About Collaboration, Interaction, and the Negotiation of Meaning in Synchronous Written Chats in L2-German

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Abstract. In this paper I will show the preliminary findings from my study of the discourse in synchronous written chats performed by students who study modern German literature within their first term of German studies. The focus of the study is on learning strategies and discourse strategies and how the Swedish learners make use of them when chatting with students at the same level of proficiency (peer groups) and in groups with students who are native speakers of German/or Swedish speakers at a high level of L2-proficiency. The data was collected from four chat-sessions within the period of September 2011 to January 2012. Based on socio-cultural and cognitive SLA-theory, the study has its focus on the relationship between interaction and the possibilities for language learning in mixed groups and peer groups of L2-German learners. The main questions are: In which constellation, native speaker/non-native speaker vs. peer-groups, do L2 German students meet the best opportunities for producing meaningful and rich output? When and to what extent do they find opportunities for self-repair, using direct or indirect feedback from their collocutors as an expression for meta-linguistic consciousness of the students? Which strategies do they use to keep the communication going and to learn special features of the language?

Keywords: learning strategies, discourse, group dynamics, lexical variety, syntactical complexity.

1. Introduction

This paper is an introduction to an on-going research project on the interaction and communication in synchronous written chats and their influence on learning German as a foreign language in an academic literature course. The project started in September 2011 and is expected to be finished in August 2014. In this first part the focus is on the learners' participation in different formations and the instances of conscious attention to form or meaning (self-monitoring, corrective feedback, and repair) in the output. The

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next step is to examine the discourse strategies and learner strategies to find out how the subjects create their discourse and how they pick up new L2-knowledge through the negotiation of meaning.

From a socio-cultural view (see Vygotsky, 1978), a learner benefits from the interaction with a more competent speaker because the latter puts him/her forward in the learning process. In a conversation with a native speaker on the other hand, a learner always has an inferior position because he/she lacks the linguistic knowledge to produce adequate utterances in the L2. Ellis (2008) suggests that this will lead to less learner participation, and also restrict the learner to a limited range of speech acts.

The collaboration and the social practice within an interconnected community is seen by researchers such as Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson, and McConnell (2004) as a positive factor for learning because of the special affordances (see Gibson, 1979) the learner meets in this context. As Crystal (2001) has pointed out, synchronous written chats can be placed on both sides of the speech and writing divide because on the one hand they have certain elements in common with oral face-to-face-conversation, and on the other hand, with written language. Because of the written language in chats the learners have the opportunity to go back to items that have been discussed before. They can use this information in their own production and thereby pay attention to language items (see Warschauer & Kern, 2000). This, from a language processing view, is important for acquiring new skills. What a learner pays attention to highly depends on social context and the situation in which the interaction is taking place and this will have influence on the learning outcome (see Fredriksson, 2006).

Although we can see an increasing interest in computer-mediated communication for language learning (CMCL), there is still little knowledge about how it works for a learner of an L2 (see Lamy & Hampel, 2007). First, the intention of this study is therefore to find out how the learners´ interactions and language productions are influenced by the constellation of speakers in a chat, and secondly, which opportunities for language learning they offer to the learner.

2. Method

2.1. Data-collection

The data has been collected in four chat-sessions from 30 students of a literary course within their first term of academic German studies. The students have different language backgrounds and different levels of language proficiency in German: 8 subjects are native speakers of German and are living in Sweden (L1G), 14 subjects are Swedish students who have been exposed to L2-German for a short time (L1S) (they have a level comparable to A2/B1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), and 8 subjects are Swedish students who have lived in a German speaking country for a long time and have almost native speaker competence

(L2G). The students usually meet in Adobe Connect every fortnight to orally discuss specific questions concerning the literature they have read. For the purposes of this study, they performed four discussions in MSN/Adobe Connect by chatting in groups of mainly three, but sometimes also two or four participants. The constellation of learners, competent and native speakers varied in each chat. The students prepared the questions in advance. This gave them not only the opportunity for pre-planning the language they used but also the possibility to use the ready-made answers and paste them directly in their chat. This has to be taken into account for the analysis of when the learners´ focus is on the task.

The groups:
- A: L1S/L1S/L1S, equal L1, homogenous group (9 L1S-subjects);
- B: L1S/L1S/L1G, unequal L1, unequal competence (4 L1S-subjects);
- C: L1S/L1S/L2G, equal L1, unequal competence (14 L1S-subjects);
- D: L1S/L1G/L1G, native speaker dominance (5 L1S-subjects);
- E: L1S/L1G/L2G, learner dominance (4 L1S-subjects);
- F: L1S/L2G/L2G, competent speaker dominance (2 L1S-subjects).

2.2. Data analysis

Based on a model which has been developed by Henrici (1995) to analyse the relationship between the interaction and L2-acquisition in traditional oral language discourse, I used a modified model to analyse the discourse in written chats. Following Henrici's (1995) model, I used a combination of conversation analysis and discourse analysis to find out how the more or less competent speakers of L2-German and native speakers of German organized the discourse (strategies for discourse management and discourse repair) in different constellations and which opportunities they created for language learning. I used quantitative and qualitative analysis methods to describe the discourse in terms of the L1S-students':

Participation in the different chat-groups:
- Rate of turns per chat;
- Rate of sentences, complex sentences per answer
  (subordinated and coordinated clauses);
- Rate of words per answer/chat;
- Strategies of discourse management/discourse repair: introduction and change
  of topics, questions for clarification, other corrections and self-repair.

Learning strategies:
- Cognitive strategies: self-monitoring as an expression of the learners' attention
  to form or meaning, imitation and reproduction of words or structures;
- Socio-affective strategies: expressions for cooperation (e.g., smileys).

3. Discussion

3.1. Participation

The results from the quantitative analysis indicate that the average rate of the L1S-learners' turns is higher in groups of three learners (A: 33%) or two learners and one competent speaker of L2 German (C: 32%). In groups of L1S-learners and one or two native speakers, the average rate is lower: 28% for B and 26% for D. Interestingly, there is not much difference between the homogenous L1S-learner groups (A) or groups with one native speaker and one competent L2 German speaker (E: 30%). This indicates that the presence of a native speaker seems to be less relevant for the learners' participation when they and a competent speaker share the same background and are in the majority. It is important to mention that these results are based on cross-sectional data from L1S-learners in the different formations and that the comparison is of limited value because of the various sizes of the compared groups. There is also a significant individual variation between the learners due to certain factors, e.g., the participants' interest in the book, in the task or in the other participants.

3.2. Language complexity

The analysis of the frequency of words and sentences in the learners' answers show that the presence of one or two native speakers (B or D) seem to have a positive influence on the learners' language production. They produce more words (29% or 36% of their answers contain 11 to 30 words) and more sentences (30% or 38% of their answers contain 2 to 4 sentences), compared with homogenous learner groups (23% for both categories). The rate of empty answers (6%) or answers without sentences (42%) is highest in homogenous learner groups. In formations with two native speakers (D), the learners also use more complex sentences (39.9% have subordinate or coordinate clauses) and with a higher accuracy rate (74% compared to 65.3% in homogenous L1S-groups).

3.3. Monitoring and repair

The first results of the study indicate that there is very little monitoring in the Swedish students' discourse and when it occurs the learners will not get feedback in a way that helps to develop L2-knowledge. Wrong hypotheses about grammatical rules are seldom corrected.

3.4. Formulas

I have found that the learners often rely on language items which they may have learned as formulas, especially when they are chatting in unequal constellations. These formulas can be characterized as units containing phrases like *ich mag ´I like´*, *ja* + lexical word (wirklich, Drama, klar) or partly analyzed features like *kann/muss* + uninflected V2 (muss sein, kann sein). This helps them to keep the discourse going.

4. Conclusions

To summarize my preliminary findings, on the one hand, the common language background in homogenous L1S-learner groups (A) or groups with one competent speaker of the L2 (C) seem to enhance the learners' participation. On the other hand, the presence of a native speaker appears to push the learners to produce more words and complex sentences. Both aspects have to be taken into consideration when forming collaborative groups in chats. Although the learners will not participate as much in unequal formations, they probably will use the language more creatively and with greater correctness. This may in the end further the acquisition of the L2. There are still many questions left, as they require more detailed analysis of the material. Conclusions from this preliminary study are:

- Instructions on how to construct the interaction in order to facilitate the learners' participation seem to be important;
- The little amount of conscious monitoring indicates that learning cannot be based on this strategy;
- Further attention has to be spent on learners' strategies, on formulaic speech and creative language use.

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CALL: Using, Learning, Knowing
EUROCALL Conference, Gothenburg, Sweden
22-25 August 2012, Proceedings
Edited by Linda Bradley and Sylvie Thouësny