completely new form and who used a distance learning platform for the first time. For most of them (71%), team work was also a new experience. Nevertheless, the students demonstrated a high level of adaptability to the new learning strategies as well as eagerness to experiment with a novel type of education, attracted mostly by the flexibility it offered with regards to timing and space and the opportunity to use ICT throughout the course.

In the survey completed at the end of the course with the aim of finding out the students' opinions regarding the efficiency of the learning process (learning activities, nature of the realized interactions, tutor's role, etc.), the collaborative scenario was evaluated as interesting, useful and motivating by 95% of the learners. The majority of the students (81%) expressed their satisfaction that most of the work had been carried out in a team, while all students admitted that it had brought extra value to the learning process. The other benefits mentioned included the opportunity to share ideas, exchange information and experience, the diversity of opinions and, mostly, the support they could get from other team members and the tutor.

The students who declared a preference to working individually gave as a main argument the difficulties related to communication and interaction with some of the other team members and their dissatisfaction with the final output. However, they also admitted that, if working with other colleagues, they could have appreciated the advantages of joint work. This brings forward the issue of how to form teams: homogeneity/heterogeneity regarding the initial level of competences, individual characteristics and working styles, etc. In our case, the problem was resolved by changes in the team.

Online communication for the aim of organization within the team and distance collaborative work were defined by the learners as an innovative element in their educational experience. Along with studying the subject, they had to develop the skills of interaction in a distance learning environment and self-learning management.

#### *1. Alternation and interdependence of learning activities*

The method of alternating interdependent individual and collaborative activities, was approved by all students involved in the learning course. On one hand, they believed that the individual activities carried out during the first phase of the study unit

were useful for them because they:

- Allowed learning and understanding the key concepts and helped them create an informed individual opinion on the issues discussed later on – 90%;
- Allowed students to show their individual qualities and progress – 81%;
- Allowed students to build their own initial model of knowledge and thus prepare for the team work which followed – 90%;
- Allowed students to show responsibility towards the rest of the team by doing their best to complete the individual task, which was used later on as a team's resource during the team work – 71%.

In fact, all respondents perceived the initial individual activities as a necessary preliminary stage, ensuring the efficiency of the collective work that followed.

On the other hand, the collaborative activities (preferred by 81% of students) were identified as useful and enriching because they allowed to:

- Exchange and share information, ideas and experience – 100%;
- Share and/or challenge different points of views – 71%;
- Revise personal points of view by acknowledging other students' arguments – 90%;
- Develop teamwork skills – 81%
- Show tolerance to other people's opinion and give reasonable argumentation of their own – 71%.

In fact, the majority of students admitted that they had further developed their knowledge by learning from one another or that they had changed their viewpoints by embracing new ideas and arguments provided by others [8].

Comments such *“as we learned to work as a team, as it is in real life, and to be tolerant and respectful of different opinions; this work brings us together, we share experiences and knowledge; it taught us to be open-minded, respectful of other's opinions and work, to be proactive and responsible; in our team we helped each other out and we came up with more ideas that we would have had on our own, and after we have learned how to be more organized things became even easier”* reflect students' appreciation of the importance of developing teamwork skills and the value they placed on collaborative aspects in online learning.

Based on our results, we fully share the views of De Lièvre, Quintin and Depover that the application of a scenario in which individual and collective activities are alternated in the search of collaborative dynamics is a practice that simultaneously ensures smooth progression through the stages of successfully acquiring knowledge and ensures a balance between the individual and the collective elements of the learning process [6].

In fact, this type of articulation of the activities created positive dynamics allowing the building of knowledge in stages. During this type of work, the students first structured their ideas and built an initial model of knowledge at individual level, so that later, through discussion, clash of opinions and ideas and validation or revision of ideas, they could jointly build a shared model of knowledge.

## *2. Authenticity and contextualization of learning activities*

As mentioned above, the activities set out in the learning scenario are aimed at completing a specific task from professional life in a particular context. The analysis of the results shows that this type of activities are adequate and effective for achieving the predefined targets mostly because they are not simply an end in themselves or related only to the learning environment, but put students in authentic situations and require particular output.

This finding is confirmed by the answers of the surveyed participants. The majority believe that they were able to develop both linguistic and professional competence that they could later use and reinvest in their professional lives.

The usefulness of such tasks is largely confirmed by practice as well. Students who had already worked in the field of tourism shared that they had been able to use the linguistic, professional and metacognitive competences acquired during the course. Due to the experience with this type of work they had gained on the course, they were able to adapt easier to working in a professional team and were more efficient in completing their tasks. Ninety percents of the students surveyed believed that at the end of the course they were closer to the requirements of their prospective employers in terms of competences, work skills and communication skills needed in a professional environment. A comment from a student included: *I find it most beneficial when a task is interesting and similar to what we face in the professional environment and I know that most likely I will use that experience in the future.*

In a few words, the respondents rated the activities related to professional life as adequate and efficient because they:

- Allowed the development of language and professional competences of cognitive and metacognitive nature simultaneously - 86%;
- Allowed reinvestment of the acquired knowledge in real life - 90%;
- Were interesting and motivating - 95%.

Our experience shows that students actively engage in the learning process when they see the point of what they are doing; they work towards achieving particular results which they find useful and in line with their personal goals. Motivation definitely increases when students are confident that they can transfer their knowledge and skills in real-life situations. A student observed that *when you see that what is required from you is completely up to date and appropriate, not only from a theoretical side but also from a practical point of view, you not only put your best effort forward along with all the knowledge that you have already acquired, but also a part of yourself; this makes the learning process complete.*

Based on the experience gained during the course, we fully share the opinion of the majority of researchers working in the field of distance learning that learning activities are effective when they pose an intellectual challenge for the student and put them in situations which allow them to demonstrate their autonomy and willingness to collaborate with other learners [4, 7, 1]. The majority of the students believed that by the end of the course they had become more organized, more tolerant towards different opinions, more autonomous and more flexible in decision-making.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Collaborative learning requires cognitive and metacognitive skills as well as social, psychological and emotional predisposition. In fact, our students had to learn to work together in collaboration while acquiring knowledge and competences in the subject area.

In order to better facilitate the collaborative process, a more comprehensive study on the evolution of online learning communities is planned. It will focus on the different variables that affect the learning process in collaborative distance learning environment. Besides, the expertise gained in the design and experimentation of learning practices will be enlarged and applied to other university subjects which aim to offer distance learning courses on a regular basis.

Generally, we can describe this experience as successful as far as the course objectives were achieved by the majority of the learners. Despite the fact that the students had difficulties, mostly in adapting to collaborative work in a distance learning environment, and the hardships related to "learning to work together" at certain times, the choice of pedagogical model or training strategy should not be doubted.

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**The paper has been reviewed.**