Exploring the Potential of Dialogical and Trialogical Systems in Language Learning: Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 Applications in FL Writing Proficiency Courses

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Abstract

The socio-constructivist approach has made a significant contribution to computer assisted language learning through its focus on peer collaboration and negotiation of meaning. The present paper shows how these insights can be applied to foster advanced foreign language (FL) writing skills. Based on our experience with FL writing proficiency courses in Flemish higher education, we discuss two practical applications of virtual learning environments (VLEs); the first may be described as "dialogical", the second as "trialogical", with wikis being the collaboratively created objects. Both types turn out to be useful in order to promote a closer integration of private and educational communication in the lives of "digital natives" studying a foreign language. Our first project involved e-mail tandem partnerships between Flemish majors of FL German and a group of L1 German peers taking a course on teaching German as a FL. The collaboration consisted mainly of the German group´s feedback on the Flemish students´ texts (descriptive, deliberative, persuasive). Communication was conducted both via a VLE and e-mail. The Flemish students documented the collaboration process, drafts and final versions of their texts in a portfolio. Problems encountered had to do with the difference in term dates between the two institutions, with a lack of teaching experience on the part of the German students, and with the fact that they did not know the Ghent students' L1, Dutch (making it difficult to diagnose L1 interference in the latter's errors); intercultural misunderstandings also occurred, caused by differing interpretations of irony. Our second project consisted in the joint creation of German FL wikis within groups of Flemish bachelor students. They collaboratively created wikis on recent "Words of the Year" of German-speaking countries, keeping in mind their peers' background knowledge. Besides peer-collaboration, peer-revision also played an important role, as the groups provided mutual feedback on their wiki´s. In our paper we present samples of wiki pages and peer feedback, and highlight some conclusions concerning the (rather divergent) appreciation of the project by the students as expressed in a post-hoc questionnaire. Both our applications demonstrate how the computer literacy acquired in private communication can be integrated into the teaching of FL writing in different ways. An obvious strength of the trialogical approach is that it allows teachers and learners to focus on writing processes. Since wikis also enable researchers to track the creation process, they can lead to new insights into the FL writing process and the negotiation involved in collaborative writing in general. On the other hand, applying Web 2.0 projects in higher education also implies new challenges to the institutional framework, from hard- and software through teacher training to curricula flexibility.

1. Introduction

The socio-constructivist approach has made a significant contribution to computer assisted language learning through its focus on peer collaboration and negotiation of meaning (cf. e.g. [1]). The present paper shows how these insights can be applied to foster advanced foreign language (FL) writing skills.

Based on our experience with FL writing proficiency courses in Flemish higher education, we discuss two practical applications of virtual learning environments (VLEs). Using terms from Paavola / Hakkarainen [3], the first may be described as "dialogical", the second as "trialogical", with wikis being the collaboratively created objects. Both types turn out to be useful in order to promote a closer integration of private and educational communication in the lives of "digital natives" studying a foreign language.

2. A dialogical project: e-mail partnerships

2.1 Setup
Our first project centred on e-mail tandem partnerships between Flemish and German students at University College Ghent and Bonn University during the winter term of 2008-9. The Flemish students, who were mostly 20 years old and all had Dutch as L1, were in the third year of a B.A. course in Applied Language Studies (*Toegepaste Taalkunde*) and studying German as one of two foreign languages; they were taking a mandatory class in German writing skills (*tekstvaardigheid Duits*) comprising 12 weekly sessions of 120 minutes, taught by TL. Their L1 German peers were mostly in the second or third year of various Bachelor degree courses in languages at Bonn University and taking an optional introductory class on teaching German as a FL; most had German as L1, though there were a few other speakers with another L1 (e.g. Russian) and German as FL.

The collaboration arose from personal contacts between TL and the Bonn lecturer, Paul Meyermann. The focus of the e-mail project was methodological: as the Ghent students' main task was to practice writing German texts, the Bonn students would practice marking the texts and giving feedback by e-mail, as well as conducting personal e-mail exchanges with their Ghent peers in German. As it turned out (cf. below), marking texts written in non-native German was an unusual experience for them and became the source of practical issues as the collaboration proceeded.

2.2 Procedure
The writing tasks set for the Ghent students consisted of three different genres: narrative, descriptive, deliberative. The narrative text was considered a warm-up exercise and not included in the e-mail project for planning reasons (cf. below). In the event, each Ghent student thus contributed two texts to the project, which were marked and commented on within a week by his/her Bonn peer, to be then revised by the author in accordance with the comments received and resubmitted to their peers for final comments. Since the Bonn group was roughly 50% larger than the Ghent group (32 vs. 21), some Ghent students were paired up with two Bonn peers instead of one. All communication, especially group messages and the exchange of texts, was conducted via Campus, the Blackboard-based VLE of Bonn university, whose administrators had kindly agreed to register the Ghent students as external users. Apart from e-mails in which the Bonn students gave feedback on the texts they had marked, the student pairs were also asked to exchange personal messages via their personal e-mail addresses at least once a week in German on any topic or interest they might share. The pairs had been matched up by the lecturers on the basis of an introductory e-mail written by each student through Campus at the start of the project, taking into account preferences voiced by the students themselves. Most pairs therefore had enough in common for personal contacts to take place smoothly on a regular basis.

As the project proceeded, the Ghent students documented the collaborative process in a paper-based portfolio which they submitted to their lecturer at the end of the term. The portfolio contained drafts and final versions of their texts, as well as feedback messages written to them by their Bonn peers; the more personal aspects of their e-mail communication were not documented. Each portfolio also contained personal reflections of 1-2 pages by the student about the project, his/her experiences and suggestions. The portfolio contributed one third to the final grade awarded for the class; the rest came

from a written exam which did not refer to the e-mail project and involved skills (e.g. translation into German) practised in class while the e-mail project was on-going.

2.3 Experiences

Judging from the reflections in the portfolio, most Ghent students enjoyed the project and felt that the contact with their German peers had contributed appreciably to their FL competence generally and writing skills in particular. However, they also pointed out problems with the marking and feedback process which were typically due to a combination of two facts: that their Bonn peers had no prior experience with marking and that they did not know Dutch. Since Dutch and German are linguistically very close, Dutch is a significant source of errors for learners of German. Not knowing Dutch, the Bonn students sometimes misinterpreted text passages because they were (naturally) unable to identify the underlying L1 structure or phraseology, resulting in unhelpful suggestions for improvement. In other cases, misleading feedback was given because the Bonn students lacked sufficient awareness of German grammar or spelling. This is in part an intercultural problem, since normative grammar and spelling have a much lower priority in German school curricula and culture generally than in Flanders. The minimal conclusion seems to be that a more mature German group with some initial teaching experience should be chosen were the project to be repeated in the future.

Other problems encountered during the project had to do with the difference in term dates between the two institutions: with the winter term running from late September to Christmas in Ghent and from mid-October to mid-February in Bonn, and with the first weeks taken up by organisational matters, the project had effectively only about seven weeks to run. The lecturers thus experienced a need to plan well ahead and to communicate extensively with each other at every turn. After the end of the Ghent term, the Ghent lecturer travelled to Bonn to visit the peer group and their lecturer and discuss their experience of the project with them. Apart from their own lack of practical skills in marking and feedback, the Bonn students reported that misunderstandings sometimes arose in personal communication with their Flemish peers because the two groups had a different sense of irony. Since such intercultural issues are best solved through face-to-face contact, it would be desirably in similar projects in the future to organise an excursion so that the groups can meet in person, ideally over several days provided sufficient funds can be found.

3. A trialogical project: joint creation of wikis

3.1 Introduction: Wikis in the language class

Rather than e-mail communication between FL and L1 peers, our second project covered the joint creation of wikis within groups of FL students. Wikis belong to the ever increasing group of web 2.0 environments whose use in language education is currently being explored and evaluated [5]. One advantage of wikis is their social aspect: students can adapt, complement and correct each others' texts. By their very nature, wikis are a good means to call students´ attention to the cyclical process of writing and rewriting. Furthermore, collaborative writing can help overcome the initial "writer's block" that often accompanies the FL writing process. The shared responsibility for a collaboratively created object can result in a higher degree of engagement and intrinsic motivation, provided the collaborative process works out well for the group. Another useful feature is that the linguistic means and strategies required to ensure coherence in a hypertext structure vary from those in linear texts. As a result, wikis help focus students' attention on these strategies [4]. Finally, online wikis allow for freedom in time and space regarding the writing process and remain available to the whole group for further exploration in or outside the classroom.

3.2 Project outline

For our case study, we worked with a 2nd year bachelor course at Ghent University and a 3rd year bachelor course at University College Ghent. Students were divided into groups of three or four. Each

group created a wiki about a recent "Word of the Year" of a German-speaking country. The students were asked to design wikis to elucidate "their" word for their peer students, keeping in mind their readers' background knowledge. For each of the three collaborative phases (i.e. researching background information, structuring the wiki, writing the texts), three 30-minute in-class sessions were provided to kickstart the collaboration and to make sure all students felt comfortable working with the new medium. The resulting draft of each wiki was then peer-reviewed, providing feedback towards the final version.

3.3 Results: Students´ appreciation survey and teacher observations

For a final appreciation study, we asked the participants of the 3rd year bachelor course to fill in an extensive anonymous questionnaire (n=27). None had ever contributed to a wiki before. The survey covered attitude towards wikis for language learning in general and for the specific task, practicalities, technical problems encountered, and satisfaction with the group result. According to the results, 46% of the students agreed that the wiki as a good task, 25% did not agree and 29% neither disagreed nor agreed. Nevertheless, 22 out of the 27 participants stated that their view of the task had improved as the work progressed. Out of the answer options regarding attitude before starting the task, "curiosity" was the one chosen most frequently (10 out of 33 answers, multiple answers were possible), followed by "anxiety" (7) and "I had no idea what to expect" (7). Concerning their general appreciation of the task, it is interesting to note that the two statements "A group task is a good way to improve writing skills" and "I am happy with the result of our group work" both got an average score of 4,3 on a scale from 1 to 5.

Peer feedback played a major role throughout the project. All groups provided feedback about two other groups´ wikis using pre-defined rubrics and a checklist dealing with aspects of language, structure, content, layout, and illustrative multimedia. A majority of the students (62%) believe that peer-feedback in general is a good means to improve one's writing skills. However, only 45% stated that the peer comments actually helped them improve their wiki, and only 25% felt that they had learnt something from providing feedback to their peers. This was surprising given that the students knew that the rubrics used in the peer feedback phase would also be used by the teacher in the final evaluation. Moreover, an analysis of the feedback sheets revealed that the students had provided constructive input, e.g.: "Perhaps you should subdivide this page according to the three subtypes of X", "The information on subpages X and Y are not really related to your main topic – perhaps you should remove them", "On this page, you use a lot of passive voice, which disturbs the reading flow".

Some technical problems were reported, but most of them could be solved by peer assistance through the group fora that had been set up for this purpose, e.g.: "Could anyone please put the photo on website X put under my text on page Y? I don't know how to do this", "I have managed to reduce the size of my photo's. It works like this: (...)". The forum was also used to complain about technical problems: "f*, part of my text has totally disappeared. I'll have to rewrite the whole damn thing!" Although some technical problems were related to bugs and could not be solved, this did not seem to affect the general appreciation of using wikis in the language class. When asked to choose between two positions, 73% of the participants preferred the statement "I like to discover the new possibilities that wikis offer. When technical problems appear, one has to look for solutions." to the statement "The risk of technical problems bothers me and outweighs my interest in new possibilities."

Interestingly, forum communication (which took place in the L1) also displayed typical features of informal electronic communication like abbreviations and contractions imitating spoken language. The students clearly felt at ease in their group forum, although they knew the teacher had access to it. On the content side, besides dealing with technical issues, the forum also helped the students to plan the workflow (e.g. "Let´s work on the main page together in class, and distribute the subpages for individual work. I suggest that A works on subtopic X, B on subtopic Y and I take subtopic Z" →

Answer: "Fine with me") and to create a group spirit (e.g. "I think our wiki looks great. I counted 2200 words, so that should be fine. I think we're done." → Answer "Hurray to us!").

Assessment is inherently a problem in all group tasks. Even if participation in the wiki can be tracked in detail, and fine-grained assessment methods are available which take intragroup peer evaluation into account, we continue to believe that group work should result in a joint score for all participants. This score accounted for 15% of the total course evaluation, attenuating the impact of extreme scores on individual grades. In the survey, which was carried out before students knew their scores, 63% of the students agreed with the principle of a group score, 27% had reservations, and 7% rated it as unfair.

3.4 The teacher's perspective: Lessons learnt

One lesson learnt from this experience is the importance of clear instructions regarding plagiarism. As it turned out, a considerable proportion of the wiki-texts had been "cut-and-pasted" from websites, sometimes with minor changes regarding word order, tense, etc. Although references to the information sources were given (as required) at the bottom of each wiki page, the citations themselves (either direct or indirect) were not referenced. The fact that the task consisted of gathering, reformulating and summarizing existing information from the web into another hypertext environment aggravated this problem. The students seemed to be genuinely unaware of violating intellectual property rights. This may in part be due to the structure of the study programme: in the Applied Language Studies bachelor programme at University College Ghent, students do not receive explicit training in academic skills until the third year. However, we had experienced the same problem with students at Ghent University the previous year, where academic skills are taught and practised earlier, so this cannot be the sole reason. We therefore suspect that the lack of notion of individual intellectual property rights may be a general tendency amongst Netgeners, taking to the extreme the web 2.0 principle that all knowledge is co-constructed.

4. Conclusion

Both our applications demonstrate how computer literacy acquired in private communication can be integrated into the teaching of FL writing in different ways. An obvious strength of the trialogical approach is that it allows teachers and learners to focus on writing processes [2]. Since wikis also enable researchers to track the creation process, they can lead to new insights into the FL writing process and the negotiation involved in collaborative writing in general. On the other hand, applying Web 2.0 projects in higher education also implies new challenges to the institutional framework, from hard- and software through teacher training to curriculum flexibility.

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