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Learners' perceptions of the pedagogical relations in a flexible language learning system

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The flexible language learning system we have devised at our university combines different elements: individual work on a virtual learning environment, pair-work and counseling sessions. The implementation of the system involves a new conception of the different “actors” roles. Teachers become tutors or counselors with new specific pedagogical goals, and learners have a new role to play too. From the creation of the system five years ago, our research has studied a cohort of 610 students. The article focuses on the last two cohorts of students, for whom two important changes in the guidance elements present in the system were introduced. It discusses students' perceptions of the roles played by the different actors in the system, as compared with traditional language teaching/learning situations. Possible implications for future cohorts of students at our university, as well as for other students working in learning systems of the same kind, are drawn.

Keywords: language learning system; autonomization; logbook; counseling; pedagogical roles

Introduction

The change of technology in the last 20 years has greatly modified the design of language learning courses. Applications of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in foreign language teaching and learning have indeed aroused considerable interest in the last decades, and caring for heterogeneity has become easier. Technology is perceived as “able to afford the learner more appropriately individualized instruction than what can be achieved through classroom learning” (Chapelle, 2005, p. 78). At our university, in order to prepare MA psychology students (i.e. fourth-year students) to follow a course in English for psychology in the second semester of their university year, we offer them a flexible language learning system in the first semester of the university year. The system combines individual work in a virtual learning environment, pair-work, and counseling sessions. The use of this system has been studied since its first year of implementation in 2005–2006 (Chateau, 2008; Chateau & Zumbihl, 2010, 2011), following the

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tradition of action-research, a cyclic process in which action and critical reflection take place in turn (see Benson, 2001; Nunan, 1992; Riley, 1996), and has concerned 610 students up till now.

For the fourth and fifth cohorts, two changes were introduced into the system: a logbook, in order to favor a reflexive approach by the students, since the study of the previous cohort had revealed the need for a new tool to enable learners to take more control of their learning (Chateau & Zumbihl, 2010); and an improvement of the existing forum, to help them to go a little further towards autonomy via collaboration with their peers. Bertin, Gravé and Narcy-Combes, claim that “going through the different tasks and reflecting with the tutor or with peers will lead to personal adjustment” (2010, p. 114). Notwithstanding the impact of the guidance tools on learners’ autonomization which has already been studied (Chateau & Zumbihl, 2011), we hypothesize that they may reveal the representations the learners have of the roles played by the “actors” involved in such a language learning system. After a brief review of the environmental and theoretical background of the present research, the article will focus on the results obtained with the last two cohorts of students and discuss their perceptions of the change of roles played by the different actors as compared with traditional language teaching/learning situations.

Environmental and theoretical context

The context of the study

At the start of 2005–2006, taking English courses became compulsory for all psychology students at Nancy 2 University. One objective for MA students was then defined with the psychology colleagues responsible for the Master’s degree. The idea was to enable students to read articles in their discipline and to write abstracts by the end of the academic year. However, when they arrive, not all students enrolling for the MA in psychology have received tuition in English in their previous university studies, even though nearly all of them have studied English in the secondary system. Some are even professionals (e.g. primary school teachers or school psychologists) who, after working for a certain number of years, have decided to resume their studies, not necessarily giving up their job completely. The students we have to deal with thus have very tight schedules, and this is reinforced by the fact that most of the theoretical courses in psychology they have to attend take place in the first semester. Moreover, they have very varied language learning backgrounds. In order to prepare them to follow a course in English for psychology in the second semester, we then decided to design a flexible system to help them reactivate their language skills during the first semester, even if we are aware of the fact that a four-month course is perhaps not enough to really make a difference. This learning system has gradually been improved over the years, via students’ feedback. It is accessible from the “Espace Numérique de Travail” (ENT), the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) of our university, based on Moodle (Brandl, 2005). Since it has already been described elsewhere (Chateau & Zumbihl, 2010, 2011) it will not be detailed here. However, it should be noted that it comprises individual work¹ and pair-work,² both types being accessible from the VLE. Moreover, in order to favor collaboration and pedagogical dialogue, both essential for the development of autonomy (Benson & Lor, 1998), the system incorporates a number of guidance elements. These elements consist of:

- an introductory practice session at the beginning of the semester, organized in small groups in computer rooms, where the students find their way around the tools and resources available, an essential element to help students feel confident about the VLE (Hampel & Hauck, 2004);
- an online individual logbook, accessible to the tutors, which is meant to help learners become conscious of their difficulties and the strategies they use to solve them, as recommended by Mozzon-McPherson (2007);
- a forum which enables the students to find solutions with their peers or their tutors in order to “enhance the learning experience” (Kol & Scholnik, 2008, p. 49);
- counseling sessions, at least one meeting with a counselor being compulsory during the semester.

All these elements are meant to help learners become autonomous in their learning of English, since it is “not an innate capacity” (Bertin, Grave, & Narcy-Combes, 2010, p. 116) and yet is an essential parameter, necessary for success when confronted with self-directed learning, as we will see below.

The notion of autonomization

Autonomy can be defined as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3) or “as the capacity to take control over one’s own learning” (Benson, 2001, p. 2). It is something that needs to be developed (Holec, 1990). Holec writes of “autonomization” as “a matter of acquiring those capacities which are necessary to carry out a self-directed learning programme” (Holec 1985, p. 180). In his 2003 definition of the term, Little insists on the role of the teacher, which is to create a learning environment in which learners accept responsibility for their learning role in order to become more autonomous. He also reminds us that “to support the development of learner autonomy is [...] a key issue for self-access language learning schemes” (Little, 2003). This necessity of supporting the students’ autonomization process is valid both in the case of self-access centers, as stated by Little, and of distance environment (Boulton, Chateau, Pereiro, & Azzam-Hannachi, 2008), or even in systems that combine elements of both as the one described in this article.

Our objective in introducing a logbook in the language learning system for the fourth and fifth cohorts studied here, and asking students to keep a record of their autonomous learning experience was thus to guide learners in order for them to develop their capacity for autonomy and “to assume control of their own learning processes” (Benson, 2001, p. 37). A study of the logbooks has shown that the students were taking more control of their learning (Chateau & Zumbihl, 2010), and thus perhaps that they had started to modify the way they considered themselves as learners, a necessary condition for them to succeed in their learning as we shall discuss below. There seems indeed to be a tight link between the autonomization process and the modification of the representation the learners have of themselves as learners:

[s]tarting from the premise that autonomy is an ability and a capacity to determine the objectives of one’s learning, define the contents, select the methods and the resources, and monitor progress and evaluate outcomes [...], then such development is seen as a process of transformation within the individual.

(Mozzon-McPherson, 2007, p. 70)

This transformation aspect of the autonomization process is an important component (Bertin et al., 2010; Mozzon-McPherson, 2007). It induces a change in the pedagogical roles involved in flexible language learning systems of the sort studied here, as we shall see in the next section.

The notion of roles

According to Riley, “learner autonomy in institutional settings inevitably requires both teachers and learners to modify their representations of these respective roles” (Riley 1989, p. 70). Furthermore, although different terms are sometimes used to name the person whose role is to accompany learners in their autonomization – Riley speaks of “Helper”, “Knower”, “Facilitator” and “Counsellor” (1986, p. 19) – most researchers agree that autonomy necessarily implies a change in the pedagogical relationship between teachers and learners. La Ganza, for example, mentions the “teacher–learner relationship as a Dynamic Interrelational Space (DIS) which conceptualizes learner autonomy as an interactional construct, whose realization depends as much on the capacities of the teacher as on capacities of the learner” (2008, p. 65). Foucher and Demaizière also insist on the teacher’s role in helping learners to take more control of their learning (1999). For Mozzon-McPherson, “Advisers are not “surrogate teachers” who simply provide language tutoring in a different context” (2007, p. 75). On the contrary, they have a “significant highly skilled role as mediators between traditional models of teaching delivery and a transformed model in which dialogue is a pedagogic tool in developing learners’ understanding of the mechanics and contextual role of language learning” (p. 82). Although focusing on distance contexts and not specifically on self-directed learning, Hurd also mentions a “change in the balance of traditional responsibilities and roles.” (2006, p. 320).

From the point of view of the learners, this change of roles is a difficult process (Portine, 1998); it has to do with the way they perceive their capacities as learners, and may be linked with the notion of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). As stated by Zimmerman, indeed, it seems “that self-efficacious students participate more readily, work harder, persist longer, and have fewer adverse emotional reactions when they encounter difficulties than do those who doubt their capabilities” (2000, p. 86). Yang indicates:

perceived self-efficacy may influence one’s choice of activities. People undertake and perform confidently activities that they judge themselves capable of managing, but they avoid those they believe exceed their ability. These judgments also help people to determine how much effort they will spend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles or difficulties.

(Yang 1999, p. 517)

Furthermore, self-efficacy seems to have an impact on the way the learners deal with anxiety and can help them decrease it (Zimmerman, 2000). Anxiety, defined as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (E.K. Horwitz, M.B. Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 125) is “an influential factor in language learning at a distance” (Hurd, 2007, p. 499). This is thus clearly an emotion that has to be taken into account in a system in which most of the

language learning activities will be done on a VLE, and which involves learners to be more in control of their learning process than in a traditional classroom setting. This notion of control implies learners to react to difficulties and to take steps to overcome them. It depends on the way they explain the causes of their difficulties, as stated by “attribution theory”. “In order to take responsibility for our own learning we must believe that we have control over learning success and failure, and consequently attribution theory has important implications for the promotion of autonomy” (Dickinson, 1995, p. 171).

Learners’ control, self-efficacy and anxiety are, as we have just seen, parameters that play a part in the way learners may adapt to the flexible system. We can then postulate that their perception of the pedagogical roles involved in such a system may be a key element. The research question is therefore to know whether the guidance tools, introduced to increase dialogue between teachers and learners and among learners themselves, reveal the representations the learners have of their role and of the teachers’ roles. In order to assess this question, we studied the logbooks of the last two cohorts of students, the answers they gave during the counseling session, as well as the comments made to some questions of a questionnaire given at the end of their work in the system.

Methodology

The methodology we adopted for the present study was threefold, to cross-check different types of data. We first carried out a discourse analysis of the logbooks of the two consecutive cohorts (Bardin, 1977; Brown & Yule, 1983). However, because the students’ perceptions of the roles in the system were not necessarily explicit, we limited this analysis to a “sequence” analysis (see below). These perceptions were also studied through the sheets filled in by the teachers during the counseling sessions. Finally, a five-point Likert scale questionnaire (Appendix) was given to the students in order to obtain their evaluation of the tools used in the learning system, such as the logbook and the counseling session which may modify the actors’ roles.

Sequence analysis of the logbooks

In this type of analysis, the discourse is studied in its development. The objective is to follow the thinking process and the dynamics of the discourse. A new sequence appears when there is a change in the subject for example, or when the author changes her or his way of expressing from description to explanation. These different sequences can easily be noticed with ruptures in the discourse, and, generally, specific words or groups of words enable a transition from one topic to another. In the first stage of an intensive analysis like this, Bardin (1977) recommends restricting the corpus. Therefore, we worked on complete logbooks from one student in 10, chosen at random for the two cohorts. We studied 11 logbooks out of 115 for the first cohort and 8 out of 77 for the second.

It is to be underlined that the sequence analysis is basically a possible interpretation of the students’ discourse, which could be correlated to the results obtained with the analysis of the counseling session sheets and the questionnaires.

Thematic analysis of the counseling session sheets

The counseling session sheets were filled in by the tutors during the sessions with the students, and studied with thematic analysis. With this type of analysis, the contents of a document can be divided into categories which are then applied to all the texts to be analyzed. Each theme corresponds to a signification unit, which includes all the ideas on a specific subject. In this way, the most important themes expressed by the students were identified, classified and categorized. These categories were analyzed qualitatively and compared against the results already obtained from the logbooks.

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the questionnaire

The questionnaires, 72 for the 2008–2009 cohort and 62 for 2009–2010, were filled in by the students at the end of their work in the VLE. The objective was to collect information about their evaluation and appreciation of the whole system. The questionnaire was created using Sphinx³ which also enabled us to sort the data and analyze the results. Our analysis of the results of the autonomization process, which was studied in a previous paper, focused mainly on the use of the forum and the logbook (Chateau & Zumbihl, 2011). For the analysis of the perception of the actors' roles, we concentrated on the answers relating to the usefulness of the introductory practice session, the contacts with the tutors and the students' overall opinion about the system. These three items were chosen as they revealed students' perceptions of the pedagogical roles involved in such a flexible language learning system. We obtained both quantitative results and qualitative results as the students had the possibility to comment their answers on each specific aspect.

Results and discussion

As mentioned earlier, the aim of the present research was to focus on students' representations of the actors' roles in this specific language learning system, since the autonomization process had previously been studied (Chateau & Zumbihl, 2010, 2011). However, students' autonomization process and their representations of the actors' roles are elements which are tightly linked to each other as seen previously in the theoretical context.

Qualitative analysis of the logbooks

Our initial analysis detected little difference between the two cohorts so the data are combined in the following analysis.

The content of the students' logbooks does not always indicate a conscious perception of the actors' roles. However, underlying representations implicitly appear in these documents. Four different aspects of the students' attitudes towards the learning system were noticed through this qualitative analysis, i.e. anxiety, transformation, centrality of the teacher–learner relationship and collaborative learning.

Anxiety

On the whole, the students seem to analyze their problems effectively but some of them express a certain anxiety as they do not know exactly what to do to find

solutions to their problems. This implicit anxiety, noticeable in their logbooks, may be a request for help from their tutors since they know that the tutors will read their logbooks.

This may also be due to a misunderstanding of the new roles involved in the system, some learners indeed seem to perceive the teachers as being simply “absent”. We may find hints of anxiety in comments such as: “a platform does not replace a teacher’s lesson. I am impatient to start the second semester courses with a teacher”⁴; “I realize how important the teacher is especially for learning a language, to support us and to help us understand what we have done wrong. I am really pleased to start a new semester with traditional courses.”

One of the students felt obliged to do the exercise again for the teacher even though she had already completed the work correctly, saying: “I worked very hard yesterday and this morning I went mad because everything had been erased and I had to do everything again.” This could be understood as a sign of underlying anxiety that they are being watched over by the teacher, which may correspond to a perception of the teacher as a controller: “I have written the answers on a draft, I don’t know if I should write them in my logbook”.

Transformation

Some of them, however, express the idea of having really accomplished something; they feel responsible for their language learning. They seem to have taken over this responsibility from their teachers (Bertin et al., 2010; Little, 2003). These students appear to have a generally positive opinion of what they have achieved, one mentions: “I think I can understand English a little better than before”, another one indicates: “this semester’s work and the counseling session helped me acquire a sound methodology (especially for vocabulary) and I will be able to use it in the future”. These comments illustrate the necessary process of transformation that learners have to undergo in order to reach autonomy (Mozzon-McPherson, 2007; Portine, 1998), and it is a long and difficult process that requires support as one student indicated: “First it was something new and the fact of working on my own does not give me any limits or rules. It was difficult for me to work like that”. Indeed, becoming autonomous is a long and difficult process.

Centrality of the teacher–learner relationship

Some students are very proud of having found the solution by themselves: “part III was really difficult, I gave up learning for a few days, my self-esteem had fallen (. . .). This time, after several trials I have managed to overcome the difficulties I had. I must say that transcriptions were very useful.” It is worth noting that the strategy of using transcriptions had just been recommended by the tutor during the counseling session. This may mean that the student needs the teacher’s presence as a “helper” and that he is also anxious to show the tutor that he has followed her advice (Mozzon-McPherson, 2007; Riley, 1986). It seems to indicate that this relationship, which involves dialogue between tutors and learners, is an essential guidance element.

Sometimes learners speak to the tutors directly in their logbooks and show that they follow the recommendations given during the counseling session: “we met on the 1st of December. You advised me to work on the document about the history

of art. I found this document particularly interesting. I felt I understood the document better. Maybe it was because I had the transcription in front of me as you had suggested". The word "suggested" is to be noticed. It may indicate that the student has started to consider the teacher as a counselor rather than as a linguistic expert. The word "suggest" could be linked with the appearance of a new teacher–learner relationship such as described by La Ganza (2008). This is reinforced by the end of this specific student's logbook: "it is the first time I have used this kind of platform and I really appreciated it. I felt free to learn at my own pace". The idea of freedom, an essential element of the student's autonomy also appears here (Trebbe, 2007).

It is still difficult for them to apply learning strategies. Some will be able to do so after a certain number of trials and others will take advantage of the meeting with the tutor to change their attitudes. One of the students, for example, gives very few details about the work done until the counseling session, which he mentions in his logbook, and suddenly, after the meeting, describes his work much more precisely as if he had finally understood the point of taking charge of his learning. This phenomenon could be analyzed as a justification of the teachers' counseling role and shows the importance of dialogue between teacher and learner as stated earlier (Foucher & Demaizière, 1999; Mozzon-McPherson, 2007).

Students generally recognize that the system fostered a certain level of autonomy and insist on the importance of the counseling session: "thanks to my work this semester and to the counseling session I have been able to acquire a good method for self-learning (especially vocabulary), it will be useful for the future". Students who get good scores in the online activities mention them in their logbooks suggesting that they are very proud of them and have reached a certain level of self-esteem, which may contribute to their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Yang, 1999).

Collaborative learning

Other students find solutions to their problems in collaborative learning and choose to work in groups on the different resources present in the system. The importance of collaborative learning is generally implicitly expressed. The different steps of the collaborative learning process are very precisely described in their logbooks with the repetition of the "we" subject: "we worked together with the video document, we had the opportunity to learn scientific vocabulary, we had difficulties to understand a few words but we found them in the suggested dictionary and it helped us a lot." Even if no explicit appreciation of collaborative learning appears in the logbook, the student's discourse seems to confirm the necessity of peer support in such language learning systems (Bertin et al., 2010).

In any case, as revealed in the logbooks, the guidance elements give most students the possibility to go further, to understand their errors and to exert their "critical reflection" (Murphy, 2008, p. 84). Even if some students still need the teachers' presence sometimes and are not yet able to deal with their anxiety towards their responsibilities as learners, most of them are able to take charge of their learning and choose appropriate strategies.

Analysis of the appointment sheets

One hundred and eight counseling sessions were carried out in 2008–2009 and 77 the following year. The notes taken by the tutors during these meetings were examined

and classified for each cohort. The ideas expressed explicitly by the students during their counseling sessions were sorted in 11 particularly noticeable themes which were then analyzed qualitatively.

The 11 main themes were the following:

- it is interesting to work with the platform
- this organization does not suit me
- it enables me to work at my own pace
- it enables me to notice my weaknesses
- I could use varied resources
- I used the forum
- I did not use the forum
- I appreciate collaborative working
- the use of specific techniques
- negative impressions of the logbook
- language level representations

These results seem to confirm those already found from the qualitative analysis of the logbooks. Indeed, among those that explicitly gave their opinion during the session many students seem to appreciate the work organization with the flexible system.

At the same time some students (12 in 2008–2009 and 11 in 2009–2010) clearly mentioned their difficulties with this new organization and with their new roles as learners. It seems that they were particularly disconcerted by the fact that they had to work on their own and that teachers were not in front of them, as is the case for a “traditional” course. The statements made by the students during the counseling sessions were sometimes rather strong: “It is not a real course, I prefer to listen to a teacher”; “I need to be supervised; I have problems working on my own”; “I get stressed when I have difficulties; a traditional course is more serious”; “I had the impression I was left to my own devices.” Generally however, these statements can be linked with other statements made by the same students which show that they have underestimated their level in English. These students, who probably have a low self-esteem considering their capacities in learning a foreign language, would prefer the continuous presence of a teacher to reassure them; they do not perceive themselves as able to control their success or failure. They do not seem to be ready to take charge of their learning. This lack of self-esteem, and corresponding difficulty in taking a more autonomous role can be connected with the notion of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Yang, 1999).

Furthermore, the reaction to difficulties and the way learners overcome them depend on how they explain the causes of their problems, and on their perception of their capabilities (Bertin et al., 2010; Dickinson, 1995).

However, a number of students (eight and nine in each of the two cohorts) seem to have found a solution to their problems with collaborative learning, which confirms the result already found in the logbooks. These students say for example: “But I liked collaborative working”; “I can find help with my friends, it would have been more difficult for me if I had worked on my own.” In distance contexts such as the one mentioned here, students have to be responsible for their learning which is made possible through interaction with peers (Bertin et al., 2010).

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the questionnaire

It is worth mentioning that out of 134 students (72 for the 4th cohort and 62 for the 5th), only 24 (14 and 10) had already worked online before we asked them to use the VLE (question 1). This element may explain why some of the students found it difficult to deal with their anxiety about their new roles as learners implied in such a system, as revealed by the previous analyses.

However, in order to study the perception of students' representations regarding the actors' roles, we will focus on three questions of the questionnaire concerning the usefulness of the introductory practice session, the counseling session, and the whole language learning system. Moreover, even if the global figures obtained are interesting and meaningful, the students' comments are determining for the present study. Furthermore, because these three elements correspond to different stages in the system, the comments regarding each of them may reveal different perceptions.

The usefulness of the introductory practice session

Regarding the introductory practice session, the rather high percentages confirm the fact that it is perceived as an important element of the guidance tools in the system (Hampel & Hauck, 2004), even though there is a slight difference between the two cohorts (Table 1). If we consider the students' comments, 17 students in the first cohort and 11 students in the second mentioned the explanations and the opportunity "to understand better what the teacher expected". This sentence may reveal a certain level of anxiety from the students concerning the tutors' expectations about their work which is of high importance for them. However, two students pointed out that the information given by the tutors was redundant as it was already on the platform. Apparently, these two students did not consider the tutors' explanations necessary; perhaps because they were already engaged in the autonomization process.

Table 1. Quantitative results for the introductory practice session.

	2008–2009	2009–2010
Useful	55.6%	43.5%
Very useful	11%	14.5%

The usefulness of the counseling session

The answers to this question show that a majority of the students felt the need to meet the teachers. The students' comments are particularly interesting as they strongly reveal some aspects of their representations about the teachers' roles (Table 2). Ten students in the first cohort specifically pointed out the availability of the tutors who were always at their disposal to answer their questions: "the teacher was

Table 2. Quantitative results for the counselling session.

	2008–2009	2009–2010
Useful	61.1%	46.8%
Very useful	12%	21%

really available to answer my questions at any time". A majority of the students in each cohort noticed that the "teachers" gave answers to their questions and "helped" them understand their difficulties: "I did not understand certain things and the teacher helped me understand them". One of the students also pointed out the fact that the advice was more personalized than in a classroom context. Indeed, the words "advice" and "counseling" were found five times in the first cohort's comments and eight times in the second. Thanks to the counseling session, these students seem to have integrated the teachers' role as counselors.

The idea that the counseling session enabled the students to adjust their work was also expressed in 10 comments: e.g. "for an adjustment"; "to adjust my work and know what was expected". This may mean that some students still need the teachers to help them evaluate the situation, a possibility reinforced by other remarks such as "it is reassuring to know that we can contact someone in case of difficulty"; "it is reassuring, we are not alone with our difficulties". This need for reassurance is a recurring theme: "the meeting enabled me to acquire self-confidence. It confirmed that my work had been done correctly". This can be linked with the previous analysis of the counseling session sheets. However, this is not contradictory with a certain level of autonomy: as one student mentioned, the meeting helped him to adjust, as it corresponded to "a framework which also enables certain autonomy". This apparently confirms the idea of a necessary personal adjustment (Bertin et al., 2010). It also reflects a lack of self-confidence noticeable in several students' appreciation of their knowledge of English: "to know my level"; "to discuss the difficulties I have"; "to see if I had worked in the right direction"; "to have answers to my problems with the English language". Students expect the teachers to help them with their difficulties in English and to reassure them.

There were also three remarks concerning the contact with the teachers outside the counseling session. Apparently, the learners found e-mail contacts difficult, using it "just for the computer problems, it is difficult to explain learning problems"; "difficult to explain problems by e-mail". This emphasizes the students' needs for a face-to-face meeting with the teachers which is more reassuring for them (Mozzon-McPherson, 2007). According to these results the counseling session is probably the key guidance tool present in the language learning system.

The usefulness of the flexible system

If we consider the usefulness of the flexible system as a whole, the quantitative results show a rather high level of satisfaction among the students (Table 3). For the first cohort 19 students appreciated being able to "work at [their] own pace" and "organize [their] work as [they] wanted". Another seven emphasized the autonomy: "it enables us to be autonomous and to organize our work as we want"; "for autonomy: to acquire knowledge autonomously"; "this autonomous work is very pleasant"; "to be autonomous in our learning".

Table 3. Quantitative results for the flexible system.

	2008–2009	2009–2010
Useful	55.6%	64.5%
Very useful	16%	14.5%

A majority of students with 20 comments highlighted that they could concentrate on their own difficulties and that their work was more individualized as a result: “it helped me concentrate on my difficulties”; “I could concentrate on my weaknesses in grammar”; “the possibility to work on the subjects we are interested in or for which we have difficulties”; “for the individualized work”. One of them even wrote: “we can work on precise points which we don’t have time to study in class”.

The three elements of the questionnaire studied in this section correspond to students’ perceptions of three different stages in the system. Comments about the introductory practice session seem to reveal some anxiety about the new roles involved. Those concerning the counseling session turn around the pivotal position of the teacher–learner relationship in this system and, finally, through some of their comments about the system as a whole, students seem to show their understanding of their new responsibilities as autonomous learners. This may thus indicate a progression in students’ representations of the new pedagogical roles involved in flexible language learning systems, as opposed to traditional classroom-based situations.

Conclusion

The results obtained from the three types of data analyzed in this study revealed specific items which may have an impact on the roles played by tutors and learners in flexible language learning systems, e.g. students’ anxiety in relation with their language learning, their adaptability to new roles, collaborative learning and the centrality of the teacher–learner relationship.

It should be pointed out, however, that this study was conducted in a specific context, where the designers of this system also play the role of tutors. Although this may not be ideal Riley (1986) points out that this is often the case in similar systems where structural obstacles are sometimes difficult to circumvent in institutional environments. This could explain the difficulty which some students sometimes have in understanding that the tutors are at their disposal to help them and to give them advice. The autonomization process is possible only if the learners have changed their representations of the pedagogical roles and are conscious of the new role they have to play. Although there is a progression in the learners’ representations of the actors’ roles which could lead to more autonomy for some students, traditional representations still exist especially regarding the tutors’ role and this could be an obstacle towards more autonomy in this specific context.

This shows the necessity to reinforce students’ understanding of the tutors’ role of guidance and counseling. This could be done through a better explanation of the actors’ roles during the introductory practice session as well as by trying to encourage them to meet the tutors earlier in the semester so that they understand that the tutors are here to offer support in their language learning process. Generally indeed, the students’ representations change after meeting the tutor face-to-face. Dialogue between learners and tutors is thus at the centre of this change of the representations of the actors’ roles.

Notes

1. The students are asked to work on three files out of a choice of 29 thematic files of authentic video, audio and written documents. These documents focus on a given subject

- (psychology, education, the environment, technology...), and are accompanied by pedagogical activities.
2. In order to help them improve their oral comprehension and written expression skills and to develop collaborative learning, the students have to choose from a list of audio and video documents dealing with psychology and to write a summary/commentary by pairs. The list of documents from which they can choose comprises 12 documents available in the self-access language centre of the university and 29 documents available on line.
 3. For more information about Sphinx, see http://www.lesphinx.eu/fr/accueil_sphinx.php
 4. The students' comments were originally written in French and have been translated by the authors.

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Appendix. Questionnaire M1 psychology

Questionnaire M1 Psycho 2008-2009

2008-2009 - SCERV

1. J'avais déjà eu l'occasion de travailler en ligne (même dans le cadre d'une autre matière)

1. oui 2. non

2. Si oui dans quel cadre ?

3. J'ai trouvé le dispositif facile à utiliser

1. pas du tout d'accord 2. plutôt pas d'accord
 3. sans opinion 4. plutôt d'accord
 5. tout à fait d'accord

4. En quoi il m'a été facile/ difficile :

5. J'ai trouvé ce dispositif utile

1. pas du tout d'accord 2. plutôt pas d'accord
 3. sans opinion 4. plutôt d'accord
 5. tout à fait d'accord

6. En quoi il m'a été utile :

7. La session de présentation en salle informatique m'a semblé utile

1. pas du tout d'accord 2. plutôt pas d'accord
 3. sans opinion 4. plutôt d'accord
 5. tout à fait d'accord

8. En quoi elle m'a été utile :

9. Le(s) contact avec l'enseignant(e), soit par mail, soit lors des permanences, soit du/des rdv-conseils m'a/ont semblé utile

1. pas du tout d'accord 2. plutôt pas d'accord
 3. sans opinion 4. plutôt d'accord
 5. tout à fait d'accord

10. En quoi ces contacts m'ont été utiles :

11. J'ai trouvé le forum utile

1. pas du tout d'accord 2. plutôt pas d'accord
 3. sans opinion 4. plutôt d'accord
 5. tout à fait d'accord

12. En quoi il m'a été utile :

13. J'ai trouvé le carnet de bord utile

1. pas du tout d'accord 2. plutôt pas d'accord
 3. sans opinion 4. plutôt d'accord
 5. tout à fait d'accord

14. En quoi il m'a été utile :

15. J'ai trouvé le travail sur langues-Utile

1. pas du tout d'accord 2. plutôt pas d'accord
 3. sans opinion 4. plutôt d'accord
 5. tout à fait d'accord

16. En quoi il m'a été utile :

17. Autres remarques et suggestions :