

A Summary of Masters' Dissertation:
Authentic and Sustained Peer-to-Peer Target Language
Interaction- A study
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This dissertation explored the possibility of teachers facilitating direct interaction of student of the same age in foreign languages. As a teacher of languages, this is a change that the author implemented in three different London schools and one school in France. This was carried out by a new languages exchange website for schools, called 'Bili' (www.bili.uk.com).

Introduction and Context

The research is to be carried out across three London academies within a large federation. The federation is widely considered to be very successful, with all of its academies being rated by Ofsted as either good or outstanding. A report carried out by the Sutton Trust places the federation amongst a group of academy chains which have 'a transformational impact on students' life chances' (Sutton Trust, 2015). Of the three participating academies, Academy 1 is an all-girls school, Academy 2 is mixed and Academy 3 is all-girls. Academy 1 was rated as Good in the most recent Ofsted inspection, while both Academy 2 and 3 were rated as Outstanding.

The research took place in the first half of the Summer term, with the message exchanges between students taking place over a period of six weeks. It must be noted that due to the short timescale, the validity of conclusions drawn from the attainment data will be limited in scope. As previously mentioned the three participating schools were drawn from a pool of six schools taking part in the federation's year 7 French pilot scheme of work, which are included in the study as control groups for comparison of attainment data. Four different teachers participated, with 117 students across the three academies (see table below). Correspondingly, there were

117 exchange partners at one school in France, who were taught by four different teachers, but that is beyond the scope of this enquiry into the impact of this learning platform in England.

Academy 1		Academy 2		Academy 3	
Teacher 1 (researcher)	Teacher 2	Teacher 3		Teacher 4	Teacher 4
20	27	23		23	24

Figure 4: Structure of research by school and teacher

‘Bili’ as an online resource aims to improve the language learning experience through technology. Unlike the majority of online language learning tools this is not a static resource, and is reliant on both teacher and student input to function.

It is clear that for the use of technology to be effective it must be carefully integrated into the delivery of the curriculum, with it in mind to provide meaningful practice. Findings from Ofsted in their observations of ICT across MFL departments corroborate that a key feature of outstanding teaching and learning was that ‘there was a policy for using ICT and its use was written into schemes of work which were updated regularly’ (Ofsted, 2011, p.47).

The tasks on ‘Bili’ are set by the teacher on a weekly basis (and adapted as necessary), so whilst providing that opportunity to communicate in a culturally appropriate way, it also gives students a chance to employ language covered in the classroom in an authentic manner. This presents an important question for this study in so far as whether students recognise this context and whether it has an impact on their engagement in the tasks.

Through ‘Bili’ students will similarly be able to see one another’s others work, potentially improve their own as a result and read more extensively. Therefore, it will be important to measure student attainment, not solely through their outcomes in their written work, but also through reading.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

1. Can authentic peer-to-peer target language interaction be implemented and sustained in schools and what effect does this have on student engagement and attainment?

This is the overarching question which frames this research: through the 'Bili' website is it possible to enable students to communicate with each other, and if so does this interaction support them to make progress, and engage better with the foreign language? This question is central to whether authentic exposure and use of a foreign language over the internet is beneficial and indeed desirable.

2. How prepared are MFL teachers to adopt new technology to complement their approach to teaching and learning?

For effective change to be implemented and sustained, the website has to be accessible to teachers and complement, not detract from, their classroom teaching. It is clear that with any new resource there is a necessary initial time commitment to sign up, understand and learn to use the new technology. As advocated by the literature on leading educational change, for sustainable impact to take shape teachers and users of the platform on an individual level must both identify the problem, and recognise the website as an effective and accessible solution to it. 'Bili' has to facilitate this process, and yield tangible and rapid benefits for teachers if it is to have a long term impact of MFL pedagogy.

3. What are the barriers to students using a MFL in an authentic context?

It is important to form an accurate picture of students' attitudes towards communicating in the language, and the relation between their confidence or willingness to apply the language, and its perceived usefulness. This aims to complement and deepen the understanding of the language learner's relationship between the context they are in, the language they are using and the resulting value they see in it.

4. Are students more receptive to receiving peer-feedback?

Differing from other homework and online resources, 'Bili' will rely on students to provide each other feedback on their work, putting the teacher in the position of gatekeeper to monitor but not disrupt the dialogue. It is important to monitor how this feedback would be received from a peer (who they themselves are able to support in the same way), in contrast to relatively similar feedback provided by a teacher, or subject expert with whom there exists no symbiotic relationship.

5. Can the linguistic awareness of students (in both their first language and the MFL) be increased through correcting a peer's work?

Similar to the previous question, the impact of correcting and giving valuable feedback to peers may serve to improve their own literacy in their first language as well as gaining a greater awareness of common linguistic areas and patterns, which may in turn support their accuracy in the foreign language.

6. Can student attainment be accelerated through authentic and purposeful communication in a foreign language?

Evidently for the website to provide real value, it is important to monitor the impact that the various facets of the 'Bili' website have on student attainment, and progress especially when compared to those of other students of similar ability. For a change to really take hold, it is clear that there need to be tangible, and short-term as well as longer term wins for both the students and the teachers.

7. Can student engagement be increased through authentic and purposeful communication in a foreign language?

Finally, from a more qualitative perspective the question of whether this interaction can impact on student engagement is essential when one acknowledges the long term impact this could have on a student's participation in and attitude towards language learning.

Results

As detailed above the research was collected from a variety of qualitative and quantitative sources in advance of, during, and after the period of six weeks when participating schools had used the languages exchange platform, 'Bili'.

The first tool used was the focus group involving six female students of mixed ability who were asked to discuss the same four questions which were planned. This focus group was conducted at Academy 1, an all-girls school. As the researcher in this discussion, I limited my contributions to asking for further clarification, or asking for a response from a different student. The four questions were explicitly focussed on communication both written and spoken in the target language. Each of these will be addressed in turn, and any common themes or comments discussed.

1. How do you feel about speaking in French?

It was widely agreed upon that this was the most difficult part of learning the language. One student said that she felt shy when speaking, and was scared about making the wrong sound. Another student made the distinction between whole class choral repetition, which she said was 'fun because I can practice without anyone listening to me', and pair work which said 'I don't really do because it's embarrassing'.

2. How do you feel about writing in French?

Students agreed that this was easier, but only provided they were given enough support. One student said 'it's annoying that I can't really say what I want to because I don't know the words'. Another student 'it's ok, but it's normally quite boring', and when asked to clarify, said that she did not think the topics were interesting. One student said that she preferred doing it for homework because she was not rushed, and another agreed but said that she then uses google translate so she does not make mistakes.

3. How would you feel about speaking in French to a native French speaker (your own age)?

One student started by saying that she would speak in English: 'everyone speaks English anyway, Sir'. Another said that she would say 'bonjour..comment t'appelles tu?' and 'ça va?',

before 'I'd run out of useful things to say'. It was generally agreed that it would be quite scary because the French person would think they have a stupid accent.

4. How would you feel about writing in French to a native French speaker (your own age)?
The students were in agreement that they would prefer to write so that they had more time to think about what they wanted to say. One student also pointed out that the potential benefit of receiving feedback from a native speaker: 'I like the idea of writing to someone my own age because if I make a mistake they can give me a correction in a way that I understand.'

From this focus group three main barriers to authentic communication in the target language (French) emerged. Firstly, and unanimously, students felt inhibited from communicating, especially in spoken language but also in written form, by a fear of making mistakes or a lack of confidence in their ability to be understood. Secondly, students felt frustrated by being unable to access the language to express what they wanted to say, which in turn led to an over-reliance on resources such as dictionaries or google translate. Finally, in line with the research into the University of Cumbria Approach students could not relate the language they were learning in the class room to the real context and purpose of communication, and as result found it boring. These findings, combined with the literature and the research questions were used to shape the questionnaire which students completed at the beginning and end of the exchange.

The first student questionnaire was completed over the internet, through a link on the first task. 105 students completed it across the three participating academies, although some the students at Academy 2 did not complete it until over a week later, and of the 12 students missing 8 of them were from Academy 2. The second questionnaire was printed and distributed to teachers to complete in the classroom with their students at the end of the six weeks and 112 were completed. The questions asked, with the options given can be seen below and in appendix B, and each question will be analysed in relation to the other questionnaire. The analysis will refer to the percentage rather than number of students to reflect the differing numbers in the sample.

Questionnaire 1- Learning French

How useful is it to learn French?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Very useful	12.4%	13
Quite useful	34.3%	36
Sometimes useful	32.4%	34
Not useful	16.2%	17
Not useful at all	4.8%	5
<i>answered question</i>		105

Questionnaire 2- Learning French

How useful is it to learn French?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Very useful	10.7%	12
Quite useful	38.4%	43
Sometimes useful	34.8%	39
Not useful	10.7%	12
Not useful at all	5.4%	6
<i>answered question</i>		112

Figure 5: Question 1, student questionnaires

This question addresses primarily the research question of whether this regular peer-to-peer interaction in the target language can increase student engagement. The responses to how useful the students find it to learn French do demonstrate some positive correlation. While 1.7% less students find learning French very useful, the proportion of students who found French useful (very, quite or sometimes) rose from 79% to 84% of students. While this could be attributed to other factors, such as other students joining the sample, a 5% rise is deemed significant. It is hypothesised that by applying the language they were learning in an authentic context the students were able to recognise greater opportunity for using it.

Questionnaire 1- Learning French

How confident are you speaking in French?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Very confident	1.9%	2
Quite confident	33.3%	35
OK	50.5%	53
Not confident	12.4%	13
Not confident at all	1.9%	2
<i>answered question</i>		105

Questionnaire 2- Learning French

How confident are you speaking in French?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Very confident	6.3%	7
Quite confident	29.5%	33
OK	49.1%	55
Not confident	13.4%	15
Not confident at all	1.8%	2
<i>answered question</i>		112

Figure 6: Question 2, student questionnaires

The second question referred to the confidence students felt communicating specifically in spoken French. Although the tasks completed through the online exchange platform were all written, it is hypothesized that if students can gain confidence through writing interactionally this may impact on their confidence in spoken French. Despite showing a stark increase in the number of students who felt very confident speaking in French, the percentage of students who felt very confident, quite confident or OK dropped by less than one percent. Although this drop is negligible, it is not felt that significant impact is demonstrated by this result.

Questionnaire 1- Learning French

How confident are you writing in French?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Very confident	1.0%	1
Quite confident	37.1%	39
OK	41.0%	43
Not confident	18.1%	19
Not confident at all	2.9%	3
<i>answered question</i>		105

Questionnaire 2- Learning French

How confident are you writing in French?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Very confident	7.1%	8
Quite confident	33.0%	37
OK	40.2%	45
Not confident	14.3%	16
Not confident at all	5.4%	6
<i>answered question</i>		112

Figure 7: Question 3, student questionnaires

The question of the students' confidence in writing demonstrates similar responses to speaking. There is a peak in the number of students who felt very confident writing in French, by 6.1%, which serves to some extent to corroborate the number of students who felt very confident in speaking French. Similarly, the overall percentage of students who feel very confident, quite confident or OK writing in French has risen slightly by 1.4%.

Questionnaire 1- Learning French

How much do you enjoy speaking in French?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
I love speaking French and take every opportunity to do so.	0.0%	0
I really like speaking French and always want to contribute in class	18.1%	19
I quite like speaking French but I prefer to do it just in pairs when we have to in lessons.	47.6%	50
I dislike speaking French and try to avoid speaking it.	19.0%	20
I hate speaking French and rarely do it.	15.2%	16
<i>answered question</i>		105

Questionnaire 2- Learning French

How much do you enjoy speaking in French?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
I love speaking French and take every opportunity to do so.	0.0%	0
I really like speaking French and always want to contribute in class	17.1%	18
I quite like speaking French but I prefer to do it just in pairs when we have to in lessons.	50.5%	53
I dislike speaking French and try to avoid speaking it.	26.7%	28
I hate speaking French and rarely do it.	12.4%	13
<i>answered question</i>		112

Figure 8: Question 4, student questionnaires

The question of how much the students enjoy speaking French, as in question two was posed with it in mind to identify if there is a positive correlation between communicating with a native speaker peer, albeit in written French, and the enjoyment taken from speaking in the language. Unexpectedly, this question showed a negative correlation from the first questionnaire to the second, with 34.2% saying they did not enjoy speaking French (the final two options) at the start, and over 39% at the end of the project. It is possible that some of those students had not completed the previous questionnaire, and it should also be noted that fewer students said that they hated speaking French. Nonetheless, this correlation must be acknowledged and it is hypothesised that perhaps a focus on writing over this time through use of the website and in preparation for a writing assessment, might have negatively impacted on the lesson time devoted to speaking and students may have begun to neglect it as a skill.

Questionnaire 1- Learning French

How much do you enjoy writing in French?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
I love writing French and always try to use new creative vocabulary.	7.6%	8
I really like writing French and like to apply what I've learnt in class.	30.5%	32
I quite like writing French but I don't like to write very much.	41.0%	43
I dislike writing French and try to avoid writing if I can.	16.2%	17
I hate writing in French and rarely do it.	4.8%	5
<i>answered question</i>		105

Questionnaire 2- Learning French

How much do you enjoy writing in French?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
I love writing French and always try to use new creative vocabulary.	12.4%	13
I really like writing French and like to apply what I've learnt in class.	32.4%	34
I quite like writing French but I don't like to write very much.	40.0%	42
I dislike writing French and try to avoid writing if I can.	18.1%	19
I hate writing in French and rarely do it.	3.8%	4
<i>answered question</i>		112

Figure 9: Question 5, student questionnaires

In contrast the question as to how much students enjoyed writing in French showed a positive correlation. 79% of students expressed that they liked writing in French initially, while almost 85% of students liked writing in French by the end of the six-week period. In terms of the research question related to student engagement this is one question where it was expected there might be a significant impact because of the purposeful, and interactive nature of the written tasks which the students completed. This 6% increase, although not conclusive certainly corroborates the hypothesis.

The first questionnaire completed by heads of department was purely to measure immediate reactions to the concept of implementing sustained peer-to-peer interaction in the target language through an online resource. At a network meeting I led a short session on the proposed project, and invited those present to complete the questionnaire. This posed two simple yes-no questions:

Do you think putting your students in direct contact with their peers abroad to communicate in the target language would have a positive impact?

Do you think that taking part in such an exchange online would benefit your students?

They were also invited to express their interest in taking part in the study, and to add any comments or reactions to it as a concept. From the pool of fifteen middle leaders from twelve schools, 100% responded yes to both questions and four of the schools volunteered to take part in this study. One comment was made by a head of department: 'This really is an excellent tool for bringing MFL to life!'. It was abundantly clear that the initial reaction was positive and the heads of MFL departments saw the potential of connecting their students as a great benefit for their students.

The following step was to interview the participants to assess their reaction and learning on how to use the platform including any barriers to this, and also establish whether there may be any variables worth exploring based on their own perception of the impact of it. Unfortunately, it was not possible to conduct an interview with Teacher 3, which does limit these findings but also impacted on the early stages of the trial. As before, with the focus group it was necessary to plan my questions carefully to mitigate against bias and asking leading questions (see below and appendix F). Each of these questions and responses will be discussed in turn:

1. What effect do you think using this exchange will have on your teaching and the students in your class?

Teacher 2 said that she imagines that the students will take more pride in their work, and think more carefully about what they want to say. She also says that she hopes that their general engagement improves in lessons as they think about what they might want to say to their partner. Teacher 4 similarly highlights their engagement that may increase by 'writing to someone they want to talk to- not me!'. Additionally, she points out that the students' confidence may build as help their partners with their English, and 'realise that making mistakes is a key part of learning a language'.

2. What barriers do you see to its implementation?

Teacher 2 expressed concerns that the students 'would not have access to IT to complete the tasks' as she did not have any lesson scheduled in an ICT room. She also worried that the students in France would have a much higher level of language than her students, and that they would be discouraged by this. A personal concern was of the ability of some of my weaker

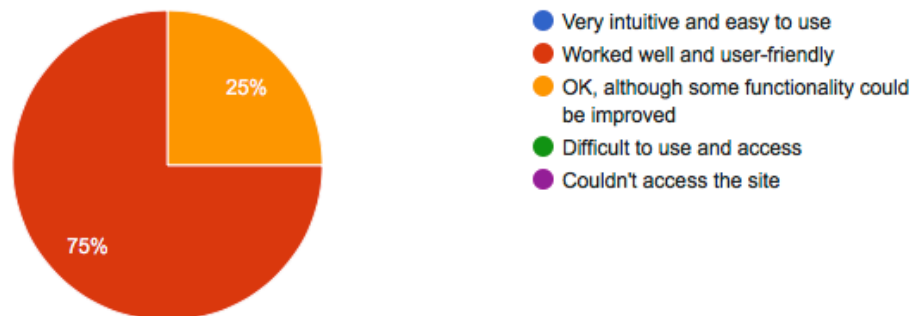
students to give feedback on their partner's English. Teacher 4 was particularly worried over the security of the website, how pupils' details were stored and the extent to which teachers could police what the students wrote.

3. How do you plan on using it practically?

Teacher 2 said she planned to use it largely as a homework tool explaining that she wants to 'teach the content in the lessons, and give them the preparation they need but then know they are doing something relevant every week for homework'. She also pointed out that she 'won't have to mark it either!'. Teacher 4 said that she planned to use it predominately in the classroom and said it would be 'a good chance for the students to use their ipads!'. She also said that her school had a 'big push on redrafting work based on feedback' so intended to print out the completed exchanges so students could improve on their writing.

All four participating teachers, including myself as the researcher-participant, were invited to complete questionnaires which were distributed by email (see appendix G). All four were completed, and because of my own participation and the ability to discuss responses further with my colleague it has been possible to include more justification to some responses.

How accessible did you find the website to use as a teacher? (4 responses)



How accessible did you find the website for your students? (4 responses)

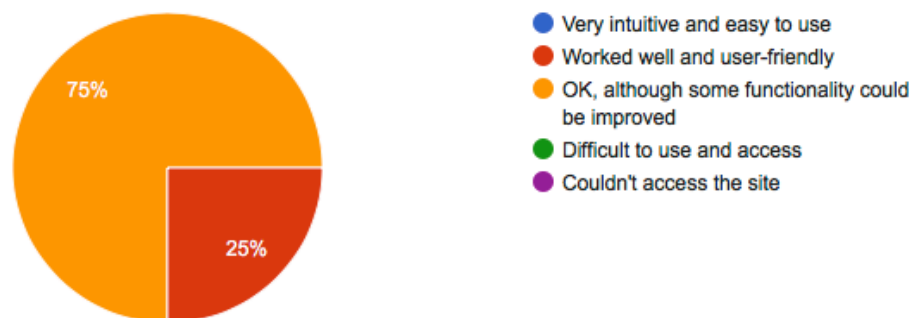


Figure 10: Questions 1 & 2, teacher questionnaires

The question of accessibility of the website was thought to be important bearing in mind the potential barriers to both teachers and students from benefiting from this platform. Generally, as displayed above it was felt that 'Bili' was user-friendly for teachers, but could be improved for students. Teacher 2 answered both questions that it was 'ok, although some functionality could be improved', and as my direct colleague I did have the opportunity to discuss this further. She cited issues with the school firewall meaning that it was not always available, but also that there was a need for clearer guidance for students on the weekly process and importantly how to mark their partners' work.

How did you use the website over the 6 weeks? (4 responses)

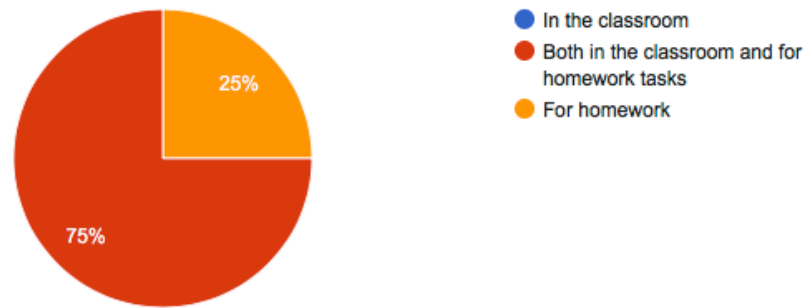
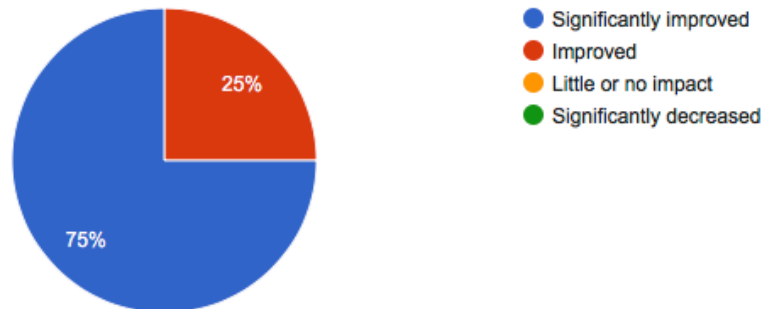


Figure 11: Question 3, teacher questionnaires

Three out of the four teachers used the website for a combination of classwork and homework tasks. This could suggest that the teachers felt the students required more support to be able to access the website and complete the tasks, and this correlates with the findings from question two concerning the accessibility of the website for students. I used the platform solely to set homework from, as I felt the lesson time was best used to prepare the students to produce the language required and to clear up any misconceptions. I also liked that it was a simpler way of monitoring homework, and ensuring that every student completes it.

What impact did use of the website have on the quality of student work?

(4 responses)



What impact did use of the website have on the general progress of your students?

(4 responses)

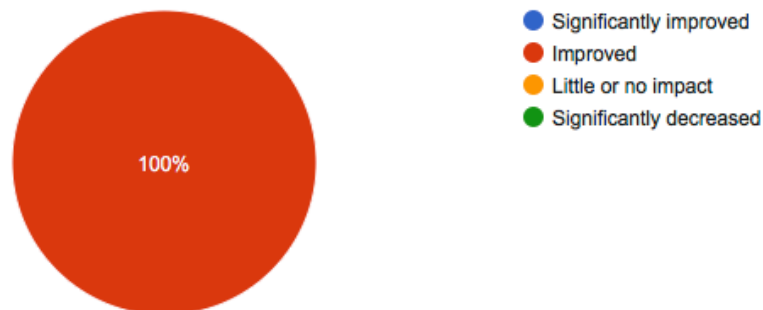


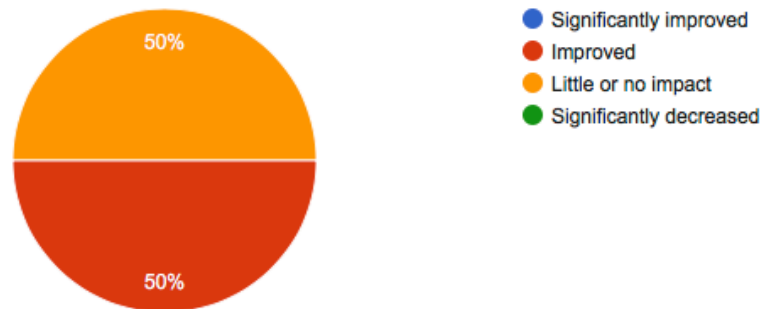
Figure 12: Question 4 & 5, teacher questionnaires

In addition to gathering attainment data, based on standardised assessments it was felt that evidence should be collected concerning the teachers' informed judgement on the progress of their students over this time which they believe can be attributed to the use of the exchange platform. This judgement reflects the students' level of understanding demonstrated in lessons, in their books and for homework. The data above when compared to the assessment data, will provide another perspective to help corroborate or negate any anomalies. All teachers felt that participating in the project had improved both the quality of the work of their students and accelerated their progress, while three out of four felt that the quality of the students' work had

significantly improved. Two possible hypotheses for this are: firstly, teachers had a more systematic medium with which to set quality written tasks and thus students were getting more practice; secondly students were taking more care in the quality of their work as they knew it was being sent to a real native speaker.

What impact did use of the website have on students' willingness to contribute in lessons?

(4 responses)



What impact did use of the website have on students' engagement in French?

(4 responses)

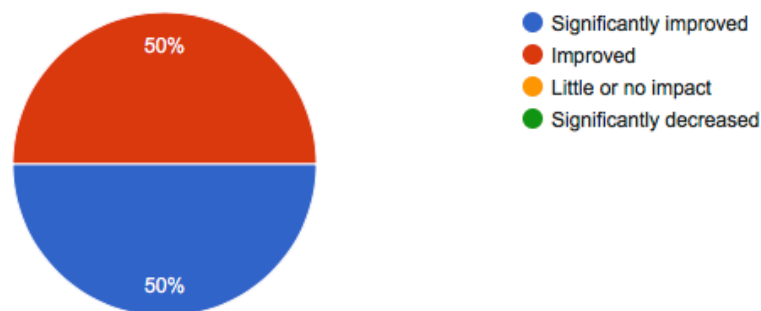


Figure 13: Questions 6 & 7, teacher questionnaires

Overall teachers did notice a positive impact on both the students' willingness to contribute in lessons, and more apparently their engagement in the subject. As would be expected, the two teachers (Teacher 2 and 3) who noticed little or no impact on student contributions in lessons saw that the progress improved but not significantly. This impact on engagement is considered significant, as while the short time frame for the project may restrict to an extent the progress in

regards to the academic attainment of the students, it is felt that a more immediate impact on engagement may be possible as students interact with a native speaker of the same age for the first time.

This research was granted access to the website data which provided the opportunity to measure a number of variables in terms of teacher and student usage of the website. Below is a table of the findings, which will be analysed in detail. Data was collected on a weekly basis, and has been collated by averaging the weekly usage, apart from the number of tasks completed which is an average per student over the six-week project. Teacher 4 had two different accounts for her different groups, so these can be treated separately in this instance. It is felt that by analysing this data a number of conclusions may be drawn:

- How successfully the platform was implemented into the academy concerned;
- How accessible the teachers found the website;
- How accessible and engaging the students found the platform.

From these usage statistics it may also be possible to identify a correlation between the impact on student engagement and attainment in French and how much they used the website.

Correspondingly, particularly high usage of the website may serve to isolate the intervention from other possible changes in the learning environment, while low usage may raise questions over the validity of other data, in that negligible usage is likely to have negligible impact.

School	Academy 1		Academy 2	Academy 3	
Teacher	Teacher 1 (researcher)	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 4
Average Teacher Website Activity per week					
Teacher logins	15	8	3	6	7
Teacher Tasks Approved	14	22	7	16	20
Teacher Printing	2	1	0	2	0
Teacher Rewards	6	4	0	12	15
Student Website Activity Average per student					
Student Logins per week	5	4	2	4	6
Total Student Tasks Completed average per student	5	5	3	5	4

Figure 14: Website usage data

The teacher usage of the website does show some significant variance between teachers. As the researcher and leader of this project, naturally the number of times I logged in are

significantly higher. However, given the role of the teacher requires them to log on three times a week (once to set the task, a second time to approve completed tasks, and a third time to approve corrections and responses) the login count demonstrates that teachers did use the platform correctly. There are anomalies for all of the usage statistics for Teacher 3. This can be attributed to a lack of understanding as to how to use the website. Unfortunately, due to time constraints it was not possible to meet directly with Teacher 3, prior to starting the exchange, so all communication was conducted by email and he was not given any direct training on how to use the exchange platform. This meant that his class were not fully set up until the second week and both the teacher and the student usage statistics are significantly lower. The number of teacher tasks approved reflects the number of times a teacher approved and therefore sent a completed student task to the student's partner. The numbers do in part reflect the number of students in a class, but also the number of tasks they completed per week and the quality of them (if they were not sufficiently good quality the teacher could reject them). The teacher printing and the teacher rewards were included as a measure to ascertain the participants' learning and implementation of that, especially in terms of these extra features, not integral to the message exchange. The printing feature was not well-used and from personal experience this was because of a lack of time, and the tight pressure in that respect to move onto the next week's task. Teacher 4 used the rewards regularly as a tool to encourage students to produce higher quality work, after asking her about this she said that she found it 'useful in lessons to give them 'live' feedback which they could see on their ipads, and that other students could see too!'.

To use the website effectively students were required to login on at least two occasions per week (the first to complete their task and the second to respond to their partner). Apart from the anomaly previously discussed in Academy 2, students logged in on average more than regularly enough. Evidently, these statistics are limited to the fact that some students may have logged in many more times, and some less which would have skewed the result. Nonetheless, it can be assumed that students were gaining sufficient access to the site. The number of tasks completed refers to the number of tasks they sent to be approved by the teacher, and the result reflects an average among the class for the total six weeks. It should be noted that there were a total of six available tasks, and some students did complete all six. However, there were noticeable delays in the exchange meaning that some students were not able to progress as fast as they would like as they were waiting for a response from their partner. This issue, combined with some responses not being approved on time by teachers, and students not

meeting deadlines for their work meant that fewer tasks were completed and that many students did not complete the planned six tasks.

The attainment data made available to this study was from standardised assessments and in the form of percentages from academy averages of year seven students studying French.

Therefore, there are several limitations to this data:

- Firstly, this is a reflection of one piece of work, and only indicates progress in two skills at a time (correspondingly the Spring 1 data- Speaking & Reading is not fully comparable), and there could have been numerous factors which contributed to a student scoring a higher or lower mark in that particular test and on that particular day;
- Secondly, this shows the result in group averages across schools, which particularly in the case of Academy 2 is problematic where one class were using the site and the other French class were not. Although, both classes at Academy 1 and 3 took part in the project, it does not allow for further analysis against the individual classes usage statistics;
- Thirdly, following the removal of national curriculum levels the federation moved to a system of data collection which used percentage scores and benchmarked them against their peers. This does not provide a frame of reference in terms of what students were able to achieve at each level.

	Spring 1- Speaking & Reading	Spring 2- Writing & Listening	Summer 1- Writing & Listening
Academy 1	72%	73%	75%
Academy 2	69%	63%	72%
Academy 3	67%	68%	66%
Academy 4	74%	68%	72%
Academy 5	64%	59%	61%
Academy 6	63%	65%	63%

Figure 15: Assessment attainment data

To start from the historical data, it appears that there is a general drop in performance between the Spring 1 and Spring 2 assessments, and averaged between the schools this equates to a 2.3% drop. When looking at the participating schools in the project this results in a 1.7% drop, although both Academy 1 and 3 actually gain one percent. This could be significant, if it forms part of a downwards trend that the assessments are becoming more disproportionately more

challenging over the course of the year. Additionally, the drop could be attributed to the change in skills being examined. Between the Spring 2 and Summer 1 assessments there is a 2.3% rise in average attainment across the six schools. Overall, this fluctuation could be dismissed as it is in line with the previous dip in attainment. However, when it is broken down between the participating academies, and the non-participating academies the difference is more pronounced: Academies 1,2 and 3 average an increase of 4.3 % in attainment, while Academies 4,5 and 6 only gain 1.7%. Unfortunately, it must be concluded that this data is inconclusive in relation to this study for several reasons. Firstly, Academy 2's result, despite showing a sharp increase, shows a similarly stark decrease between the previous assessments. Contrasted against the marginal changes in the other schools with similar numbers of students, this could suggest some other factors are influencing the outcomes at this Academy (such as a change of teacher or timetable), or that the marking is inconsistent. Secondly, as mentioned above the data set for Academy 2 includes the non-participating class, so it is impossible to isolate this to the intervention of using the language exchange website. Thirdly, as mentioned in the light of the relatively low usage statistics it is doubtful that the implementation of the website in that Academy would have had such an impact. Finally, if one does discount the data of Academy 2, and examines Academy 1 and 3 which gain and lose 2% respectively, on average there is no accelerated progress between the Spring 2 and Summer 1 assessments. This is further corroborated by comparing the progress between assessments at these two Academies which shows a 1% increase in average attainment between the Spring 1 and Spring 2 assessments.

Discussion

Each research question will be addressed sequentially, relevant findings addressed in relation to it, and where appropriate it will be linked to the area of literature as either an area of contention or synergy.

1. Can authentic peer-to-peer target language interaction be implemented and sustained in schools and what effect does this have on student engagement and attainment?

The first question frames this research, and the discussion will continue to address this question, tying in the different factors which are integral to implementing regular peer-to-peer target language interaction in schools. However, in broad terms the findings of this research, although inconclusive with regards to attainment, do indicate that both teachers and pupils regards this as a worthwhile goal. Indeed, an article launching a new research initiative into modern language learning corroborates this:

young people ... need to feel that their school experiences equip them with the tools to actually communicate in and understand language of a more authentic kind than they typically encounter in the classroom.

It is evident that the languages exchange platform, 'Bili', does provide a viable and accessible means with which to implement this, but in order to draw firm conclusions as to the efficacy of such a platform in terms of attainment, further research is required.

2. How prepared are MFL teachers to adopt new technology to complement their approach to teaching and learning?

The findings in relation to this question relate in two different ways: firstly, how accessible and attractive teachers and importantly school leadership finds the technology as a platform for learning; and secondly how they see it complementing their teaching and the expected outcomes. Teachers generally found the website accessible and that it worked well, they were attracted by the potential to engage students by actually using the language to talk to someone their own age, and also felt it might build their confidence by helping a peer learning English. The need was recognised by teachers, and heads of departments for change in this field to combat dwindling uptake, and poor engagement in languages. Consensus was met, that the

platform, 'Bili' providing opportunity for 'real-life' target language interaction had potential to bring about that necessary change.

Concerns were voiced about having access to ICT facilities for the students, and also from senior management about the security of the website. The website was approved by all three principals and the usage data implies that all pupils did have sufficient access to the platform. It was apparent through the interviews, and evident that this happened from the questionnaire, that teachers saw using the website as a useful resource to complement what they are already doing in the classroom, for example ensuring that students communicate purposefully in the language for homework, or asking them to redraft their work. This echoes the recommendation of the ACTFL that 'the use of technology should never be the goal in and of itself, but rather one tool for helping language learners to use the target language'(ACTFL, 2012).

3. What are the barriers to students using a MFL in an authentic context?

The barriers to students using MFL in an authentic context, apart from lack of opportunity and exposure, are generally internal as highlighted by the focus group and the questionnaires. Three major trends emerged. Firstly, students did not want to be seen to make a mistake; secondly students felt that they knew insufficient language to express themselves; and thirdly, students did not relate the language they were learning in the classroom to what they wanted to say. This third option, supports the premise of the University of Cumbria Approach to equipping students with language appropriate to their present context.

4. Are students more receptive to receiving peer-feedback?

It was surmised by a teacher that this might be the case, and in the focus group a student certainly supported this view. The teacher views on the increase in quality of work from students, may also serve to support this view as they take more care, and take on board their feedback.

5. Can the linguistic awareness of students (in both their first language and the MFL) be increased through correcting a peer's work?

It was not possible, in this study to gather sufficient evidence to inform an answer to this question. Unfortunately, the data available from the website did not provide any information in this respect, as it might have through measuring the corrections in students' work and any improvements. If it were carried out over a longer timescale, it may have been useful to measure impact on their grammatical knowledge both in their first language and the language they were learning.

6. Can student attainment be accelerated through authentic and purposeful communication in a foreign language?

As discussed, in the findings the centralised attainment data is inconclusive. This is partly because of the short-term nature of the project, partly because of the unavailability of a more detailed breakdown of the data, and partly due to a late start and incomplete tasks from many students. However, the professional judgement of teachers on the impact of website on the students' progress demonstrated that all felt that they made significant progress because of the interaction they had engaged in with their peer in France.

7. Can student engagement be increased through authentic and purposeful communication in a foreign language?

Based on the evidence of this study, the impact of the purposeful written communication with a peer in a foreign language is overwhelmingly positive on student engagement. This is corroborated by both teachers in the questionnaires, and the impact is demonstrated by the increase in enjoyment of writing in French in the final student questionnaire.

Conclusions

As an early study into the feasibility of authentic peer-to-peer interaction on a regular basis, the scope for research and development is enormous. This study, conducted over a short time period and on a relatively small scale, cannot hope to draw firm conclusions on the basis of the research carried out. Nonetheless, linking the current literature in the area of study with the evidence collected certainly validates this as an important and under-researched field, and establishes the direction further research might take. There are four central conclusions which can be drawn from this study.

Firstly, there is a need for change in how modern foreign languages are presented and taught in English secondary schools. The damning statistics documenting the steady decline in the uptake of language learning, the poor outcomes in terms of examination results but also ability of language learners in the U.K. compared to other countries, and the poor engagement in language learning noted first hand by teachers and highlighted by Ofsted, all suggest that the current landscape needs to change. Following the research carried out by Colin Christie in to the University of Cumbria approach and corroborating it with students' personal insights from this research it is clear that an incongruence exists between what students are learning in the classroom and the language they feel they need to express themselves. This poses the question as to how we as languages teachers can equip language learners with the tools they need to truly enjoy communicating, and move away from the transactional style of teaching where students are 'ordering meals they are not going to eat, planning journeys they are not going to make, and speaking to and hearing about people they do not know.' (Grenfell and Harris, 1999, p.26). This study proposes that expanding the context in which students are able to communicate beyond the classroom and giving new purpose to the language they are learning will serve to bridge this gap.

Secondly, this study does show that the academies, teacher participants, and students are receptive to new technology, provided it is accessible and they can integrate it into their own teaching. The overwhelmingly positive response from the heads of department at the initial meeting, coupled with the reflections from interviews and staff and student questionnaires indicates that the organisations were ready at least in principle to adopt this new platform as a manner of enhancing the scope of their language teaching delivery. Correspondingly, the usage

statistics from the website do indicate that the technology was regularly used both by students and teachers over the project.

This research hoped to establish some firm evidence over the impact the use of this exchange platform has on student attainment. Unfortunately, as discussed in the findings section the data collected is inconclusive. It is argued here that the time frame was too short, but also that the research tool was not fit for purpose. In order to fully investigate the impact on attainment and students' linguistic awareness (related to research questions four and five), a more tailored instrument is needed to gauge what can be isolated to the impact of the peer interaction, and what should be disregarded as an external influence.

Finally, it is clear from this study that there has been a substantial impact on student engagement in communication, both from the teachers' and the students' perspectives. Despite being a more subjective measure, it is proposed that the impact of any new resource in modern languages pedagogy which can serve to raise engagement in students to communicate will have far broader implications than accelerating their attainment, and pave the way for them to see language acquisition as an ongoing process in their lives both in and outside of formal education.

References and complete dissertation available on request