

IRC Français – A French Learning Community

James M. Hudson
College of Computing, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA 30332-0280
Tel: 404-894-1558, Fax: 404-894-0673
Email: jhudson@cc.gatech.edu

Abstract: This paper presents IRC Français, a project designed to help students learn a foreign language in an online, conversation-oriented environment. After briefly presenting the framework, rationale, and design for IRC Français, I will offer some initial findings from a pilot study. This study, conducted using four sophomore-level French conversation classes at two universities, examines how the medium of IRC Français affects language learning.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication, distributed learning environments, informal learning environments, learning communities

Learning Challenges and the Power of “Third Places”

Learning involves the possibility of making mistakes (Kolodner, 1997). Willingness to make such mistakes requires that learners be willing to take intellectual risks: risks that Bransford, et al. argue can be difficult for students who are performance-oriented (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). Learning a foreign language as an adult involves an even greater degree of intellectual risk-taking. While children often enjoy playing games with a language, adults use language to control how they present themselves to others. Therefore, when an adult begins learning a foreign language, the ability to feel in control of self-presentation is no longer available. Guiora frames this difficulty in terms of a “language ego” which must be permeated in order for language learning to occur (Guiora, 1972). The argument follows that an increase in ego permeability – a decrease in the fear of using a second language incorrectly – will increase language learning.

In *The Great Good Place*, sociologist Ray Oldenburg presents a vision of “third places” that has inspired the design of IRC Français as an environment to support ego permeability (Oldenburg, 1989). Third places are those environments outside of home and work that serve important socialization functions. Oldenburg argues that third places are neutral environments which have a socially-leveling effect. Class distinctions are de-emphasized and playful conversation reigns. These low profile and accommodating environments welcome patrons to enter, relax, and enjoy the company of others.

Under the guidance of Amy Bruckman, I designed IRC Français to provide a third-place-like environment for language students. We envisioned an environment where students could converse with others in a foreign language. Often, grocery store and train station discussions are the only conversations heard in the classroom. In our vision, however, popular culture and personally-meaningful topics dominate conversations. Due to the media and the orientation of the conversations, our hope is that all students would begin speaking more equally rather than having conversations dominated by a few. In this way, we aim to create a third place environment that can increase language ego permeability and language learning.

Software and Environment

Underlying the IRC Français environment is an IRC (1) client that provides students access to a text-based discussion space where they can communicate with others in real time. We implemented client software to offer an environment more attuned to the unique needs of language learners (Soloway, Guzdial, & Hay, 1994). The software removes many of the technical difficulties that tend to confuse and frustrate non-computer specialists and provides scaffolding to help the learners find the correct online location for conversations with other students. Additionally, it simplifies the difficulties in generating accented characters from a standard American keyboard.

Earlier pilot studies helped us evolve the learning environment (Hudson & Bruckman, 2000). Students using the IRC Français software converse with other students. Usually, an advanced/native speaker is present as a host for the conversation. During the week, we hold a number of scheduled chat sessions with a host for each. This provides a time in which the students know that they can find other students online and available. Our ultimate

vision has students using IRC Français at any point during the day for self-motivated language practice. Unfortunately, the community is not yet large enough for that to be a possibility.

Evaluation

This poster will present the early results from a semester-long evaluation of IRC Français. This evaluation focuses on the effects of the medium of IRC Français without attempting to make any rigorous statements regarding the actual language skills being learned (2). We specifically focus on the nature of IRC Français as a third place. Research in the CSCW community suggests that this type of environment can have a socially-leveling effect in which all participate more equally (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). There is limited research, however, about the applicability of these findings to educational environments. This evaluation focuses on these leveling effects in the creation of a third place environment designed to encourage language ego permeability.

During the Spring 2000 semester, nearly seventy students from six sophomore-level college French classes at three different universities are participating in the IRC Français environment. This evaluation primarily focuses on four conversation-oriented classes, each with different instructors, at two of the universities. Since our interest lies in the comparison between conversations in the classroom and conversations using IRC Français, these conversation-oriented classes offer the most direct sources of comparison. Outside of class time, the approximately forty students involved must attend and participate in at least one of three scheduled sessions with IRC Français each week. The topic of discussion for each hour-long session is left to the host, but is announced in advance.

In addition to examining the logs of the conversations on IRC Français, we are videotaping a number of the classroom conversations and interviewing the instructors and students. Presently, we are still conducting this study, but early results suggest this is a promising line of inquiry. We are beginning to see striking differences between discourse patterns in the classroom and using IRC Français. The conversational pattern in the classroom shows segments where the teacher makes a long statement followed by a short statement from a student. This pattern repeats throughout the class period. On IRC Français, the discourse pattern shows far more equity with students replying to one another more frequently. In fact, while hosting a session, one teacher frequently commented on how surprised she was by the depth and speed of student responses to each other using IRC Français.

The evaluation also has begun to show other interesting findings. For example, one native speaker participating in the discussion seems to help while multiple native speakers must remain careful to avoid dominating the conversation through talking with each other. In this poster, I will present the results from this semester-long study of IRC Français.

Endnotes

- (1) Internet Relay Chat: A network of computers connecting users to a real time text-based chat system.
- (2) Research on this is being conducted separately in collaboration with Lisa Jurkowitz, Department of Modern Languages, University of Arizona.

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