

**LEARNING THROUGH SHARING :  
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**The use of a task-based online discussion forum in language teaching:  
learning practices and outcomes**

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For the past decade online discussion forums have been gaining popularity in educational settings. Indeed, they have become a common component in both distance and blended courses in higher education. Easy to use, they provide an electronic environment that is accessible to participants who are otherwise separated by physical distance. In most of the language courses, the purpose of introducing an element of online discussion is to enable a collaborative construction of knowledge. Previous research on the use of CMC in language teaching has shown that when learners write in a foreign language, task design plays a fundamental role in fostering this collaboration. Thus, in order to help maximise the potential of online discussion forums in language learning, this study investigates language students' practices and perceived learning outcomes of a task-based online discussion forum.

This paper briefly presents a discussion forum task integrated in a larger project which has been running for the last four consecutive years and which promotes a three-phased approach. Language learners first select a current French socio-political issue, retrieve information from the Internet on this topic and analyse it with a view to producing a piece of work demonstrating thorough understanding of the topic. The CMC task starts mid-way through the project (week 6 of a 12-week course). Each L2 learner submits his/her assignment on line and is paired with a native speaker who has expressed an interest in his/her topic. Learners then have to engage in debate with their respective partners. In the latter part of the project, they are asked to reflect and report on their learning experience.

Drawing on qualitative data collected from a cohort of approximately 25 Irish students following their six-week experience of CMC with their French partners, the study identifies students' perceived learning gains. Interestingly, an increase in autonomy and a greater responsibility for one's own learning are among the learning benefits reported by students. The paper then highlights a number of pedagogical choices that were made to accommodate students' needs and practices. Finally, it argues that a meaningful and 'authentic' learning task is essential to engage students.