

Antipodal communication between students of German in Finland and in New Zealand via Facebook

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Abstract. This reflective practice paper presents an excerpt of the outcome of a telecollaboration project between two tertiary institutions in New Zealand and Finland. Twenty-six intermediate students of German in the two countries used a Facebook-group to write about given topics which were part of their final assessment. The posts were a combination of video uploads, audio recordings, and writing which is in line with the multimodal meaning-making theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). The task design was guided by O’Dowd and Ware’s (2009) three-layer approach design. The study investigates how students perceive the collaboration using the Facebook group and how the multimodal approach helps the students to develop their digital literacies. The data collected for the study included a mixed-methods approach with pre- and post-questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and Facebook logs. Results show that students learned more about each others’ culture and improved their German at the same time.

Keywords: telecollaboration, Facebook, German.

1. Introduction

Widely accessible and user friendly social networking sites have allowed students to connect with friends world-wide and develop an international network. Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are perceived as authentic communication platforms by language learners. Bringing SNSs into the language classroom to connect learners of German from two different parts of the world to create a collaborative learning environment within the principles of constructivism (Ellis, 2003) seems a natural continuation of the students’ online life they are already leading (Boyd, 2014).

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This study is based on a telecollaboration task that was set up on a Facebook group between two sets of learners of German. Tertiary students from New Zealand and Finland communicated over a period of six weeks for an enhanced collaborative learning experience. In this study, we wanted to find out how the students perceived the work on the Facebook platform and how the multi-modal approach helped them to develop into a community of learners. For this research, we posed the following questions:

- How do students perceive class collaboration using a Facebook group?
- How does the multimodal approach help students to develop into a community of learners?

2. Method

2.1. The project and the participants

The study took place in German language courses in Finland and New Zealand. Both classes were B1 level. The telecollaboration task took part over a period of six weeks and was part of the overall assessment of the two classes. The 26 students, 14 from New Zealand and 12 from Finland, were given five tasks based on the three-layer design (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009). The tasks were organised in three main categories (Table 1). The first task type comprised of information exchange tasks. Task type two involved comparison and analysis; the students had to comment on other students' Facebook posts and draw comparisons between the two different cultures. This information exchange type triggered reflection about their own culture and enhanced intercultural understanding. The final task type was a collaborative task, a joint product of the two groups. The students were assigned to groups of four students, two students of each class. The task design was supported by multimodal meaning-making theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

Table 1. Tasks and topics of the exchange

Tasks	Topics
<p>Task type one: information exchange</p> <p>Video: individual introductions Photos, weblinks: local culture and people</p>	<p>Make a video not longer than 3 minutes, introduce yourself and your hobbies. Presenting your hometown and family. The distant partners are required to comment on at least two of the posts.</p>

Task type two: comparison and analysis Photos: comparing Photos, weblinks: comparing	Writing about food in your country supported by photos. Presenting your favourite clothes shop using external web links and photos. The distant partners are required to compare the information with their country.
Task type three: collaboration PowerPoint: presentation about a given topic in pairs of 3-4 students from both classes.	Comparing Christmas, summer holidays or national holidays in the two countries.

The groups doing the PowerPoint presentation were made up of three or four students from both classes, the groups were assigned by the teachers. The students had free choice of the software to use for the presentation.

2.2. Data collection and data analysis

A post-questionnaire was created using google software; it included 11 multiple choice questions and nine open-ended questions asking about their perception of the project and consisted of multiple choice questions applying a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The data also consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted after the project had finished.

Coding was derived from students' online answers and interview responses. The researchers read and identified common phrases, key themes, and patterns concerning student perception of the use of Facebook and their views on the multimodal design.

3. Results and discussion

The study has given some insight into how students perceive Facebook as a platform to communicate with peers they have not met before. The results showed that the majority of the students (80%) perceived the tasks and the experience on the Facebook site as favourably. One student commented in an interview "I have learned more about both of our cultures while improving my German".

Several students commented that they gained confidence and found the course content very interesting. They enjoyed the choice of topics; they believed that the topics were interesting for both developing cultural knowledge and building up their vocabulary:

“the artefacts are good, all people eat, all people wear clothes, etc.”.

“I learned many new words to do with food”.

Some students found it challenging to communicate with strangers, they commented that

“it is sometimes hard to communicate with different people in different places or it is hard to start making contact with people you've never seen and probably will never see again”.

The tasks were set up that so that they had to communicate in different modes: video, audio, photos, and texts. The students answered in the post-questionnaire in favour of written text as a communication media. Photos might have been too personal, one student commented in an interview, that while he was posting a photo of his family on a public platform, he felt uneasy about this. The introductory video was also perceived by students as intimidating: “It was intimidating, I did not like to show my face to strangers”. This statement is in line with [Ware and Kramsch \(2005\)](#), who recommend that in-depth intercultural understanding needs to be carefully set up in a dialogical setting.

Overall, Facebook as a platform was perceived as an easy place to communicate, “Facebook is a good platform, everyone who takes the class uses it anyway”. Especially the New Zealand students benefited from developing the unique virtual community of German learners; it eased their feeling of linguistic isolation. They commented “there were many different people from all over learning German”.

4. Conclusions

The study described how students from two very different parts of the world can connect with each other using technology and the common medium of the German language. The main aim was to provide the students in both classes with an additional dimension of authentic course content. It was interesting for the teachers to see that writing was still the preferred medium.

Although the project was of a small scale with only 26 participants and over a short period of time, it was a rewarding activity for the students to gain cultural insight into a new culture. Most of the students expressed the wish to continue with the exchange. Unfortunately, setting up an exchange with students on the opposite

hemisphere brings problems with respect to term schedules and time differences. We were very fortunate that we found a six-week slot in our teaching schedule that worked for both countries. Problems with the time difference were minimised because we set up the telecollaboration based on asynchronous communication.

The short opportunity the students had was very enriching and added Finland and New Zealand onto the travelling map for the students involved. In the future, we will try to set up online exchange possibilities over an extended period and preferably with more chances for the students to talk to each other. The students should also have the opportunity to get to know each other in individual dialogues before moving to the more public class overarching SNSs.

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