

## Active learning through the Cultural Exchange:

Using videoconferencing to facilitate cross-cultural dialogue



Maryse Wright and Oranna Speicher

Maryse Wright is Head of the Language Centre. She leads on a project looking at evaluating and developing the curriculum for undergraduate language and non-language specialist students (French, German and Spanish) in their first year of post A Level studies in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures. Her area of expertise is post A Level French language teaching to non-specialist language students.

Oranna Speicher is the E-Learning Development Officer for the Language Centre, and also a German Language Teacher. She is currently leading three technology-based projects: **The One Stop Language Shop (OSLS)** with Dr Thomas Koller; **The Cultural Exchange** with Maryse Wright; **The Virtual Assistant** with Sarah Wullink.

**Oranna Speicher and Maryse Wright discuss their experiences working with partners at the Universities of Braunschweig and Lyon, and the impact of their work on the student learning experience.**

### What is the Cultural Exchange?

The Cultural Exchange (CE) gives language students the opportunity to talk directly, through a videoconference link, to their peers in Braunschweig and Lyon. With the Braunschweig partners the format included formal presentations with question and answer sessions, and less directed sessions where the students took the lead. This was supported by a dedicated WebCT course which included both a German and an English discussion forum. With the Lyon partners, the format was a weekly two-hour session over one semester, divided into a one-hour whole group session followed by individual students from Nottingham and Lyon pairing up using a webcam. Students had to keep notes of what was covered in both hours, including the vocabulary they had learned. This was used to write a Cultural Exchange diary, which was offered as an alternative to the news report which usually forms part of the assessment at this level.

### What are the benefits of the CE over a standard classroom teaching scenario?

*Maryse:* It's a much more authentic, active exercise. In class, there is always the teacher at the front, and the students expect them to know the answers. With the CE, the students know that they have to find the answers from each other. They might struggle, and they might have to ask lots of different questions and make lots of mistakes, but they get there in the end!

*Oranna:* I agree. The students were actively getting meaning both from their peers here but also in the other country, rather than asking us, which was great.

*Maryse:* It is quite amazing to observe because you think that nowadays, with all the opportunities for travel and so on, people are more aware of each other's cultures. But it is not necessarily the case. England, France and Germany are still so different. Students know in theory for example that there are words that look the same, that have the same dictionary translation, but that are used in a completely different way. Talking directly to their peers really highlighted these misunderstandings, these gaps between the two languages and cultures. It was a real learning experience.

### What do the students get out of it?

*Oranna:* The students had to work together on the presentations. An outcome of this is clearly the development of good presentation skills and improved communication confidence. The interaction with the students in Braunschweig also improved the oral fluency and pronunciation of the Nottingham students, because they were exposed to a variety of accents. Success really depends not only on the language level of the students involved, but also on their personalities. Some students really don't worry too much about possible target language deficiency, they will just chat. Others are very concerned about accuracy and about making mistakes. You can't legislate for that.

### Can you think about uses of this technology in other disciplines?

*Maryse:* It would be very useful for teachers in secondary schools. I am doing a project about transition in language learning from the 6th form to the first year at University. I think it would be a great idea to have a link showing students what happens at University and the other way round. It would be helpful if students doing first year language here, for example, could actually talk to sixth formers and say (because they have been through the system) 'this is what we do!'

*Oranna:* There are many departments that have exchange links with institutions abroad, like Law, Education and Engineering, for example. As long as you have the right equipment and the staff to support it, any sort of collaborative learning is possible with this arrangement.



### Can you tell me a bit more about the related 'Virtual Language Assistant' initiative?

*Oranna:* A lot of schools belonging to the University's widening participation consortium don't have the luxury of a language assistant. I worked with Sarah Wullink, the School of Modern Languages and Cultures (SMC) Widening Participation Officer, to create a project with Ashfield School in North Nottinghamshire. We recruited an Austrian exchange student and introduced her virtually to the A2 group of five girls over in Ashfield. They then met every week for an hour for a conversation class - for each class, clear instructions were given to the Austrian student by the German teacher of the school. The German teacher at Ashfield stayed for the first meeting, but left them to it after that, just like it would have been had the Austrian student been physically present in the school.

### How did the students over at Ashfield School react to the Virtual Language Assistant initiative?

*Oranna:* At the beginning they found it a bit bizarre! They thought it was odd, looking at someone through a screen but they quickly warmed to the idea. Sarah Wullink and I went over to Ashfield School and interviewed the students once the project had finished. As a finishing touch, the group invited the Austrian student to the school and they cooked some Austrian delicacies together. It was a really excellent end to it. We now have a French student who is going to go 'virtually' into another Nottinghamshire school and we are also carrying on with the Ashfield School and the German virtual assistant. It is all very exciting.