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A VIRTUAL EXCHANGE PROJECT ENHANCES DIGITAL LITERACIES AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract

This practical report presents a virtual exchange project between two higher education institutions, one in New Zealand and the other in Finland. In both countries, the students are intermediate learners of German, they use a closed Facebook group to post about given topics which are part of their final assessment. To receive full marks for the assignment, the students need to upload five posts, comment on other students' posts and make a joint presentation. The posts were a combination of video uploads, audio recordings, online sites, photos and text.

The study seeks to answer the questions of how students perceive the collaboration using Facebook group and does the multimodal approach help the students to develop their digital literacies and intercultural competence. The theoretical framework applied is multimodality and virtual exchange. Further, language learning and intercultural competence are viewed through socio-cultural and ecological language learning approaches.

The data collected for the study includes a mixed-methods approach with pre- and post-questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and Facebook logs. The qualitative data were analysed via content analysis method and the quantitative data via basic statistical methods.

The preliminary findings indicate that the multimodal collaboration in Facebook leads to genuine discussions and through them enhances students' digital literacies as well as intercultural competence development.

Keywords: Higher education, digital literacies, virtual exchange, Facebook, German.

1 INTRODUCTION

Facebook and other technology-mediated social network sites have become an integral part of students' social and educational lives, as the sites are spaces and meeting places where students can join groups of learners from different countries and backgrounds. The sites have developed into new global contact zones that have led to the creation of online learning communities.

Given that language teachers design and create the learning activities on social networking sites in a pedagogical sound manner, these spaces can develop into learning communities that foster digital literacies and intercultural competence besides language learning. Further, language learners can extend their face-to-face classroom learning and gain access to other learners globally to learn the target language together, leading to intercultural communication and, consequently, intercultural competence. Simultaneously, as the students learn the subject contents, they improve their digital literacy by using online resources, evaluating their trustworthiness, and deploying digital tools for their own learning.

This study presents a virtual exchange project which involved two groups higher education students, one in Finland and the other in New Zealand. A closed Facebook group was created for the groups with the idea that the students post multimodally on given topics using the common target language German in their posts. The aim of this project was to offer the two groups of students the opportunity to connect with students on the other side of the world and make their German learning more relevant. Another aim was to extend their language skills and give both groups more opportunities to use their target language in an informal register and enhance their knowledge base by comparing cultural artefacts. In conducting the multimodal learning activities, the assumption was that the students' digital literacies improve as a side effect.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this research applied theoretical framework consists of multimodality, virtual exchange and digital literacies. In addition, language learning and intercultural competence learning are viewed through socio-cultural and ecological learning approaches.

In the concept of multimodality, the idea is to provide the learning material as well as instruct the students to conduct their learning activities in various modes: visual, audio, text and speech [1]. In today's digitalised world, people use different modes in their free time and informal contexts, however written form is still the dominant one in educational settings.

Virtual exchange means an international educational collaboration that is actualised by digital communication tools [2]. Improving students' digital literacies in higher education refers to the method in which teachers intentionally involve educational technology in their teaching and in students' learning activities in order to improve students' competences in using technology and critically assess online sources [3].

In the sociocultural and ecological learning approaches, language learning is viewed to emerge in interaction, participation and collaboration with peers and experts [4] [5].

3 METHODOLOGY

This study's objective was to gain a comprehensive understanding of how a virtual exchange and a closed Facebook group as a learning environment can enhance students' digital literacies and language and intercultural competences in a German-language course. The following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: How do students perceive the collaboration in the virtual exchange using the closed Facebook group?

RQ2: Does the multimodal approach help the students to develop their digital literacies and their language and intercultural competence?

3.1 Project and participants

The setting of the study a virtual exchange project in which two German language courses participated, one in Finland and the other New Zealand. The project involved 26 students, 14 from New Zealand and 12 from Finland. In both classes the students possessed B1 language level. The virtual exchange project occurred over a period of six weeks and was a part of the overall assessment of both classes. A closed Facebook group was used as the online learning platform.

In the project, the students were given five tasks based on the three-layer task design [6] according to which the tasks were organised in three main categories. The first type comprised information exchange tasks. Task type two involved comparison and analysis tasks which are reflective and intercultural, and the final task type was a collaborative task: a joint product which ideally promotes global citizenship and intercultural competence. In the final task the groups of three or four students from both classes were assigned by the teacher. The students posted all their assignments in the closed Facebook group, and the others were to comment on the posts. The task design was supported by multimodal meaning making theory [1], see Table 1.

Table 1. The assignments of the virtual exchange project.

Week	Assignment	Topic	Feedback	Assessment
Task type 1: Information exchange				
1	Video: make a video in which you introduce yourself and your hobbies. Comment on at least two distant partners' introductions	Yourself	Teachers' feedback on FB Overall feedback in class	pass/fail
2	Photos and text: tell about your family with photos and written text Comment on at least two distant partners' family presentation	Your family	Teachers' feedback on FB Overall feedback in class	pass/fail
3	Photos, text and weblinks: present your hometown with, photos, written text and weblinks. Comment on at least two distant partners' family presentation	Your hometown	Teachers' feedback on FB Overall feedback in class	pass/fail

<i>Task type 2: Comparison and analysis</i>				
4	Photos and text: Write a text about food and mealtimes and typical dishes in your country. Explain what you eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Use photos to support your text. Compare at least two distance partners' information with your own eating habits	Local culture: food and eating habits	Teachers' feedback on FB Overall feedback in class	pass/fail
5	Photos, text and weblinks: Write a text about your favourite clothes shops. Explain what type of clothes you wear at university. Use also external weblinks and photos to support your writing. Compare at least two distant partners' information with the information on your own country	Local culture: shopping and clothing	Teachers' feedback on FB Overall feedback in class	pass/fail
<i>Task type 3: Collaboration</i>				
6	PowerPoint with voice recording or a video: Make a presentation on one of the given topics in groups of four, two from each university. Compare the phenomenon in the two countries.	Local cultures: Topics: suggestions: Christmas, summer holidays, national festive, Easter, New Year	Peer-feedback in class Teachers' individual feedback in class	peer-assessment grading 0-5

3.2 Data and analysis

This research was conducted using a mixed-methods approach to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The data comprised a pre-project questionnaire, a post-project questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were individual, face-to-face interviews which varied from 10-20 minutes each. In addition, the Facebook-log data comprised 138 posts totaling 4,607 words.

The quantitative data were collected through GoogleForms online questionnaires, which were conducted at the beginning and end of the project. The pre-questionnaire comprised 14 multiple-choice questions and mapped out students' preferences on social media usage and their activity on them. The post-questionnaire comprised 11 multiple-choice questions and nine open-ended questions on students' perceptions of the project. In both questionnaires, the multiple-choice questions used a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1).

The qualitative data comprised both semi-structured interview questions conducted after the project ended and the answers to the open questions in the post-questionnaire. A part of the students, five from Finland and six from New Zealand, were interviewed, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured interview responses and the open-question answers in the post-questionnaire were analysed using the content-analysis method, because it is a method that provides procedures for rigorous analysis of written data [7].

Both researchers read and identified common phrases, key themes and patterns concerning student perceptions on the collaboration on Facebook and their views on how the online collaboration led to improved digital literacies as well as language and intercultural competences. Both researchers analysed the data several times for reliability. After the individual phase, the researchers discussed created the coding frame together. Identification of categories and subcategories was used to build the coding frame. In addition, the quantitative data were analysed via basic statistical methods, and the analysis results support the findings of the qualitative data.

4 RESULTS

In this section the results are divided into two sub-chapters and the research questions are answered separately in their own chapters.

4.1 How do students perceive the collaboration in the virtual exchange project using the closed Facebook group?

The virtual exchange project in the German language course regarding students' perceptions of the collaboration in the online community showed that the students were engaged in the activity and were interested in their group members' posts. During the project, the participating students posted regularly in the six-week period, particularly when they were required to add artefacts.

The results show that the majority of the students (80%) perceived the tasks and the experience on the Facebook site as favourably. The students perceived the collaboration meaningful and beneficial for learning community building. They stated that Facebook acted well as a learning platform and posting weekly in the group became a routine. The students viewed it as an advantage that they used Facebook for their social connections as well, and they did not need to log into another platform for their German studies. Facebook group was regarded a safe place for communication and posting also personal photos, videos and recordings. Furthermore, all students were in favour to continue with the course design including virtual exchange and a closed Facebook group.

4.2 Does the multimodal approach help the students to develop their digital literacies and their language and intercultural competence?

As for digital literacies development, the students considered the multimodal approach of the virtual exchange project enhancing their digital competences. They learned to critically evaluate various web sites and online resources. After the project they regarded mastering several digital tools suitable for video creation and voice recording. Further, they developed in taking photos and editing them as well as adding sound and voice in their own productions. After the project, the students considered that they have learnt to know several digital applications which they can use in their other studies and future work.

According to the analysis of the post-questionnaire and the semi-structured interview questions, all students in both countries stated that the 6-week virtual exchange project provided added value to the German language course. The assignments were perceived as challenging enough, though not too demanding, and the topics of the assignments were seen suitable. Collaborating on the Facebook platform with new people motivated the students using their target language which in turn improved their language competences. The students answered in the questionnaires that they enjoyed the variation the virtual exchange had brought to the language course; over 90 % of the students considered it as fun. In addition, the students reported that the Facebook multimodal assignments tasks fostered their oral and written language skills and their communication competence at large.

Alongside with language competences, the students regarded their intercultural competence improved as they completed the multimodal assignments in collaboration with the group from other side of the world. They acquired knowledge of German speaking culture but also the counterpart's culture.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Today's digital age enriches learning afforded by educational technology such as computers and handheld devices. Digital platforms can offer students meaningful, omnipresent learning experiences in various ways. Even though students are perceived as digital natives who grew up and live in a digitalised world mastering social communication technology, this view does not necessarily reflect real life, as many students are not interested and often not even competent to use technology and social media for learning. Teachers face the challenge to design and facilitate assignments on platforms such as Facebook which helps learners to build a community that can feel close, intimate, emotional, and inclusive. Both teachers and students need to adjust to these ways of learning and teaching. Technology in language learning requires the teacher not only to be engaged and motivated to use digitalisation effectively but that they also need to be technology savvy to design pedagogically balanced assignments to rehearse all language competences and intercultural competence. Parallel with learning the subject matter the students improve their digital literacies.

In addition to language learning, the students enjoyed gaining cultural knowledge as well as connecting with students of German language on the other side of the world. This unique exchange was useful because both learner groups studied the same target language at the same level, and they both experienced the same feelings of limitation. This novel experience of negotiating tasks, talking about and comparing cultural issues required practice and training in the target language.

In this virtual exchange project, the closed Facebook group added pleasure to the German language course, as the students enjoyed creating their own recordings and written tasks, and they had pleasure in reading, watching, and listening to their peers' products. The students' positive attitude toward the assignments fostered their learning in regards their intercultural competence and digital literacies.

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