

Learning German Online about Prerequisites, Attitudes and the Effect of Computer-Mediated Communication on Language Learning

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Abstract

In Sweden there is a growing number of schools which use Information and Communication Technologies in foreign language education, while little research has been done on the matter how they contribute to language learning. Our contribution to the conference is to present our research project, which will start this fall with classes in the Swedish region Dalarna, and we will also show some preliminary results. The project is based on a longitudinal study, which will run over two years, and has two focal points: 1. The examination of teachers' and learners' usage of the computer as a learning/communication tool and their attitudes towards it. We hope to get a better understanding of the conditions under which computers aid language learning in a blended learning setting. 2. The significance of chat as a communication mode and its effects on language development. We want to know: In which mode, written chats compared to oral face-to-face communication, do certain language structures and discourse features first occur. Which influence can be supposed that both modes have on each other? We expect to find out that chat contributes to the development of oral skills because its' conditions for planning in- and output supports the development of routines to process certain forms and structures. As our research methods we use questionnaires, interviews, learner language analysis.

1. Introduction

This paper is an introduction to a newly started research project on the use of modern technology in German language classes in Swedish upper secondary schools (gymnasium), age 16-19. Research [1] has shown that the interest in learning a foreign language has decreased among young Swedish learners since the modern languages, German, French or Spanish, are no longer obligatory subjects. The students choose other subjects in which they more easily can achieve higher grades, or they often quit their courses after a while in lack of motivation. As Thorson et al. [2] have shown the students often are missing authenticity in their classroom and they are not willing to make an effort for learning the language because they cannot see any worth in it. The students' attitudes might be a result of the tendency in Swedish language classrooms to teach the L2 in a traditional way. This means the L2 is treated as a product, but rarely used for communicative purposes [3]. As Granath & Vannestål [4] have pointed out the use of IT in language classes can lead to a more stimulating learning setting, because IT has an enormous potential for enabling different kinds of interactive and communicative activities in and outside the classroom. There is a growing number of Swedish schools where each student is equipped with his/her own computer, and this makes it important to us to find out how this potential is used by teachers and learners and in which way IT can promote language learning in a blended learning setting. We have chosen to look at the phenomena from two angles: from the outside view of teachers and learners on their learning, and from the inside by looking at the impact of computer-mediated language on language development. We hope to show general tendencies which can help teachers in their daily work.

Our questions can be divided into the following:

Part 1: Usage and attitudes: When does IT aid language learning in blended learning settings and when not? Which common tendencies can be found regarding the benefits of using IT in language classroom?

- How often do teachers/learners use the computer in their language class?
- Which competence do they have regarding IT?
- Which kind of activities do they use it for?
- For what purposes do they use it?
- Which kinds of tools and social networks do they use?
- In which way is IT an aid in language learning, according to the teachers/learners?

Usage and attitudes towards the use of computers in language class over time?

Part 2: Investigation of developmental features in task-based learner language: Does chat serve as an instrument to develop language skills regarding oral competence?

- What kind of grammatical structures do the students activate in
 - a. oral communication
 - b. chat communication
- and how do these develop in each mode?

2. Methods

For our investigation in part 1 we will use questionnaires and collect the answers from teachers and learners from Swedish upper secondary schools from all over the county, offering German classes for advanced beginners from the CFRL-level A2 to B1. The questionnaires are answered online at two different times, in the end of October 2011 and in the end of spring term, May 2012. The samples will be analyzed with quantitative methods by distinguishing frequent users from non-frequent users as the main categories. The analysis will be finished in fall 2012.

Our investigation in part 2 is based on samples of learner language produced in written chat and in oral speech from 31 learners in one specific German class at a Swedish upper secondary school (gymnasium). The data collection is spread on four terms, from the end of September 2011 to the end of May 2012 with collections twice a term. The students are paired up and get certain subjects to discuss on in oral speech and in chat. The tasks they get have an information gap. They record their conversations on mp3 and send it together with their chat logs to their teacher. We have decided not to be present in the classroom sessions to minimize the risk for manipulation. But the students are informed at the beginning that they participate in a research study and have given their agreement to it.

The tasks the students work with are based on their language level and the language progression in their curriculum (Reported by their teacher). This helps us to investigate the connection between input and output.

The language data is analyzed with quantitative and qualitative methods by counting the occurrence of certain grammatical items in oral speech and written chat and their correct and incorrect use over time.

Structures we are interested of are:

- Verbal Morphology: present tense, present perfect, past tense of regular and irregular verbs, subject-verb congruence, and modal constructions (combination with V2)
- Nominal morphology: Gender agreement of articles and pronouns
- Syntactical structures: word order: subject-verb-inversion, V2-end in modal constructions, present perfect and subordinate clauses, order of adverbials

The language items will be collected in a database (access) and analyzed regarding systematically occurring specific form-function mappings.



This analysis is completed with a description of the nature and development of the learner language in chats and oral speech.

2.1 The test group

The test group in part 1 consists of teachers and their students in German language classes from upper secondary schools from all over the country. We focus on schools which are offering classes for advanced beginners (from A2 to B1), which are schools with an orientation to humanities and social sciences.

The test group in part 2 consists of 31 students at the age of 16/17 who have learnt German for three years. They come from a small town in Dalarna, Sweden and have a middle class background and both immigrant or Swedish origin. The students are offered a laptop in the middle of September to use in all subjects at school.

The teacher, who is a fluent speaker of French (her mother tongue), German and Swedish, is focusing on communicative language use and her grammar instruction is therefore almost completely implicit, which means she's not teaching grammar explicitly.

3. Theory

Our work is placed in cognitive language acquisition theory and based on a language processing model Fredriksson [5] has developed out of connectionist, information processing and variability theories. Her model describes acquisition on the level of processing, explaining the developmental patterns observed in learner language which is produced in different tasks (free writing, translation, cloze test). This model has been confirmed by her analysis of written data from Swedish learners at the beginning and advanced levels concerning the development of verbal morphology. Her results indicate that German verb morphology is not acquired from rules but rather by associative connections of different kinds of form-function mappings. The learners do analyze the forms they meet in their input, but the depth of the analyses depends on the learning context (is the attention on form or on meaning) and on the complexity of the form (can it be learnt as a lexical item which does not need a formal analyses, or does it consist of many irregularities which has to be discovered by the learner and connected with the right function in the target language?). Learners develop analyzed (often seen as generalizations) and unanalyzed form-function connections (chunks) parallel, which can be observed in the systematical variations in learner language.

3.1 Tasks and language use and language acquisition

Conversations in both oral speech and written chat have in common that they involve the learner in some kind of communicative activity. If we agree with Ellis [6] we can expect then that samples elicited by this means reflect how the learners use the L2 for message conveyance and that their focus is on meaning. But as Ellis [7] also demonstrates it is very much dependent on the task- design what kind of language the learners produce in their outcome. Even if we intend to engage the learner in meaning-focused language use we cannot be sure what the learners really do. They can put their focus only temporarily on form and this can lead to a certain kind of analyzed form-function-mapping. For us it is important to investigate if there is a difference between oral speech and chat-language concerning the form-function mappings the learners have built.

3.2 Oral speech and written chat

Oral face-to-face conversation and synchronous chat conversation have certain properties in common. But there are also properties which bring chat closer to written language. Crystal [8] therefore places what he calls Netspeak therefore on both sides of the speech and writing divide. The differences are

caused by the technology but also by the medium; the use of written language. The collocutors have time to plan their output, reflect what they have intended to send or can go back to earlier messages. The participants often write simultaneously, which causes interruptions in their conversation. According to Crystal [9] the conversation in chat proceeds "in a mixture of sequence, simultaneity, and overlap". In face-to-face conversation overlapping speech is minimal, the collocutors get simultaneous feedback while they are forming their messages and the interaction between them is faster than in chat. The different media in which the learners communicate can thus be suggested to have influence on the learners' selective attention and the kind of their form-function mappings.

3.3 Expected results

From the comparison of learner language produced in oral and in chat conversation we expect to find that the learners use forms and structures which can be learnt as lexical items (chunks) with more accuracy in oral speech - indicating they have been learnt as unanalyzed form-function-connections - and more variation of complex forms and structures in chat language - suggesting they have been learnt as analyzed form-function-connections. As learner language develops the analyzed forms and structures are activated in oral conversation.

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