

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM: ELECTRONIC DISCUSSION AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING¹

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ABSTRACT

Amongst the opportunities for cross-cultural contact created by the burgeoning use of the Internet are those provided by electronic discussion lists. This study looks at what happens when language students venture out of the classroom (virtual or otherwise) to participate in on-line discussion groups with native speakers. Responses to messages and commentary by moderators and other participants on the (in)appropriateness of contributions allow us to determine what constitutes successful participation and to make suggestions regarding effective teaching strategies for this medium.

A case study examines the threads started by four anglophone students of French when they post messages to a forum on the Web site of the French newspaper *Le Monde*. Investigation of these examples points to the ways in which electronic discussion inflects and is inflected by cultural and generic expectations. We suggest that successful participation on Internet fora depends on awareness of such cultural and generic mores and an ability to work within and/or with them. Teachers therefore need to find ways in which students can be sensitized to such issues so that their participation in such electronic discussion is no longer seen as linguistic training, but as engagement with a cultural practice.

A TALE (with apologies to Beatrix Potter)

Once upon a time there were four letter-writers and their names were Fleurie, Laura, Eleanor, and David. They hopped onto the Net from Britain and the USA and clicked their way across *Le Monde* (or more precisely, its on-line discussion pages). Fleurie and Eleanor, who were good little students, looked for pen-pals in order to improve their French, whereas Laura and David were much more concerned by vigorous debates about racism and cultural imperialism. In fact, David didn't even manage to write in French. Yet it was Laura and David who were warmly welcomed to stay and contribute, while Fleurie and Eleanor left, apparently discouraged.

As teachers of French, concerned to encourage use of that language by our students, this looks at first glance to be the kind of tale we would *not* want them to be reading. Our recalcitrant hero is not reprimanded -- hardly an edifying moral conclusion -- and dutifulness goes unrewarded. Why does the story end this way and what can be learnt from it?

In this article, we situate our case study in the wider context of task design of on-line activities. We then analyze the strategies and practices of the four message writers in order to derive lessons about the use of electronic discussion in language learning, lessons that underscore the crucial role of genre in intercultural communication.

THE BORDERLESS WORLD?

Language learning provides fertile ground for the co-existence of two contradictory views of Internet use. On the one hand, there is the idea of the borderless world where the Internet flattens out cultural

difference. On the other hand, we continue to assert the existence of virtual boundaries: While the physical borders may be irrelevant, the Internet is the superhighway into the heart of another culture, giving instant access to difference. When we send off our students via modem to practice their French in an electronic discussion forum, the contradiction gets played out as follows: We have deceptively easy access to our linguistic and cultural other, but this other is assumed to be doing the same thing as we are (discussion) only in French. The ways in which electronic discussion may be inflected by cultural and generic expectations risk being ignored.

We have reason to be suspicious of the assumption of the flattening out of cultural difference. Although Internet fora notionally transcend national and cultural boundaries, as soon as communication occurs, cultural practices are necessarily activated. Thus, while participants in a given discussion list view it as a forum for debate, their notions of what constitutes acceptable forms of debate may differ according to cultural affiliations. Wider cultural patterns in rhetorical ploys (Smith, 1987), explicitness of communication (Gallois & Callan, 1997), use of irony and humor, repertoires of textual features available for pastiche (such as Beatrix Potter's tale of "good little rabbits"), as well as strategies for engaging in cross-cultural communication (Freadman, 1999) will come into play. In this way, French participants are likely to apply expectations regarding other forms of intellectual debate (such as the use of cultural allusions and "provocation," as we shall see in our examples). However these wider cultural patterns are necessarily adapted to this particular cultural practice or genre -- electronic discussion -- a genre with its own technical constraints (length, speed of reply, formatting) and discursive/rhetorical conventions (such as the use of emoticons, quotations from other participants, etc.). These conventions may vary culturally but also from site to site (subculturally).

We may therefore assume that any electronic discussion group potentially brings together participants with divergent expectations of what appropriate behaviour in a site of public discussion might be. It follows that in order to ensure the continued functioning of the group, mechanisms exist for dealing with such inter-cultural (or inter-subcultural) differences. The most visible of these we shall call "moderation." This term commonly denotes intervention by an official moderator to deal with unsuitable messages; however, commentary by other participants (self-appointed moderators) on the appropriateness of contributions may fulfil a very similar function. In such cases, the official moderator is not alone in monitoring the list, initiating new members, or attempting to exclude inappropriate behaviour, and for this reason we shall use the term moderation broadly to cover official and unofficial intervention.²

Through both of these forms of moderation, questions regarding suitability are raised and dealt with at regular intervals, and various justifications are offered for treating contributions as acceptable or otherwise. In a forum where this policing of appropriate behaviour is carried out with a minimum of congeniality, moderation can function as a kind of initiation or indeed informal teaching. In this way, the Internet discussion forum offers a potentially privileged site for students to get individual feedback on their performance from people other than the teacher. The question is how to optimize this potential. What do we need to teach our students, and how do we need to frame an activity, in order for it to result in learning? This we will address through our case study of an on-line forum attached to the Web site of the quality French daily broadsheet *Le Monde*. However, let us first situate our inquiry by examining the kinds of online activities proposed to language teachers for use with their classes.

On-Line Activities for Language Learning

The use of e-mail exchange to improve language skills is widely recognized and a number of texts are devoted to finding "keypals" for students and promoting student-student correspondence (Boswood, 1997; Rice, 1996; Warschauer, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c). As the name suggests, sometimes these keypal partnerships are merely a technologically sophisticated version of a long-standing epistolary form. O'Dowd (2001) reminds us of the importance of "pedagogically sound approaches to intercultural email exchanges which incorporate the activities fully into the curriculum as opposed to treating them as

superficial pen-pal exercises." In other words, as Candlin and Murphy argued in 1987 and Müller-Hartmann reminded us in 2000, in the context of e-mail exchange, task design is crucial.

Although the vast majority of activities described focus on the exchange of personal messages by keypals, the personal need not inevitably become the task. Various authors describe email activities that go beyond the trading of information about siblings, tastes, and hobbies to produce a collaborative student newspaper (Barson, 1991), to analyze a comparative community survey (Sayers, 1993), or to discuss literature (Müller-Hartmann, 2000), film (Kinging, Gourves-Hayward, & Simpson, 1999), current affairs (Chen, 1998), or history (Kern, 1996). Discussion tasks are thus a feature of some pedagogical uses of e-mail exchange.

The use of discussion lists is also proposed, somewhat less frequently, and like the keypal exchanges, the lists recommended tend to be restricted to learners only (Boswood, 1997; Rice, 1996; Warschauer, 1995b, 1995c). Very few activities suggested in connection with discussion lists provide occasions for students to participate alongside native speakers (Paramskas, 1995, and Cononelos & Oliva, 1993, are notable exceptions). Furthermore, topics for discussion are frequently determined by the teacher or list coordinator. In other words, despite the promise of the Internet to "connect learners with authentic culture" and serve as "a gateway to the virtual foreign world where 'real people' are using real language in 'real context'" (Osuna & Meskill, 1998), discussion activities -- whether email exchange or discussion lists -- are often limited to teacher-determined topics and the cultural comfort zone of student-student interaction. The activities are geared to student needs (obviously an advantage for beginners) but do not challenge more advanced students to cope in situations not specifically designed for their benefit. Students are still safely within the classroom, virtual though it might be, and despite its advantages, it suffers the limitations of any language classroom in providing genuine opportunities to engage with the "target culture" in roles other than that of student.³

The other important point to note in relation to the activities proposed is that discussion list tasks tend not to be clearly differentiated from keypal tasks. The topics put forward are comparable, and in particular, the personal is once again at the fore: Discussion is frequently presumed to start with the exchange of personal information. Comparing, for instance, the suggestions of Gunske von Kölln and Gunske von Kölln (1997) for the bilingual discussion forum and for e-mail partnerships, we find that the activity procedure is virtually the same in each case: (a) subscribe, (b) send a message introducing yourself, (c) communicate regularly.⁴ There is no sense that a conversation between two people is different from a public discussion. And in both cases the personal is the topic of entry.

We contend that participation in an Internet forum is qualitatively different from communicating with keypals, although this may be masked in a (virtual) classroom setting, and that understanding the generic constraints and possibilities of the forum is a prerequisite for successful participation. And furthermore, we argue that although personal conversation is an indispensable genre, it can be a limiting one. As the focus of so many learning activities, it predisposes the student to conversations about the self that inevitably position him or her as the exotic little foreigner/the other. S/he may fail to learn strategies for opening and maintaining communication of other kinds (including, importantly, types of discussion). Thus we find learners stumbling into electronic discussion lists not dedicated exclusively to their needs, with disappointing results. And this is where we return to the case study of our introduction, where four anglophones attempt to join in discussion in a primarily francophone forum.

CASE STUDY

This particular study, part of a wider project on cross-cultural communication in Internet fora, takes as its object one of the on-line discussion groups available on the Web site of *Le Monde*. Before proceeding to the detail of our case study, we need to contextualize the series of exchanges. Like many major newspapers, *Le Monde* has a Website that not only allows consultation of articles but also provides the

opportunity to engage in discussion through the posting of messages: The site *Forums Le Monde* invites participation in a listed series of debates. In all of these fora, contributions are posted more or less immediately, but may be subsequently deleted at the discretion of the Moderator.

The *Le Monde* fora have gone through various operational and cosmetic changes in recent years: The bulk of the data for this study was collected during 2000, with access to archives dating back to 1999, and our description relates to the fora that were then in operation, but were superseded in January 2001. The list of fora available at the time of the study concluded with the catch-all *Autres sujets* (other topics), and it was on this forum that our study concentrated. *Autres sujets* provided participants with an opportunity to discuss any issue not covered by a list of topics including the Clinton-Lewinski affair, French law reform, agriculture and racism, with *Sport* the only actual example of what an *autre sujet* might be. In practice it was used to canvas -- with varying degrees of whimsy and passion -- issues ranging from the minutiae of participants' lives to revisionist history.⁵

Our data therefore come from an *Autres sujets* forum where you might want to talk about sport (but generally didn't), with a Moderator, Michel Tatu, who regularly intervened in discussion. According to official policy, the forum was open to contributions in both French and English, although, to quote the Moderator "tout le monde ici est supposé *lire* le français" (01 Sep 1999 12:07; Everyone here is presumed to be able to *read* French). Given the non-specialized nature of the forum, the wide range of participants and the frequency of postings, on multiple topics, it would seem the ideal site to which to direct students of French in order to practice.

Novelty

Striking in the forum is the prevalence of a discourse of novelty. Contributors repeatedly refer to the newness of the technology, and are unsure of the conventions of exchange: These are not taken as set in advance, but as being under negotiation. Questions are thus asked and answers offered as to the appropriate length of messages, the best means of posting them, the frequency with which one should contribute, which button one should click etc. But however malleable or even uncertain the expectations of participants are with regard to genre, clearly they still do have expectations, since they feel able to comment on the appropriateness of others' contributions, and to make predictions regarding what the experience of the forum will be. This is particularly the case where a contributor signals the marginality of his/her participant status. One such marginal status (although not the only one) is that of the learner of French.

Genre, then, is not seen as rigidly predetermined and the same could also be said of culture: Contributors are well aware that since the forum is not geographically limited many of their number are not French or based in France, although they are expected to have an interest in French culture and debate.

Since neither culture nor genre is seen as firmly entrenched, both must be continually and explicitly negotiated in this forum. As Freedman and Macdonald (1992) show, such negotiating and restatement of cultural and generic rules turn up in a variety of places, such as the televised interviews and tennis commentary that are the objects of their analyses. We contend, however, that this regulatory work is intensified and presented with particular emphasis as part of the discourse of novelty to be found in Internet fora, with this negotiation absolutely integrated into the practice of the genre.

It might be supposed that the novelty would wear off -- and with it the need for continual reiteration and accommodation of norms -- as Internet discussion becomes banal. Two aspects of forum participation, however, indicate the contrary. Firstly, there is the fact that each discussion group constitutes a subcultural community, with its own standards of tolerance of digression and language errors, and so forth, specific to that forum. And secondly, there is the instability of membership, particularly in such a wide-ranging forum with such a high turnover of participants as the one we are studying. Together these

circumstances mean that there are constantly new participants needing induction into the forum community.⁶

The consequent negotiation of cultural and generic rules and guidelines takes place on the forum through moderation. To explore the way in which it operates, we will look at the exchanges involving the four characters with which we introduced this paper: two Americans and two English. All four sets of exchanges can be described as cross-cultural, in that the participants position themselves as linguistic outsiders and in each case the subject of their message is intercultural exchange of one form or another.

Four Exchanges

David, Laura, Eleanor, and Fleurie are all students of French. Their contributions to the forum appeared between July 1999 and April 2000.⁷ Although their attempts to engage with other participants present some parallels, more striking are the differences in their strategies, in the responses they receive, and in the overall success of their contributions.

In each case, the opening gambit is explicit self-positioning as a learner of French (and indeed, none of the openings is entirely error-free),⁸ but this is done to varying effect:

David: Pardonnez-moi de ecrire en anglais. J'apprends toujours le français. (30 Aug 1999 01:30)
[Excuse me for writing in English. I'm still learning French.]

Laura: Bonjour a tous, C'est evident que je ne suis pas francais. Je ne suis qu'etudiante de francais a l'Alliance Francaise. (19 Jul 1999 15:39)
[Hello everyone. It's obvious that I'm not French. I'm only a student of French at the Alliance Française.]

Eleanor: Sault, je suis anglaise et j'aime la France. Pourriez-vous m'ecrire pour m'aider a ameliorer me francias SVP. Merci! (20 Feb 2000 22:55)
[Hello, I'm English and I love France. Could you write to me to help me improve my French please. Thanks!]

Fleurie: Je suis Anglaise et je voudrais parler avec quelq'un pour amerliorer mon Français. (09 Apr 2000 21:35)
[I'm English and I would like to speak with someone to improve my French.]

The sense of this strategy is not the same in each case. For the two Englishwomen, Eleanor and Fleurie, the self-positioning as an English student of French is itself the message: The few lines quoted above constitute the entirety of the contribution in each case. For Americans David and Laura, on the other hand, it forms part of an apology for linguistic errors -- Laura's message continues with "Alors, je vous prie d'accepter votre propre langue dans un etat dechire. Je n'ai pas un truc sur l'ordinateur pour ecrire les accents" (So I beg you to accept your own language in mutilated form. I don't have a thing on the computer to write accents) -- but it is also a way of presenting their speaking position as anglophones.

Although these are the first words of the messages, it is not quite accurate to call them the opening lines, for they are preceded by the reference or subject line. Compare,

David:	Réf : Combattre le modèle américain [Fight the American model]
Laura:	ref. Steven
Eleanor:	Les Anglais [The English]
Fleurie:	Une fille anglaise [An English girl]

What stands out here is that whereas David and Laura's contributions appear as responses to other messages (David's responding to French criticism of the United States, Laura's to anti-immigrant sentiment), Eleanor and Fleurie each initiate a subject: themselves.

Innocents Abroad?

Let's look at Eleanor and Fleurie's short, simple, and rather naïve contributions first, and the ways in which they are taken up. Here we see the kinds of regulating work done by forum members. Participants clearly see it as fitting that they provide explanations of why certain kinds of conduct and content are appropriate or not.

We have seen that Eleanor's request is brief. But the first response, from "Grossefatigue," a regular contributor of banter, is briefer: "Why don't you write first?" (23 Feb 2000 09:51). In fact its title ("Tirez les premiers, messieurs les..."), clearly not addressed to Eleanor but to fellow (male) forum members, is longer.⁹

Grossefatigue's reply asserts the failure of Eleanor's contribution on both generic and linguistic counts: The invitation to "write first" implies that her request not only didn't count as a contribution, but didn't count as writing at all. And replying in English implies, perhaps unfairly, that her French is inadequate to the task. Any such perception is probably more to do with Eleanor's failure to grasp the conventions of engagement than with the accumulation of linguistic errors. On the other hand, Grossefatigue's reference line, with its historical allusion, serves to raise his reply from the merely insulting to the culturally knowing, and ensures that his message does count.

Eleanor's only other answer, from "Lambda," is far more gracious, apologizes for Grossefatigue and thereby indirectly reproaches him for his lack of courtesy. But the burden of the message is the same: If Eleanor wants to practice her French -- and what an admirable idea that is -- then why doesn't she? He concludes,

Si vous désirez parler de n'importe quel sujet, la vache folle, l'évolution de la monarchie dans votre pays ou la construction européenne, n'hésitez pas ! (24 Feb 2000 19:09)

[If you want to talk about any topic whatsoever, mad cows, developments with the monarchy in your country or the construction of Europe, don't hesitate!]

A few months later, "Fleurie" makes her attempt, under the perhaps more enticing title "Une fille anglaise" (An English girl). She has slightly better luck in that someone looking for English practice does suggest a language exchange deal (no details given). But she also receives

1. indirect feedback on linguistic accuracy in the form of a whimsical exposition on the derivation of her verb "amerliorer" (which all French readers will have understood as a mild spelling or typographical error);
2. and, yet again, two invitations to practice her French by debate, the first pointing her to the 11 forums of *Le Monde* with "des dizaines et des dizaines d'occasions de discuter sur tous les sujets que vous voulez" (Th. Paz, 09 Apr 2000 23:14; dozens and dozens of opportunities to debate on any subject you please), and the second suggesting as subjects: "[l]a vache folle," "Mme Thatcher (aucun rapport avec le sujet précédent)," "[l]es Spice Girls," and "[l]es oreilles du prince Charles" [Lambda, 15 Apr 2000 21:24; mad cows, Mrs Thatcher [no connection with the preceding subject], the Spice Girls, and Prince Charles' ears).

This list, annotated with a smiley, concludes "si ces idées ne vous ont pas fâché [sic], je vous dis à bientôt sur ce Forum" [if these suggestions haven't annoyed you, I'll see you soon on the forum]. In other words, if Fleurie can take a bit of fun and respond to the badinage, then she is most welcome to join in. Finally, this correspondent requests the address of an equivalent Web site attached to an English paper.

What the other members are doing here, evidently, is attempting to instruct Fleurie and Eleanor in some of the rules of the game, specifically, those concerning subject matter and the purpose of participation. We suggest that the most useful way to understand what kind of a game it is, is the notion of genre, with genre being understood as encompassing all aspects of a cultural practice, that is, its linguistic and non-linguistic manifestations, and including in particular its cultural purpose (Freadman, 1994, p. 4; Swales, 1990, pp. 45-46).

As we stated earlier, the negotiation of genre is notable in this forum, and the rules that we have just seen communicated to Fleurie and Eleanor have been the subject of explicit debate. "What is the subject matter of '*Autres sujets*'"? asks Godlewski (02 Aug 2000 16:23), opening the discussion thread and questioning why "sport" is the only suggestion. The responses to the two English girls give a nice list of what *autres sujets* might be.

In another example of generic awareness, the issue "Why forums?" has also been debated (Graslin, 10 Feb 2000 17:05 and thread). Answers included, perhaps predictably, the advancement of knowledge through debate and discussion. Yet Fleurie's and Eleanor's preoccupation with the purely linguistic is not entirely out of place. For in the same discussion there is also frequent reference to the pleasure of writing and therefore to the production of written text as an end in itself, and evident delight in the playfulness of exchanges, as the following demonstrates:

Ce que les forums de discussions permettent par-dessus tout c'est de renouer avec l'écriture comme moyen de communication. Les occasions d'écrire étaient devenues rares depuis l'apparition du téléphone, presque qu'anecdotiques en fait, mis à part une réclamation d'assurance ou une liste d'épicerie les opportunités de pratiquer sa prose, et de se faire lire surtout, étaient pratiquement inexistantes. (Joho, 13 Apr 2000 13:42)

[What discussion fora allow above all else is the revival of writing as a means of communication. Opportunities to write had become rare since the appearance of the telephone, almost just the stuff of anecdotes, in fact, apart from the odd insurance claim or grocery list. The possibility of practicing one's prose, and especially of being read, was practically non-existent.]

Furthermore, no one denies the merits of linguistic practice, for native and non-native alike. The second, more kindly answer to Eleanor reads in part,

Vous souhaitez pratiquer le français pour améliorer vos connaissances, c'est une bonne idée. Dommage que beaucoup de français [sic] n'aient pas la même! Leur façon de pratiquer la langue de Molière pourrait faire croire qu'ils ont dormi à l'école au lieu d'écouter :-). (Lambda, 24 Feb 2000 19:09)

[You wish to practice your French in order to improve your knowledge, what a good idea. A pity that many French people don't do likewise! The way they use the language of Molière makes you wonder whether they slept at school instead of listening :-)]

A site of public performance in French, a site to practice French, yes, but no one is suggesting that the forum is the place for gratuitous linguistic exchange, nor, (naturally enough) that its function is primarily that of helping foreigners improve their French. Therefore, if non-native speakers, such as Fleurie and Eleanor are to use the forum in order to improve their language, they will still have to participate on its terms, that is, take a topic and talk about it. Using the genre to their own ends entails understanding how to engage in it productively, or, to quote Anne Freadman, who is here applying the principles of Lyotard: "Any particular genre is defined primarily by the stake for which its participants engage in it. We have to learn how to practice a genre, we have to learn its ways and means, in order to use it to our advantage" (1994, p. 13). If Fleurie and Eleanor and their peers can learn the genre of forum participation, becoming aware not only of the form but of the stakes of discussion, they may find a way of making their purpose (improving their French) compatible with that of other contributors and thereby continue to participate.

But how can one learn a genre? We have suggested that moderation might provide a kind of informal instruction for students. In the replies they receive exhorting them to "write first" and suggesting topics, Eleanor and Fleurie are receiving initiation into French culture framed in terms of lessons in genre. And their lay-teachers are performing a job remarkably similar to that suggested for language teachers by Freadman in the same essay, that is, teaching the cultural context of language use through an understanding of genre, ensuring that students learn the social purpose and the appropriateness principles of cultural practices.

Eleanor and Fleurie do not, however, seem to be able to take up their lessons. Both disappear without trace.¹⁰

The Americans

David and Laura are two Americans who engage more productively with the forum. As stated above, their success doesn't seem to be predicated on proficiency in French. It doesn't seem to matter that David's message is mostly in English. With his nine words in French, he still manages to contribute more effectively and elicit more substantial responses than Eleanor with her eighteen. Eleanor's extras ("Salut," "j'aime la France," "SVP Merci") -- however polite and connotative of goodwill -- are of virtually no help in achieving her aims. Neither politeness nor linguistic accuracy is the measure of intercultural competence here.

Perhaps the first reason for David and Laura's comparative successes is that they each respond to another message: Unlike Fleurie and Eleanor, they enter debating. In this way, they position themselves from the outset in discussion with others, thus satisfying one of the criteria for generic appropriateness highlighted by forum members. In contrast with Eleanor and Fleurie's search for penfriends, theirs is a task-centered approach: They learn by participating in the cultural practice rather than asking for special student-centered experiences focussing on themselves. Interestingly, their messages about racism and cultural imperialism lead them to the stage where questions of French culture and Frenchness (about which, as language learners, they are presumably curious) are explicitly addressed in the responses they provoke.

Let's look at their other strategies. Laura and David both apologize for their French. Why choose this gambit? Certainly the body of David's message is entirely in English, but it is not really necessary for Laura, whose French is quite adequate: Had she not made a point of her foreignness, it would not have been as obvious as she claims. However the apology allows Laura to give an outsiders' view of France. This is not merely politeness, but a means to asserting a particular speaking position, from which better to engage in the debate. In other words, her opening enhances her capacity to participate in the genre. Like Muriel (08 Nov 1999 14:50), who locates herself culturally and geographically before replying to David (discussion [below](#)), she reinstates certain cultural borders, making them palpable on the otherwise apparently borderless Web. And this facilitates the process of cultural self-definition of the forum, giving rise to explicit statements about culture.

A third point in common is, having apologized for their linguistic inadequacies, Laura and David rebut the arguments of previous messages, and (almost incidentally) enquire regarding their eligibility to participate on the forum. Here we see another way in which they position themselves in order to speak. And in doing so, they make the appropriateness of their message an issue, thus inviting feedback on their participation in this cultural practice -- without ever asking for help to "improve my French."

Laura's enquiry about eligibility appears in her second message. This is a kind of afterthought to the first, in which she has taken another participant to task for railing against illegal immigrants. Both messages are prefaced by references to her outsider status and lack of French. The second message expands on this issue:

Parlant un francais minimal (ou affreux), venant d'un pays plus ou moins deteste (les etats-unis, comme tout le monde a deja devine)... (20 Jul 1999 18:36)

[Speaking minimal (or appalling) French, coming from a country that is more or less hated (the United States, as everyone has already guessed)]

Unsure of her welcome, she asks for confirmation of her right to write both in the subject line ("les étrangers, sont-ils bienvenus?" [Are foreigners welcome?]) and in a direct question followed by a softening explanation:

Au fond, c'est ouvert ou fermé, ce forum? [sic] Est-ce qu'on s'intéresse aux grandes et mauvaises américaines qui sont en train d'apprendre le français, qui lisent (avec un petit robert, bien sûr) les commentaires précédents avec intérêt.

[Actually, is this forum open or closed? Is anyone interested in big bad Americans who are learning French, who read (with a dictionary, of course) the previous comments with interest?]

Michel Tatu, the forum moderator, is the first to respond:

Bonjour Laura !

Oui, vous êtes tout à fait la bienvenue - y compris et en particulier pour votre réponse à 'Steve'. Le forum est ouvert à tous, il admet même des gens qui parlent le français beaucoup moins bien que vous :-)

(21 July 1999 17:02)

[Hello Laura!

Yes, you are absolutely welcome, in particular for your answer to 'Steve.' The forum is open to all, it even admits people who speak French much less well than you :-)]

Note that Laura's French is more than adequate, but what makes her especially welcome is her contribution to debate.

David, who reads but does not write French and argues for cultural dialogue between France and the United States, is similarly accepted. In an oblique way he, too, asks to be admitted, but the question is phrased as part of the case he makes: "The Internet is a wonderful thing. Now we can read your newspapers and participate in your conversations, if you will permit it." The Moderator welcomes him in English with another big smile: "Certainly, David, you are welcome :-)" (30 Aug 1999 15:00).

Here we see the Moderator's efforts to encourage certain kinds of exchange: Clearly he is not merely replying to requests for entry but helping to mould the forum by stamping certain contributions with his approval. The enthusiasm of his welcome correlates directly with the fact that Laura and David are participating in the discussion as opposed to just positioning themselves as outsiders who would like to learn more.

David and Laura are also reassured by other members, who take it upon themselves to explain what to expect and why it might be appropriate. Here we see more examples of the informal teacherly function to which the forum lends itself. Their explanation for the way things are done on the forum, in its simplest version, which is explicitly stated by some contributors, is, "We're French." That is to say, genre is explained in terms of culture.

For example, in response to David, Muriel, a French expatriate living in Spain, explains French culture, with the forum being given as a means of experiencing it. The intervention deals with a specific point of conflict that Muriel is attempting to moderate. David reacts to what he has obviously seen as an incendiary piece of American-bashing. Muriel's explanation of how the French comport themselves includes commentary on this, explained as "provocation." (Whether this in fact works as an explanation for David, whether "provocation" can be understood by him as just a harmless rhetorical ploy, is of course another matter.)

One thing which I liked particularly was to get reacquainted with French culture, and I mean by this the unmistakable way of being sarcastic, but also the kind of issues the French get all excited about ... (like Roquefort, Napoleon, hormones beef, the Concorde, etc.) (08 Nov 1999 14:50)

In response to Laura's hesitation on the threshold of the forum, Baguette performs a very similar routine to Muriel (with the difference that s/he is rather more (ironically?) self-deprecating about the French). Baguette warns Laura of "les querelles" that she will find and recycles various myths of Frenchness, as was perhaps predictable from the pseudonym:

on espère que vous participerez à nos petites castagnes amicales (chez les Gaulois, les querelles pour un oui ou pour un non font partie du caractère national, au même titre que le saucisson, le beaujolais, le roquefort et Descartes...) (21 Jul 1999 02:00)

[We hope that you will participate in our friendly little punch-ups (for us Gauls, quarrelling at the drop of a hat is as much a part of the national character as sausage, beaujolais, roquefort and Descartes...)]

CULTURE AND GENRE

The responses to Eleanor, Fleurie, David, and Laura indicate ways in which the intercultural is handled in the apparent borderlessness of the Internet: Boundaries are reasserted, in the form of rules for acceptable behaviour. The official and self-appointed moderators of the *Le Monde* sub-culture deal with other cultures by asking them to conform.

The feedback on successful engagement with the forum given to David and Laura on the one hand, and to Eleanor and Fleurie on the other, comes down to the same thing -- we are here to debate -- yet those instructions are justified differently. The remarks to Eleanor and Fleurie seem grounded in an appeal to genre: We're in a forum, ladies, so let's do what we're here for. David and Laura, on the other hand, are asked to make allowances for the French love of polemic, that is, a cultural trait, which means that interaction on the forum will take the form of debate. They are being tutored in how discussion might be culturally inflected.¹¹ In other words, genre and culture are being used to explain and justify each other; they are mutually defining, which seems to us an important lesson to be learned.

The interdependence of these two notions, the idea that culture might be apprehended and best described in terms of genre appears, then, not only in academic papers such as Freedman's (1994). Our case study demonstrates the way in which this interrelationship is present in the discourse of forum practitioners. If this is how language-users conceive of and explain their practices, it makes sense for language teachers to pay attention.¹²

How to Practice your French Without Really Trying

A funny thing happened on the way to the forum. Laura and David got distracted from their French studies but ended up receiving lessons in French culture, whereas the dutiful Fleurie and Eleanor were apparently unable to pursue their agenda of "improving their French."

Is the story a useful one for language students? Yes, it is, if it is told as a cautionary tale, for the respective successes and failures of David and Laura, Fleurie and Eleanor show us that the Internet forum can indeed be the site of invaluable learning, but that it is not guaranteed. In the case of the Fleuries and Eleanors of our classes, the danger is that they are so bereft of useful strategies -- both in terms of performance and analysis -- that they will only interpret lack of success as personal rebuff. And to them we would want to say "it's not all about you." Or, in other terms, trade in that "self"-centered approach for a task-based approach. Then you may be able to turn things to your advantage. Get the genre right and the linguistic opportunity opens.

From this perspective, "practicing French" is not a helpful way of framing an on-line discussion task for students. Teachers and researchers have repeatedly encountered the problem that "when e-mail discussion lists are established, learners and instructors may not know what to communicate about" (Leeman, 1999). The solution, however, needs to go beyond suggesting topics, which didn't work for Eleanor and Fleurie, in order to persuade students to attend to forum participation as a genre of communicative behaviour.¹³

This would involve recasting "practicing French," in our instructions to students, as practicing Frenchness: performing it through participation in a cultural practice.

This is a general principle, but we submit that Internet fora provide a particularly useful opportunity for its application. To start with, there is the undeniable fact that this is a genre in which students can participate, despite the tyrannies of distance, isolation, and dictionary dependence. But if the prominence of generic and cultural specificity is removed from the equation, if the discussion forum replicates classroom practice rather than engaging with the norms and conventions of the other, then we are passing up on a remarkable opportunity to allow students to participate in a cultural practice with and on the same terms as native speakers.

Furthermore, if the particular forum draws in a wide enough membership, it is a genre of which self-reflexive commentary is an integral part, and this commentary can serve two purposes. Firstly, students receive explicit instruction in a context in which their own performance is moderated by others and success/failure depend on factors other than Unit Goals and teacher reaction. Secondly, with very little effort, students can be brought to a point at which they are forced to consider what they might have seen to be abstract notions of cultural and generic appropriateness.

However, in order to arrive at these outcomes, teacherly attention must be given to the kinds of fora recommended to students as well as to the way in which the Internet fora are presented and treated. Exposure to helpful moderation would seem to be facilitated by choice of a forum such as the *Le Monde* site. Here wide participation, a reasonable turnover of members, an active moderator and a general, if not unmitigated, climate of convivial co-operation mean that welcoming and instructing fellow-participants is all part of the business of the forum. By contrast, a more narrowly focussed group, ruled by a central core of long-standing initiates is likely to view outside intrusion as displaced and may reprove by silence.

Successful teaching of forum debate as genre involves getting the students to attend to it as such, that is, not just as a site in which non-natives may freely partake in linguistic practice. It seems advisable therefore to preface any student involvement in such electronic debate with an investigation of what successful participation would mean for a particular forum. The objective of such a treatment would obviously go well beyond the eventual involvement of students in that forum (students only able to argue on the *Le Monde* website have rather limited cultural skills). Rather, the point would be to sensitize them to the usefulness of such preparatory work and its application in other genres.

Our uptake of the term "cultural knowledge" has thus far been limited to the realm of the performative, that of cultural skills as opposed to knowledge about a culture. However, if the fundamental principle of a forum is that it provides opportunity for debate, participants must have something to say. Students therefore would be well advised either to pick a question for debate about which they already have some knowledge or to make the effort to get to know something first. "Cultural knowledge" in a more traditional sense should therefore not be opposed to "cultural skills" but re-emerges as a skill itself, necessary to successful performance. Again, this has implications for teaching: Preparatory work on a forum -- if on a designated question such as the Greens in Europe -- could well include isolating and fleshing out the references (Who is this Cohn-Bendit? Why the references to Larzac? What is the European parliament?). At the same time, and this is one of the encouraging lessons from our case study, we have seen, both in the lists proposed to the English women and the arguments advanced by David and Laura, that the outsider's view (provided it is anchored in factual accuracy) constitutes an accepted speaking position on the *Le Monde* site.

Through techniques such as those suggested above, we, as teachers, will cultivate a process whereby performance, successful and otherwise, is analyzed, and the analysis applied to further performance. Students may then -- unlike Fleurie and Eleanor -- engage with the rules of the game sufficiently to return to the forum, learn some more and even contribute to some interesting discussion along the way.

NOTES

1. The research for this article was made possible by a research grant from the Centre for Community and Cross-Cultural Studies (now the [Centre for Social Change Research](#)) at Queensland University of Technology. Our thanks go to Peter Cowley, whose diligent forum monitoring provided the material for this study, and to other colleagues whose examples and conversation have influenced this work, such as Alicia Toohey and in particular Béatrice Atherton, whose unit on argumentation, with its use of Internet fora, was one of the starting points for the project.

2. If, for the purposes of this article, we group all interventionary moves together, this is not to deny the instructiveness of the detailed investigation of different kinds of moderation, and of their distribution amongst the official moderator and other members. (For example, in the case of the four sets of exchanges we look at in this article, it is not insignificant that it is the official moderator who replies to the explicit enquiries from Laura and David regarding their eligibility.) This sharing of the work of moderation, we suspect, varies across the sub-cultures of different fora. To the list of the kinds of moderation which manifest themselves on a forum, we could also add invisible forms of moderation such as self-moderation (which is presumably the aim of the "code of electronic conduct" often issued to new members), or moderation prior to posting by any third person such as a friend, or, in the case of language teaching, an instructor.

3. For a discussion of the constraints of the language classroom, see Cowley & Hanna, 1997.

4. This description is a typical example; compare Corio's assignment (Warschauer, 1995b, p. 52) which also asks students to subscribe and then write a personal introduction to the list and a certain number of posts per week.

5. This differs from the current arrangement where questions are grouped thematically under headings, and each thematic cluster has its own *Autres sujets*. For example, the *International* grouping lists some predictable topics, but also provides the opportunity to discuss *d'autres sujets (internationaux)*, other (international) topics. The last group on the list is *Tous autres sujets* (all other topics), with only one forum listed: *Tous sujets* (all topics). And if we have taken the time to recount all this, it is because in the current version the description of this "miscellaneous" category explicitly makes a place for "*le chat*" and "*small talk*" whereas these were not previously allocated a forum and sometimes drifted into *Autres sujets*. In another significant difference, the current list of fora includes one dedicated to *Questions sur ce forum* (questions about this forum), which caters for technical and other "how to" questions regarding on-line discussion previously found on *Autres sujets*.

6. See the argument of Kollock and Smith (1996) concerning the ongoing need to negotiate rules in computer communities:

Even if a community has developed a good set of rules, there is the task of teaching new members about those rules ... New members are tempted to wade into a newsgroup without first learning the local culture by reading the documents that have been prepared by other members or by observing the group for a period of time before attempting to participate.

...Even in newsgroups that have produced a FAQ, many of the rules and institutions that are present remain informal, undocumented and difficult to enforce. As a result, there are certain chronic problems that are difficult to resolve through these informal means. For example, groups routinely wander off of their declared topics, and are frequently invaded by those who are either ignorant of the goals of the group or who actively seek to disrupt them. (p. 122)

7. Whilst the contributions of these four writers form part of the data for our study, the subjects themselves (David, Laura, Eleanor, and Fleurie) do not. The nature of on-line participation means that all

we know of their personal, pedagogical, and institutional situation is what they choose to reveal about themselves in their messages.

8. In our translations into English, we make no attempt to reproduce the linguistic errors, which include errors of spelling, gender, and structure.

9. In his subject line ("Shoot first/After you, gentlemen..."), Grossefatigue alludes to a celebrated incident at the battle of Fontenoy, at which the English invitation to the French to begin firing was met with a reply of "No, sir, the honour is yours!" (cited in common parlance as "Après vous, messieurs les Anglais"), and gallantry cost the French their front line.

10. This episode is echoed in Paramskas' experience with the discussion list *Causerie*, both in the kinds of introductory messages posted by unwitting students and in the lack of continued participation by these novices:

Every once in a while, a French teacher will discover *Causerie* and push his or her students on to it, resulting in multiple messages of the type:

Hi,
I'm XXX, and I'm learning French and I would like to talk to you.
Write to me!

This is perhaps not the best use of the medium, but "the Cause" takes it all in good stride. Someone always speaks up to welcome the class members, who tend to fade away given the volume of messages. *Causerie* was not set up as a pedagogic tool, but certainly can serve that function well. (1995, p. 167)

11. This is something that [Chen \(1998\)](#) was belatedly required to take into account when he attempted to use a highly codified form of debate as the format for email exchange among students from various countries.

12. The interplay between culture and genre is complex and much more work needs to be done on the ways in which generic conventions are adapted in line with particular cultural conventions and vice-versa. We suggest that Internet fora, with their promise of the potential of a cross-cultural genre, are a particularly rich ground for the investigation of such issues.

13. Amongst the e-discussion activities suggested to language teachers that do gesture towards attentiveness to genre, that of Butki (1997) stands out. Butki proposes a discussion forum for ESL students where the teacher receives a handout for students that "includes examples of both appropriate messages, which are relevant to the topic being discussed and ask[s] questions that prompt additional comments, and some that are inappropriate" (pp. 107-108). Teachers are also advised to monitor the list to learn its conventions and to "ask the students to read messages for 1 week and take notes on the topics and styles in them" (p. 108). Framing the purpose as other than a narrowly linguistic one is achieved by "hav[ing] the students compete to see whose message triggers the most responses" (p. 109). Butki's activity is particularly useful in that attention to generic appropriateness is highlighted and guidelines for achieving it are given. These however, do not appear to be linked to questions of cultural difference, and the opportunity to explore anglophone habits of discussion and the interrelatedness of genre and culture may be overlooked.

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