

Interactions UTC

1. [Home](#)
2. [Themes](#)
3. [Entrepreneurship](#)
4. To understand and be understood: that is the question

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Fluency and skills in a foreign language, notably English, are absolutely necessary today in the professional world. To understand and be understood by people from every walk of life, with different cultures and accents is therefore fundamental to success. Unfortunately, the way languages are taught, especially English, at both schools and in higher education establishments, simply does not meet the need. And this is where Pipplet – a start-up created earlier this year by three UTC graduates - comes in to help fill the gap.

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Pipplet in short, offers on-line language assessment. The objective is to assess the skills acquired with a view to communicating, defending a position or even expressing emotions in a foreign language. Oral skills are therefore predominant in the Pipplet test protocol, as Baptiste Derongs confirms: "During the test, we do not focus on grammar skills as is the case with 'academic language learning', but look rather at assessing a person's capacity to correctly understand a group of persons and to be understood by its members.

There is a prerequisite minimum set of skills needed to be able to benefit from the Pipplet service, but naturally the questions used can be adapted in terms of the person's level. In fact, even if the person takes the test in his/her mother tongue, the assessment will check the ability to be understood by non-English native speakers."It was during a stay in London that the idea of creating Pipplet dawned on Baptiste Derongs, a UTC graduate with the elective major in computer science and engineering.

The decision was taken to set up the company, with two other UTC graduates he met in London: Adrien Wartel, with the same UTC

degree and specialty and Matthieu Herman, whose specialty was Mechanical Engineering. "Thanks to the training we had received at UTC, we were able to identify an excellent level of complementarity between our combined skills. "My area is more with commercial prospects and business development", explains Baptiste Derongs, who is more concerned with technical aspects, and Mathieu who deals with design questions. Two 'computer scientists' and one 'mechanical engineer', working together in the field of social sciences. That really does illustrate the UTC spirit!

The start-up was laureate in the category "emerging companies" at the i-Lab competition, July 2015, organized jointly by BPI and the French ministry in charge of Higher Education and Research. "We were awarded the maximum subsidy of 45 000 € to help accelerate our company's development phase", says Baptiste. Currently, we have a partnership agreement with the University of Paris, Sorbonne, University of Paris 6 (P & M Curie) and soon with UTC. "This partnership with the universities will allow our start-up to rapidly build up a corps of users spread over five continents. Our objective is to have access to a representative sample of the entire world' speakers. A Pipplet user will thus be in a position to exchange with between 50 and 100 other users, in several countries, so that the can become familiarized with different accents", adds Baptiste.

Every person registered for the test is invited to answer fifty or so questions: 25 questions where the person is the speaker and 25 where the same person has to listen to another user and answer questions about what the he or she was saying. "For example, one user will explain how to go from point B to point A and a second user is supposed to find B, starting from point A. If both persons have correctly understood each other, we check their mutual understanding and that question has been correctly answered. Statistically speaking, we can give a mark that represents the person's ability to understand and to be understood." The Pipplet test relies on a corpus of questions which were established with the help of a professional linguist. For the moment, the Pipplet test is

available in English, but an extension to encompass other languages is already on the board.

"Our system and the test, potentially, can be operated in any language, provided that questions are framed to suit the local cultures where it is spoken. Moreover, we have had lots of enquiries to develop the test in French. Of course, when you want to establish the test in another language, you have to assume there will be a sufficient number of persons who actually speak that language, with a certain number for whom it will be their mother tongue", underlines Baptiste.

A more long term objective is to have the test results certified, for example, for inclusion in a candidate's CV. "Users would receive a score chart when they have completed the test, indicating their degree of fluency in inter-personal communication", adds Baptiste. "The more users there are for Pipplet, the better the recognition of the test level certification. But to attain this, we must be sure that the test is passed under valid conditions, i.e., the person is not helped out by someone else". Pipplet targets mostly business concerns, notably for the purpose of recruitment procedures.

As Baptiste sees it, the evolution will consist of "proposing tailor-made tests for companies, to assess, for example, the ability to communicate in team formation, in a given professional area such as the automobile sector, or in banking and involving speakers in specific target countries such as China or India for example". Another objective is to be able soon to offer the test for any private individuals who wants to assess their capacity to communicate satisfactorily.

More at: <http://www.pipplet.com>