

Recommended website

Vivre en Aquitaine: pedagogy, audience, design

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the website *Vivre en Aquitaine*, a website for learners of French that introduces learners to that region of France whilst at the same time developing their language skills, cultural knowledge, and intercultural awareness. Whilst designers of learning resources have to take into account the learners' needs and objectives, the interplay between pedagogy and design are also crucial in developing the resources, and work together in an iterative process. This is illustrated by focussing on one particular section of the website, where the original pedagogical framework was modified by our emerging understanding of how some technical affordances could develop our pedagogy in unforeseen ways, pushing us to engage further with plurilingualism and intercomprehension.

Keywords: Pedagogy, audience, design, intercomprehension, plurilingualism.

1. Introduction

Vivre en Aquitaine is a website for learners of French (levels B1-B2) that aims to engage learners in discovering the region of Aquitaine and beyond whilst also undertaking activities that develop their language skills, their cultural knowledge, and their intercultural awareness. The site is sponsored by the *Région Aquitaine*, the Aquitaine Regional Government, and therefore one of its aims is also to introduce the area and give practical information to visitors and potential long-time residents from other European countries, namely Spain, Italy, Germany and the UK.

The project, led by the *Institut Français* in Madrid, also includes three other partners: the Open University in the UK, the *Institut Français* in Bremen, Germany, and the University of Genoa, in Italy (in 2011 the latter left the project, and the *Institut Français* in Milan replaced it). Although sponsored by the Aquitaine Region, the partners have had full control of the design of the website and its content, and at the forefront of the development were clear pedagogical objectives. These include:

- Practical objectives (discovering Aquitaine, its culture, its history, its ways of life and its customs, and finding out useful practical information for those wanting to settle in the area).
- Intercultural objectives (adopting an open and curious outlook, relativising one's values and point of view);
- Linguistic objectives (reading, listening to and understanding texts and recordings in French, knowing how to react to situations in everyday life, etc.)
- Personal objectives (improving one's French in an autonomous way by identifying one's language needs, and carrying out research and selecting information relevant to one's needs and interests).

In this article, I will briefly provide an overview of the site and describe its different sections and their content (2. Overview of the website), and then look at the initial pedagogic assumptions we made when developing the site, in particular in relation to our target audience (3. Pedagogy and audience). Next, I will consider how design and pedagogy worked together in an iterative process, in particular with regards to one particular section of the website. Although all the partners had started with a clear pedagogical framework for the website, during the development phase of the project some of the design features of the site provided affordances that we had not anticipated, and this led to the development of our pedagogical approach in a slightly different direction from the one we had planned. I will describe this process in section 4. Pedagogy and design, and in the next section (5. Pedagogy and design, a practical example) I will deal in particular with one aspect of the website, the "Miroirs" section, in the light of the technical affordances we "stumbled upon", our emerging understanding of plurilingualism and intercomprehension and the pedagogic implications this has had on our approach. Finally, in section 6. Conclusion and future plans, I will look at future developments for the project.

2. Overview of the website

The *Vivre en Aquitaine* website has four points of entry, each one linked to the user's first language. So the website can be approached from any of the following:

- <http://uk.aquitaine.fr> for the English version;
- <http://de.aquitaine.fr> for the German version;
- <http://it.aquitaine.fr> for the Italian version;
- and <http://es.aquitaine.fr> for the Spanish version.

Although the sites are almost identical, and most of the content is in French, the four language sites present slightly different versions, which I shall explain in more detail in this section. All four websites have exactly the same structure, and comprise the following distinct sections:



Figure 1. *Vivre en Aquitaine* homepage.

2.1. Portraits

Because one of the aims of the *Vivre en Aquitaine* website is to provide advice for those thinking of moving to the area, the resources include video portraits of Spanish, British, German and Italian people who have settled in different areas of Aquitaine for a variety of reasons (such as family, work, study or lifestyle). They present a range of different experiences and give advice to the newcomers. For instance Paz, from Spain, explains that the five words or expressions that are essential for anyone coming to the area are: *Merci, s'il vous plaît, pardon, excusez-moi, and bonjour*, whilst Penny's survival phrases include the more esoteric "*Est-ce que votre crème brûlée est faite[à la] maison?*"(1). She does strongly recommend to anyone thinking of settling in France that they should learn French as soon as possible, something that not all expats do, especially British ones.

Heinrich, from Germany, offers the following thoughtful advice to those thinking of settling in the area:

Apprenez la langue. Oubliez vos préjugés. Habituez-vous au fait que tout le monde ne pense pas comme vous, soyez ouvert aux idées nouvelles. N'oubliez pas votre culture et votre savoir faire, le mélange fera la richesse de vos échanges. Invitez vos nouveaux voisins à dîner, c'est la meilleure façon de faire connaissance. N'invitez jamais un Français au petit déjeuner, il vous prendra pour un fou. Ne vous enfermez pas dans votre communauté. (2)

As well as illustrating the first-hand experiences of settlers to the area, these portraits are also interesting in that they show foreigners speaking French, so provide the learners with non-native speaker models against whom to measure themselves. The case for providing learners with models of non-native speakers has been made elsewhere (Byram et al., 2002). It has also been argued that from a cultural point of view, interculturally competent non-native speakers might be a useful model for learners: indeed, Byram et al. (2002), for instance, explain how as opposed to "the insider, someone who belongs to a culture," and who is "very often unable to analyse and conceptualise what is too familiar", "the non-native teacher and learner have the advantage of seeing a culture from a distance, and then taking the perspective of that other culture to look back on their own." (Byram et al., 2002 p. 18).

2.2. Itinéraires

The section "*Itinéraires*" enables the learners to practice their French whilst discovering specific areas of Aquitaine. It is organised in terms of "*étapes*", or stages on a journey that covers the whole of the Aquitaine geographical area. Each of the ten stages of the itinerary includes a quest (*enquête*), a meeting (*rencontre*) and a situation (*situation*). "*Itinéraires*" is a section rich in resources (including audio) and online activities, and is mostly envisaged for autonomous learning.

2.3. Pratique

Pratique contains practical information for those preparing to move to France and, particularly, to Aquitaine. This section includes different "*dossiers*", each dealing with a specific topic: money, accommodation, food, health, work and study, sports and leisure, and communications, but always from an intercultural perspective. One of the aims of this section is to make the learner reflect on the ways in which these everyday practices and activities are similar to or differ from the ones they already know in their own country. The section indeed follows Byram's definition of the skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) in the intercultural context, i.e. the "ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own" (Byram et al. 2002). At the end of each "*dossier*", there is a short activity to test the understanding of what has been read, and a *pense bête*, a little reminder of key phrases or issues related to that topic.

2.4. *Enfants Nomades*

Enfants nomades is a section for children, both those who are learning French and might be going to live in France, and for those who are “nomadic children” already, and live abroad. There are video and audio contributions from children in France, from French children who live abroad, and from children from the different partner countries on different topics such as their hobbies, where they live, traditions and celebrations, and advice for travellers.

2.5. *Miroirs*

Miroirs is a collection of texts in French, with a corresponding “mirror text” in each of the languages of the parallel websites, i.e. English, German, Italian and Spanish. The mirror texts are not translations, but texts that take up the same issues, or that present a similar topic in the other culture. For instance, a text on the daily life of a woman from Bordeaux is mirrored by texts about the life of a woman from Sheffield, a student from Bremen, and a woman from Genoa, each in their respective language. Similarly, the French article on the pine trees of the Landes, which are so characteristic of this region, is mirrored by articles on Thetford forest and its Scots pines, the Castilian oak, and the Ligurian mimosa, each representing a different national landscape, and each enabling the reader to reflect on the relationship between landscape, culture and identity in their home culture and in France.

2.6. Additional sections

In addition to these main sections, the site offers two other sections that are worth commenting on:

- **Forums:** there are forums in the site where learners can post on a number of different discussion topics which are moderated by the project team to ensure that messages are swiftly responded to; there are also forums at the end of the practical “*dossiers*” and the *Miroirs* texts to enable learners to share their experiences and reflections on those specific texts and the topics they shed light on.
- **Espace pédagogique:** this section is for teachers, and contains a collection of lesson plans to enable them to exploit the different resources in their classroom. Lesson plans are organised by topic, and by CEFRL levels.

Having briefly described the different section of the website, I will now look at the initial pedagogic assumptions we made in the planning stages of the project, in particular around defining our target audience.

3. Pedagogy and audience

The four partner institutions originally involved in the project came from fairly different institutional and cultural backgrounds, and different educational areas. The French Institutes in Madrid and in Bremen offer part-time, mostly non-formal French language learning opportunities to adults and children studying part-time, usually face-to-face, and who attend regular lessons during the academic year once or twice a week; the Institute in Bremen also teaches French to students at the local university. The Department of French at the University of Genoa offers language courses, mostly for undergraduates, who study full-time in a face-to-face “traditional” university setting. The Open University, on the other hand, also offers undergraduate provision, but teaches at a distance, using online synchronous and asynchronous tools, and its mostly adult students study part-time. The different settings in which the members of the project team operated provided us with a wide variety of approaches, skills and interests, but also with different pedagogical assumptions and understandings of how the website would be exploited by potential users.

Collis and Moonen (2001) identify five dimensions of flexibility of learning: time, content, entrance requirements, instructional approach and resources, and course delivery and logistics. Whilst we obviously had no control over some of these, as we were producing learning materials rather than courses, we wanted these to enable teachers and learners to use them as flexibly as possible. We wanted the website to be designed in such a way that it could cater for different types of learning contexts: for individuals accessing the website completely independently; for learners working on the resources as part of a more directed course (for instance with a teacher, either face-to-face or at a distance); for teachers wanting specific resources that they could incorporate into their courses, and, in the case of the *Enfants Nomades* section, for parents working with their children independently and for teachers in formal or informal settings and their learners. Because of the multiple and sometimes competing audiences we had identified, and the different needs they would have, flexibility was paramount, and we wanted to design a site that could be accessed by different users in different ways.

The idea behind the website itself, of providing a collection of digital resources and activities for users to develop their language skills and cultural knowledge, is not new. What was interesting and innovative from a design point of view, though, is that, on the one hand, our different contexts and backgrounds made us envisage very different potential users for the website and this, in a sense, meant that we were “designing for strangers”. On the other hand, compared to materials that are designed for more closed or controlled institutional settings, for instance, the type of resource we were designing, which is open to any user and free to access, is characterised by a “lack of gatekeeping” compared to traditional settings (Collis and Moonen, 2010).

4. Pedagogy and design

In their foreword to Sharpe et al.’s *Rethinking Learning for a Digital Age* (2010), Collis and Moonen define learning footprints as “the evidence of where a learner has been or is going”, and what they are using and doing as they learn. Whilst Collis and Moonen wonder how “learning footprints” are influenced by the affordances of different learning spaces, they also consider that the pedagogical practices of instructors are important components of the learner experiences. They explain that:

Simplistically we can say that learning footprints are a function of (at least) the personal characteristics of the learner, cohort cultures, time available to the learner for learning, extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for learning, institutional affordances (spaces, tools and support available), technologies used and their affordances, social and personal priorities, and, last but not least, the pedagogies set forward by their instructors for learning. (Collis and Moonen, 2010)

It is fair to say that in the *Vivre en Aquitaine* resources, our pedagogical approach is not something that we formulated explicitly at the start of the project, and whilst it’s true that we all subscribed to a communicative approach and to fostering intercultural understanding, we did not fully define all aspects of our approach before starting to design the activities and resources.

Rather than seeing this as a shortcoming of the project, though, I think that this particular example can be used to illustrate how, as materials writers, we can conceptualise design processes, and the implications this has. The traditional model for working on solving complex design problems (such as designing a collection of learning materials, producing an e-learning course, or any other such design project) is to follow some linear top down process that starts with defining the problem and then moves on to working out the solution. Traditionally this model would involve understanding the requirements (the needs of the learners, the context, etc.), drawing up a specification of the project, formulating a solution, and implementing it, as illustrated in figure 2 below:

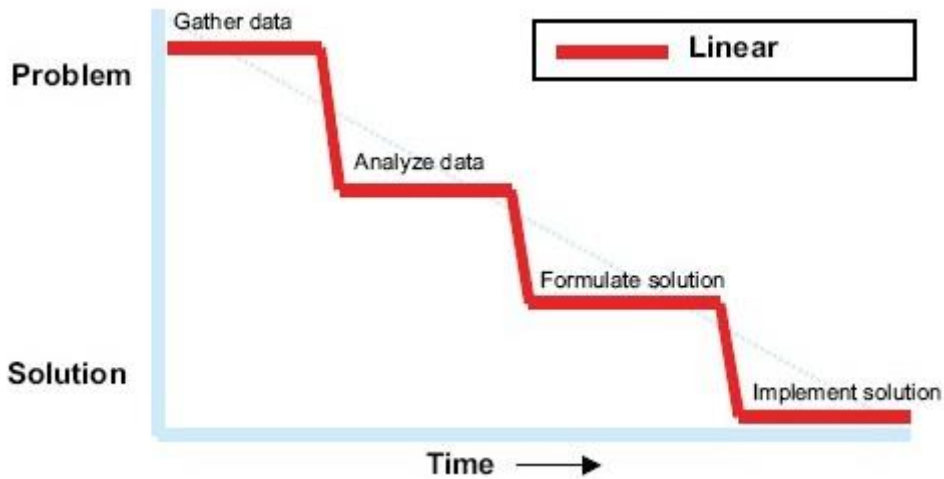


Figure 2. Traditional wisdom for solving complex problems: the 'waterfall', from Conklin (2006).

Writing about wicked problems and social complexity, Conklin (2006) explains how experienced designers don't follow this orderly waterfall model of understanding a problem first and then working out a solution, but in fact in their designing process is non-linear, and they constantly shift between redefining the problem and working out solutions in an iterative way. Indeed, once part of the problem has been identified, they work on a solution to that part of the problem, which might shed new light on the problem or demand that it is re-examined, providing further insights into how to work out a solution. As Conklin (2006) points out, humans don't solve problems by gathering and analysing data and then moving on to formulating solutions and implementing them. Rather, the thinking patterns of creative, experienced individuals are full of unpredictable leaps. This makes it difficult to provide an orderly explanation of the rationale of the development of a complex project such as the creation of a set of learning resources like the one our team was engaged in.

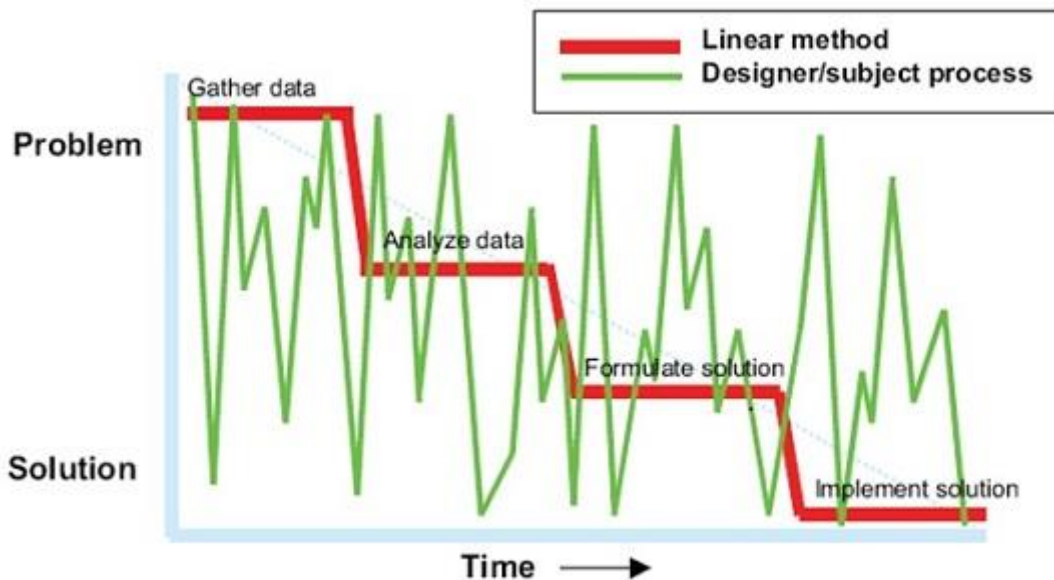


Figure 3. Pattern of cognitive activity of one designer: the "jagged" line, from Conklin (2006).

In the case of *Vivre on Aquitaine*, "the problem" was the design of a set of learning materials that fulfilled the generic aims of the project, for a wide range of users (so, to some, extent "designing for strangers"), and for a project that would have no gate-keepers and be available for learners in a whole range of settings, from completely open (in the case of independent learners) to fairly structured (if used as part of a course).

We were restricted by the affordances of the platform (we used SPIP, partly because it is open source, and partly because the back-end is relatively easy to use in terms of uploading and publishing materials). Although a set of pedagogical approaches were already in place when we started the production of the website resources, and they influenced the design (a desire to place intercultural competence at the centre of the project, the use of common tools such as the CEFR documentation for reference), others, however, developed through the interplay between our pedagogic expertise and the affordances of the site, and through constant leaps between a conceptual understanding of what we were doing ("the problem"), and a practical, hands-on approach when writing of the activities ("the solution"). In the next section, I want to illustrate this process through our emerging approach to the *Miroirs* section of the site.

5. Pedagogy and design: a practical example

The *Vivre en Aquitaine* website is a website for teaching and learning French, but the *Miroirs* sections for each language version also include texts in the users' L1s. So the French text "*La journée d'une Bordelaise*", for instance, is accompanied by a text in Italian in the Italian version of the site, a text in Spanish in the Spanish version, etc. As explained above, these are not translations of the French original, but "mirror" texts about the other culture. At one level, of course, they are designed to encourage reflections about similarities and differences between French culture and the students' own culture. When we started designing the website, we at first considered these different language mirrors to be fairly self-standing, and envisaged users who were speakers of a particular language to approach the site and the material from that language site (so a German learner would go to the *de.aquitaine.fr* site and see the Franco-German mirror texts, or a British user would go to the *uk.aquitaine.fr* site and read the texts in French and their English mirrors).

As we were writing the content of the *Miroirs*, however, we found that a particular design feature of the site, which we had not really considered at first, enabled users to move from one national site to another at the click of a button. As we wrote the *Miroirs* section, we became more and more interested in what this design feature enabled us to do pedagogically: it enabled us to easily promote plurilingual competences and even intercomprehension in a way we had not anticipated at the start, when our focus was mostly on promoting knowledge and the skill of interpreting and relating through the simple juxtaposition of a text in the target language with one in the user's L1.

Beacco and Byram (2003:8) have defined plurilingualism as "the potential and/or actual ability to use several languages to varying levels of proficiency and for different purposes." Following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001:168), they go on to explain that plurilingual and pluricultural competence is the ability "to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural action, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures". They distinguish between plurilingualism (a speaker's ability to use more than one language) and multilingualism (the presence of several languages in a given territory). Plurilingual education, they argue, should seek "to develop speakers' language skills and linguistic repertoires", and they clearly believe that it is the responsibility of the education systems to

make all Europeans aware of the nature of this ability, which is developed to a greater or lesser extent according to individuals and contexts, to highlight its value and develop it in the early years of schooling and throughout life, since it forms the basis of communication in Europe, but above all of linguistic tolerance, the prerequisite for the maintenance of linguistic diversity. The experience of plurilingualism also provides all European citizens with one of the most immediate opportunities in which actually to experience Europe in all its diversity. Policies which are not limited to managing the diversity of languages but adopt plurilingualism as a goal may also provide a more concrete basis for democratic citizenship in Europe: it is

not so much mastery of a particular language or particular languages which characterises European citizens (and the citizens of many other political and cultural entities) as a plurilingual, pluricultural competence which ensures communication, and above all results in all languages being respected. (Beacco and Byram, 2003, p. 8)

Alves and Mendes (2006) have also highlighted the point that plurilingualism as a concept goes beyond merely enabling communication in multilingual environments; rather it embodies the recognition and appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity. They remind us that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages defines plurilingual and pluricultural competences as “complex and composite competences, which allow individuals to participate as social agents in intercultural communicative interactions” (Council of Europe, 2001: 168).

One of the ways in which we have tried to promote plurilingualism and an appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity through the *Miroirs* section of the website is by making the mediation of texts in other languages part of the learning activities with our students. In a French class with Open University students of French, for instance, students who also had some understanding of one of the other languages of the site were asked to read the mirror text in that language and then summarize it in French for the rest of their peers, who also asked them questions about it, as appropriate. Although students were in the class primarily for the purpose of developing their speaking skills in French, they enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to use their wider linguistic repertoire and to be able to act as linguistic and cultural mediators for their classmates.

As we continued working on the *Miroirs* section of the website, we also developed or refined our understanding of intercomprehension. In its purest form intercomprehension is “a form of communication in which each person uses his or her own language and understands that of the other.” (Doyé, 2005). It has also been defined as “the process of developing the ability to co-construct meaning in the context of the encounter of different languages, and to make pragmatic use of this in a concrete communicative situation” (Capucho, quoted in Alves and Mendes, 2006). Alves and Mendes explain that thus, it involves “the transfer of strategies and knowledge from known to unknown languages”, a process that is supported by awareness of cultural features (Alves and Mendes, 2006). Indeed, they argue that “activating and training intercomprehension strategies comprises three levels: (1) the human ability to communicate meanings, (2) language learning (in a conscious or unconscious manner) as a process of strategies acquisition, and (3) the on-going development of intercomprehension abilities and strategies (both in interpreting and producing discourse)”.

The functionality of being able to easily swap between languages in the *Miroirs* led us to think of ways in which the pairs of texts could be used to highlight this process of intercomprehension strategies acquisition, and to foster the on-going development of intercomprehension abilities and strategies. Working with students on a mirror text in a language they do not speak encourages them to pay attention to the strategies they use to make sense of the text (text organization, multimedia elements such as images, numerical data (dates, times...), vocabulary items that are similar to the student’s L1 or any other of the languages they know, cultural knowledge they may have about the target culture or other cultures, etc.).

Doyé (2005) points out that learners have “considerable funds of usable knowledge which can be exploited”, and suggests that teachers should make learners aware of this knowledge and enable them to use it by developing appropriate strategies. For this purpose, he summarises the relevant categories of knowledge that learners draw upon when understanding new texts and utterances in a language they are not familiar with, and suggests that these are the categories of knowledge necessary for promoting competence in intercomprehension:

- General knowledge

- Cultural knowledge
- Situational knowledge
- Behavioural knowledge
- Pragmatic knowledge
- Graphic knowledge
- Phonological knowledge
- Grammatical knowledge
- Lexical knowledge

In order to find out how to exploit your own funds of knowledge that can help you make sense of a text in a language you do not speak, I would urge you to visit the *Miroirs* section of the website, and to look at a text in a language you do not understand. The following example illustrates the use of a German text from the *Miroirs* with a learner who speaks no German: <http://vimeo.com/37817462>

What is important to highlight here is that an unexpected technical development, and the affordances it provided, influenced our approach to the pedagogy, providing us with possibilities we had not anticipated at the start. As Conklin (2006) puts it, by working on “the solution”, we were also at the same time redefining “the problem”. Thinking about these technical possibilities and their pedagogical applications also enabled us to start contemplating how else we could promote plurilingualism and the polyglot dialogues learners might want to engage in.

Sometimes, however, it was the users themselves who, through their own use of the resources, pointed at new possibilities we had not originally envisaged. For instance, the *Miroirs* texts offer users the possibility to comment on the texts. As authors, we had difficulties in finding an equivalent in English for one of the French texts on the cultural and gastronomic practice of the “*éclade de moules*”. Because of the interactive affordances of the website, we decided to ask users to leave messages trying to come up with a UK equivalent, and several left comments in English or French, making suggestions of similar practices in their own cultural context. Although at first we had wanted to promote the use of French in all the user interactions in the site, we felt that the use of English here was entirely appropriate, and fitted well with the promotion of plurilingualism that we were keen to foster. The comments on the French/English version of the *Miroir*, however, were only available to users who were on English page (so if you were in the Italian page, looking at the French/Italian version of the *Miroir*, you might not know that there was a discussion on the English site). The more learners used the site, the more persuaded we became that these plurilingual and pluricultural competences were ones we wanted to promote rather than prevent, and therefore in the new phase of the project which is currently taking place, we have made technical changes to enable this practice, informed this time by our own pedagogical development, so that learners on one bilingual mirror page can see the forum discussions on the sister pages (see, for instance, <http://uk.aquitaine.fr/spip.php?rubrique84&lang=en> and click on the flags next to the forum discussion).

6. Conclusion and future plans

Goodyear and Ellis (2010) have shown how the learning context and the educational intentions of their teachers can influence the students’ learning approach. They argue that learners’ “conception of learning and approaches to study are not fixed personal traits, but emerge in interaction with a context”. Indeed, by helping learners shape and reshape the context in which they learn (for instance through the tools they use), as teachers we can also “nudge their sense of what learning is, and how to become better at it, in more productive directions”. I would argue that although this is certainly the case in our experience, and that through the *Miroirs* we were certainly able to nudge learners to explore issues of plurilingualism and intercomprehension and help develop competences in these areas, our own conception and approaches as teachers is not necessarily fixed either, and it too can emerge in interaction with a context. In this particular case, as designers of learning materials, our conception and approaches

shifted because we discovered pedagogical applications of technical features that we had not originally foreseen. At the same time, our learners' unexpected behaviour (such as the use of the L1 in the comments on the *Miroirs*), also "nudged" us as educators into further expanding our pedagogical understanding of plurilingual and intercultural practices in action.

In the next phase of the project, which is now underway, we are enabling learners who enter the *Miroirs* from a specific language portal to be able to see the comments in the other language *Miroirs*, so as to encourage a polyglot dialogue between users. We have also chosen intercomprehension and plurilingualism as two of the axes of our work for this phase of the project, and are further developing our understanding and our practice in those areas.

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Notes

[1] "Is your *crème brûlée* home-made?"

[2] Learn the language. Forget your prejudices. Get used to the fact that not everyone thinks like you, be open to new ideas. Don't forget your culture and your "savoir faire", mixing things up will make your exchanges all the richer. Invite your new neighbours to dinner; it's the best way to get to know them. Never invite a French person for breakfast, they'll think you're mad! Don't lock yourself up in your own community.

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