

Combining formal and informal learning: the use of an application to enhance information gathering and sharing competence in a foreign language

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Abstract. This study aims to enhance foreign language learners' language competence by integrating formal and informal learning environments and considers how they can improve their grammatical and lexical skills through the gathering (comprehension) and sharing (writing) of information in the foreign language. Experiments with German learners at a Japanese university preparing to study in Germany were conducted. An application to archive newspaper articles was created, indexing current German coverage. A worksheet was provided, where learners were asked to select, read, and summarize articles via the application. Feedback was given to their summary. Participants were divided into two groups, learners that studied only in an informal setting, and those that were also instructed in a formal setting. Interviews were conducted with the participants in order to evaluate how the activities affected their language skills. Results showed that the practice affected their reading methods and heightened their motivation for further language learning in general. Students participating in activities in and outside the classroom showed improvements in their lexical knowledge, and better understanding of subtle nuances in written texts, which positively affected their writing skills and their speaking ability.

Keywords: second language learning, news article material, formal and informal learning, language competence.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the importance of practising communicative language learning competence has been highlighted in foreign language learning and teaching, together with an increased use of current technological means to facilitate communication skills. According to a study by [Burston and Arispe \(2016\)](#), 81% of computer assisted language studies focus on ‘writing’ skills of foreign language learners. While the learners’ grammatical and communicational abilities could be enhanced, few studies have been focusing on the learners’ enhancement of their reading, grammatical, and lexical competence. Previous studies investigated the effects of reading in language learning. [Al Ghazali \(2016\)](#) and [Lee and Pulido \(2016\)](#) examined the acquisition of vocabulary from reading English texts in the classroom. [Wang \(2017\)](#) studied the impact of mobile learning on reading comprehension. [Fenner \(2006\)](#) advocates a learner centered language teaching environment. [Meskill \(2009\)](#) examines the possibilities that online venues for individual informal learning, integrated with face-to-face instruction, hold for higher education language learning. [Panichi \(2015\)](#) highlights the benefits of the use of social media for several learning activities, while [Krashen \(2016\)](#) states “that the crucial elements for success, for both literacy and cognitive development, are self-selected reading and engaging in problem-solving in an area of intense personal interest” (p. 2). This research focuses on the question of how students can expand their grammatical and lexical knowledge through the gathering (comprehension) and sharing (writing) of information in a foreign language. It attempts to contribute to solving this problem by creating an application that archives newspaper articles, focusing on a specific theme collected in the learned foreign language. It is postulated that learners will enhance their lexical and grammatical knowledge through the application when combined with formal learning (in class) and informal learning (outside the classroom).

This study was carried out with Japanese students in the German learning course (Level A2 to B1) at the Shonan Fujisawa Campus (SFC) of Keio University (Japan), who are preparing to study abroad in Germany. The German department at SFC has developed their own original textbook for beginners in order to develop a ‘communication-based’ language learning environment, in which students are only confronted with limited grammar and vocabulary through their textbooks.

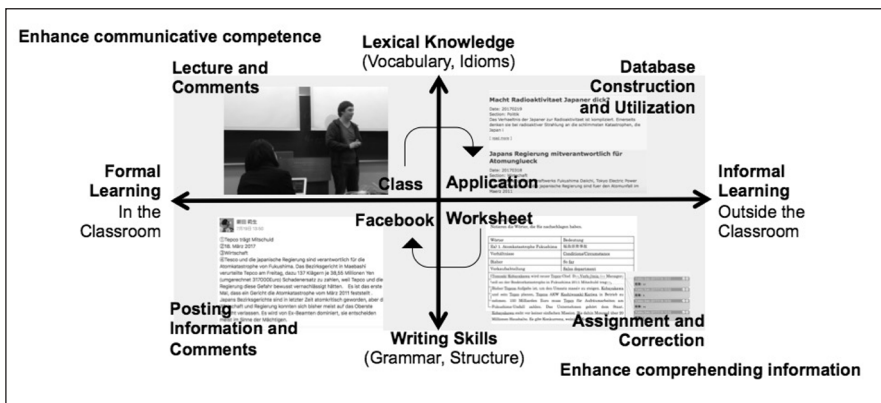
2. Method

Four students were separated into two groups: Group A (Participant A and B) and Group B (Participant C and D). Group A consisted of students participating

in a preparatory course for carrying out fieldwork in Germany, in order to study the effects of combining formal and informal learning environments. Students in Group B did not participate in class and studied in an informal setting during their free time.

For this study, the following steps were carried out: (1) a survey study with the Japanese students in order to determine what kind of media they tend to use to obtain information about Germany; (2) construction of the newspaper article database and application; (3) handing out worksheets to the participants, asking them to write summaries of the articles they read; (4) lectures and feedback in class (Group A); and (5) evaluation of the submitted worksheet and follow-up interviews with the learners (Figure 1). The results from the survey, worksheet, and interview with the students were analyzed through a content analysis, paying special attention to how students improved their skills in gathering and sharing information relating to Germany, as well as their grammatical and lexical skills.

Figure 1. Structure of the study



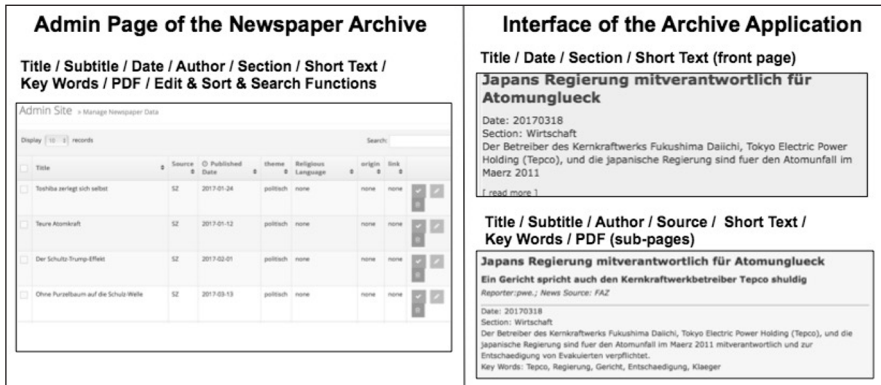
3. Discussion

3.1. Database and application design

For the application, newspaper articles from the web version of the German newspapers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, relating to the theme of the Big Earthquake, Tsunami, and nuclear disaster in Japan 2011, were

collected. The topic was selected based on its continued societal importance, both in Germany and Japan. An original German newspaper archive application was created so students could choose to read articles according to their own interests (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The newspaper archive application



3.2. Use of the news application and reading news article activities

The survey made clear that all participants regularly accessed German language information by attempting to read German articles accessed via Facebook or Twitter. However, none of the students read the articles completely. Instead, they routinely relied on supplementing the articles with English language sources, or translated them into English or Japanese by using Google Translator. Results from the interview showed that the use of the application and the task of summarizing the article improved the participants’ reading skills by looking up new vocabulary in dictionaries, while trying to comprehend the text in the original German. Students participating using the developed application showed improvements in their language skills.

Participant A learned technical terms and the subtle nuances of prepositions (such as ‘da’, ‘bis’, ‘ein’) because of the frequent use of the words ‘bisher’ (until now) and ‘daher’ (because) in the newspaper article. Participant B reported that the exercise influenced her result during the oral German examination at the end of the semester, as she remembered words such as “Gefahr” (danger) from the articles she read. This shows that this learning method combining the reading of newspaper articles of a related or specific theme, with writing exercises and feedback, also

proved to have a positive influence on the long-term retention of learned words (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Activities and results



4. Conclusions

Students in Group A showed an enhancement in several aspects by: (1) noticing new lexical elements through reading; (2) better understanding the nuances of the vocabulary through writing exercises and direct feedback; and (3) enhancing their competence to convey the obtained information orally. In general, participation in the experiment positively influenced students' motivation to learn German. It also influenced the learning style of the participants, encouraging them to try to comprehend the meaning of the article in the foreign language. The aim in constructing this learning system was to positively affect the lexical and grammatical skills of foreign language learners and to enhance their skills to gather and share the information obtained in a foreign language, by utilizing an original newspaper archive system. Results showed that combining exercises with the German article archive system positively affected their reading comprehension and ability to convey information literally and orally. However, this study was conducted in a short term with a limited number of participants. A long-term study

with a greater number of participants is important in order to determine the effects of the proposed system.

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