



Resource Usage when Searching for Information Online. Agency in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

During informal conversations and in a questionnaire preceding this work, students and teachers of Spanish as a foreign language from four different Swedish cities confirmed that language teachers sometimes approach the curricular goal of teaching culture by letting their students search through material online in the target language. This is also confirmed by previous studies [Estling Vanneståhl & Granath, 2008] If this, then, is what some people do in their language lessons, a study is warranted that researches what actually happens when students in Spanish use different resources while searching for task-specific information online. Hence, this study aims to inform the current discussion on ICT usage for pedagogical purposes, by studying how some upper secondary students of Spanish choose to use different resources when faced with an information searching group task aimed at reading authentic web sites.

These resources could be both on –and offline, comprised of different modes and expressed through different media. Some examples of resources could be dictionaries, mobile phones, talking to group members for different purposes or using web sites such as Google Docs that help further the work in a meaningful way. They could also have to do with what language one chooses to use, drawing on earlier subject knowledge or with how one distributes time.

In line with the above aim, the individual research questions are the following:

- *What resources does the teacher give and what resources do the interacting students use?*
- *What is detectable concerning students' agency as seen through their overall resource usage as well as their particular resource usage of Spanish?*
- *What do the students and the teacher express about this way of working?*

Primary data was collected through screen recordings, video and audio recordings, and prompted interviews. Multimodal Interactional Analysis (MIA) [Norris, 2004] was used as the framework for analysis of data, which was transcribed in Multimodal Interactional Protocols (IAPs) [Bezemer & Mavers, 2011].

Some results of this work in progress show that students did not use the teacher, paper dictionaries, pens, papers or phones as resources. While reading online they used the resources of time, choice and group talk differently than what the teacher expected. They become producers rather than consumers of information. They think they become active and motivated learners who enjoy using authentic sources and active collaborative authorship where they can solve the task in spite of low language knowledge. On the other hand, they think the work is time consuming and feel like they learn very little Spanish. There is a speed and presentation focus at the cost of learning process focus, where the latter is one of the teachers' main priorities.

1. Introduction

There is a massive change in Swedish schools where much money and time is invested in 1-1 solutions. Some advocate that it might be easy to install Wi-Fi in classrooms; however, to change current classroom practices, knowledge and values of the people using this technology is quite different [1]. Accordingly, there is a curricular goal in foreign languages that students even at the basic language levels should be able to search among and evaluate different sources online.

It has been argued both that language students might use computers instead of course textbooks and that writing and information seeking are some of their most prevalent school activities on the Internet [2]. It has also been feared that a “cut and paste pedagogy” may come to dominate the language learning process, especially if information is not worked through but merely copied into a new document [3].

This study aims to inform the current discussion on ICT usage for pedagogical purposes, by studying how six upper secondary students of Spanish choose to use different resources when faced with an information searching group task aimed at reading authentic web sites. The individual research questions are:



- What resources does the teacher give and what do the students use?
- What is detectable concerning students' agency both in overall resource usage as well as their particular resource usage of Spanish?
- What do the students and the teacher express about this way of working?

2. Design for learners

The conceptual framework in this work derives from the school of Design for Learners; developed by Selander and Kress [4]. This field describes the teacher's designs when teaching as well as the students' routes through learning, in that it approaches the learning situation from three possible levels of design. The macro level deals with for instance governing documents such as national curricula or school laws. The second, intermediate level concerns for example the individual school or the design of course contents. The third is the micro-level at which the learner designs his or her own process of learning, navigating through the learning experience and selecting (or not) through ways of action and materials.

In this study the interest is in the micro level, since the prime concern is in the individual's exercise of agency and choice. In the research under hand, agency is defined as the individual's choice of how to use resources in a certain situation. This is of course based on how he or she understands the task and resources at hand; and also on what power the individual is given to act.

Van Lier [5] postulated two types of agency, individual and collaborative. The more initiative shown by the learner, self initiated questions, providing answers for others and (by the teacher) un-prompted discussions, the higher the agency. Bringing curriculum design into the picture, it was stated that certain approaches seem to foster agency more than others. Among others, project-based, task-based and theme-based approaches, such as the one used here, were mentioned.

3. Multimodality, social semiotics and a new way of reading

Learning involves the interpreting and producing of signs. Hence, it becomes important to know what signs are. The teaching about signs and how we make meaning through combining signs using different modes and media is studied in semiotics [6]. A sign is a fusion of form and meaning and when we communicate signs are not used arbitrarily; they are motivated. The concept of the motivated sign brings into account the agency of the sign maker and the process of sign making [7].

When we make meaning, we use signs in different modes. A mode is used as an accepted system of communication within a certain community at a certain time [8]. Some examples of modes are gestures, speech, music, film and images. Most often we combine modes when we make meaning; we communicate multimodally.

Selander and Kress [9] mean that the digital development tends to convert students to producers of signs rather than consumers of information. They mean that previous school knowledge, often based on the ability to remember information, is now turned into the ability to be able to produce texts, to cooperate with others, to use texts and images, to critically review and help bring about new meaningful information. In this, the act of creating signs becomes a vital part of learning.

It is true that the digital revolution brought changed conditions for learning and with this, new conditions for what text, writing and reading are. For instance, concepts like cohesion and coherency mean different things depending on what text type one is interested in. How do you, for example, limit a text online? By paragraphs or hyperlinks – where does the text end?

Vaca Uribe and Hernández y Hernández studied the differences between reading on paper and reading online, asking if online reading could be considered a completely new type of reading [10]. Meaning that searching for information is one of the most common forms of reading on the computer, they concluded that some differences were that in online reading, there are elements of speed, accessibility to vast amounts of information, multimodality and interactivity between texts that are not applicable when reading on paper. They also point out that, aside from the purpose of reading shaping in which way you read, there are generational differences in how people read the same text: adults are more likely to read from beginning to end and right to left, and youth are more likely to use modes like images and film, and to fast discard information that they see as irrelevant.

Patterson also engaged in what type of text the hyperlink text is and what type of reader this text type creates [11]. Informational hypertext places students in a new reading environment where they have to read more efficiently than before, since they have to navigate actively in a way that is not possible with printable media. One of the ways in which it might be different is brought by the attitude that readers bring to this type of text which she means is a greater sense of agency.

Jewitt explains that when we analyze any Design in Learning, this is done based on multimodal contents, social relationships in the classroom and time, organized as *tempo* [12]. She means that the



classroom organization of time is what makes course contents and interaction a unit; what glues them together. Connected to this, Norris emphasizes simultaneity and multitasking in communication and means that the multimodal interactional researcher should acknowledge language, interaction and context [13]. Doing so, she introduces the terms higher-level action and lower-level actions, where higher-level action is where the person puts her main attention, while at the same time being aware of lower-level actions she is performing at the same time. The higher-level action, then, is constructed by the intensity or the complexity in the use of modes (and media, my comment) that the students use as resources.

Norris (ibid) inspired the approach of multimodal interactional analysis used in the study under hand, albeit, since there was a larger time span recorded than hers, a much less detailed level of analysis than hers was used. While data is *collected*, it is also *constructed* through choices made and perspectives taken. Not able to account for limitations posed by the different data recordings and the transcription method, it suffices to relate here that the data include 5X6 30-minute screen recordings, video and audio recordings and prompted interviews conducted right after the work session. Data was transcribed into a multimodal interactional analysis protocol and the categories of resources were analyzed according to time and frequency. Concerning the students' particular agency in resource use of Spanish, the concepts autonomy vs. dependency were also applied [14].

4. Results

The teacher said that she provided the following resources:

1. The teacher herself.
2. Preparatory work in form of classes aimed at training vocabulary and discussing content issues. The class also watched many films and worked with music from Latin America.
3. Plenty of time for the students to read slowly and penetrate difficult texts.
4. Non-digital tools (dictionaries, papers, pencils...)
5. Choice. The groups were supposed to choose an "unknown" country to work on and, even though some headlines were obligatory, such as "interesting sites", the groups could choose within those headlines.
6. A pre-checked web-link list.
7. The groups, in order to help each other solve problems and discuss different matters.
8. A keynote instruction in the virtual classroom.
9. The virtual classroom.

Only 7,8 and 9 were actually used by the students in the work session. The students worked in a separate group room and though they expressed the need for teacher and dictionaries (placed on the tables in front of them), they did not use either. They never referred to the contents from the preparatory classes. The only reference to how much time they had was: "Eight weeks? Sweet. But how many key note presentations do they want us to make!?" The web-link list was used by some at the very end, after a reminder by the researcher. The groups chose countries that some of the group members had worked with in previous projects, in other subjects, so that they had information about them already (in Swedish or English).

However, the students used resources that the teacher did not mention, or that she said they were not to use. Some of these were:

1. A shared Google document, which they wrote in simultaneously. The students switched between their work document and the Internet between 15 to 24 times in 30 minutes.
2. Google translate (two students used it sparingly, the rest often and throughout their work)
3. Copy/Paste, annotation tools and parallel tabs (between eight and 17), hyperlinks that the students found on their own (in Swedish, English and Spanish; the amount of original links was between 17 and 24, ranging between Wikipedia, power point presentations made by American students and government sites).
4. The agency in Spanish resource usage differs heavily between the individual students, some being almost all autonomous and some being dependent to a very high degree throughout their work. One student only used Spanish when he got lost in the virtual classroom and in the two end minutes; another went to google.es as the first click in order to only get search results in Spanish.

5. End word

The students express that working like this, it takes a very long time to learn very few things. At the same time, they feel that they have worked very efficiently. This makes relevant a discussion on learning process focus vs. product focus on language learning. When working with information searching in the language classroom, perhaps it is the process itself that should be the end product.



For instance, letting the students watch their own screen films and discuss the gains and losses of each others' search processes might have initiated teacher led group discussions on both language, search procedure, evaluation of sources and content knowledge.

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