Russian and Swedish Young Learners in Communication in English with the Use of Digital Tools

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Abstract

This project investigates Swedish and Russian young learners' uses of modern technology in international communication in English. Modern technology plays an increasing role in children's documentation and international communication at schools. The role of the English language in new ways of communicating and interacting is therefore relevant to investigate. The development of new digital tools implies that young learners are not only consumers but also producers of information in English, and that new forms of representations can be used when communicating in English. The present study is a project of cooperation between the universities in Uppsala, Sweden and Kaliningrad, Russia and describes communication between three schools in Sweden and three schools in Russia. The communication at the websites provides useful material of 12-year-olds who used English as their lingua franca and as means of communicating at three common websites with the help of blogs, podcasts and films from September 2012 to May 2013. All the young learners' productions at the three websites were studied in terms of modes of communication, length of contributions, structural complexity in the English language and topics selected in the messages. The results show that young Russian and Swedish learners are able to use the English language in authentic communication by using different digital tools within the topic fields of the levels A1 and A2 of the CEFR. The learners' production showed evidence of the occurrence of complex structures and current non-standard features of the English language with very few instances of misunderstandings or communication breakdowns.

1. Introduction

Modern technology provides opportunities for learners to produce documentation of their learning processes in efficient and interactive ways. Learners can give accounts of their achievements at school and share them with other learners even in geographically and culturally distant areas. In the Baltic region, English is taught as the first foreign language at most schools. Successful international communication in English is thus within reach; daily interaction and communication can be achieved without any significant obstacles. Furthermore, English is used in young people's free time with the use of modern technology. These occasions of using and being exposed to the English language outside class have an impact on learners' oral proficiency and the size of their vocabulary [1] [2].

According to Gärdenfors [3] the use of ICT, supports motivation and understanding in informal and formal learning situations, and learning can be organized as assignments for individuals or groups of learners. Learning then includes collecting produced material in portfolios where productions are put together to provide a collection of their learning. The Council of Europe provides material used for self-assessment and portfolios in language learning [4]. Motivation can probably be strengthened if the learners' produced material is in authentic communication [5].

2. Theoretical background

Learners are driven by their communicative needs when they develop their language proficiency so that they are pushed to further acquisition [6]. Ellis [7] distinguishes three kinds of need: the communicative, the expressive and the sociolinguistic needs. In the present study, the learners' use of English is driven by a basic communicative need to communicate with fellows of their own age at common websites.

The learners' unplanned production at the websites of the project was not corrected but produced spontaneously. A certain degree of self-correction in written interaction is expected, however, and learners pay more attention to self-correction in written computer-mediated communication than in oral interaction [8]. The language of the present study in naturally occurring contexts can be claimed to provide the best material for investigating learners' competence in English [9].

The transfer from the mother tongue may be the reason not only for structural errors but also for selected strategies [9]. In the present study, there are non-standard features which occur in both

Russian and Swedish learners' production, such as the erroneous use of the distinction between *who* and *which* as relative pronouns. Then there are also non-standard features which can be explained with the help of certain structures, or the absence of them, in Russian or Swedish such as the use of the definite article.

Learner language can be analyzed from different angles and perspectives such as accuracy, complexity and fluency [9]. Since the learners have different L1, namely Swedish and Russian, the distinction between a complex and simple structure is not evident; what is complex in English for a Swede may not be so for a Russian due to their different mother tongues. Nevertheless, such tools are used to study learner language [10]. Estling Vannestål [11] makes the distinction between simple sentences, compound sentences and complex sentences. Compound sentences are claimed to be "typical of speech and young children's writing".

3. Purpose and aims of the study

The purpose is to study the production and interactive communication in English by young learners in Sweden and Russia when ICT is used. The aims are:

- to describe the learners' communication and proficiency in English, and
- to analyze whether the use of ICT influences the content in youngsters' communication.

4. Methodology

The investigation was carried out in cooperation with teachers at three schools on Gotland, Sweden and three schools in Kaliningrad, Russia and some 100 learners, aged 12, participated and communication was carried out between six classes. Their proficiency in English was assessed at the start of the project using CEFR. [12]

The learners' uses of English were analyzed and both content and structure were taken into account. Seven aspects were studied: levels of proficiency in English, modes of communication, length of contributions, complexity in the learners' production, occurrence of informal features of the English language, themes in the contributions, and evidence of misunderstandings or communication break-downs in the contributions.

Activities in the project were developed in on-going discussions with teachers and researchers in a research-circle [13].

5. Results

5.1. Identified levels of proficiency in English.

The learners were at an elementary or pre-intermediate level of proficiency and the levels could be identified and described in tests by using CEFR, at the levels A1 and A2, written production [13].

As seen below in Table 1, the learners contributed on 585 occasions in English at the three websites (538 written and 47 oral contributions). The written contributions were by far more frequent than recordings of the learners' spoken English. The number of words in all the contributions is 25 149.

Table 1. Number of Swedish and Russian learners' contributions at the websites from September 2012 to May, 2013.

Websites	Written contributions		Number of oral contributions
	Number of contributions	Number of words in all the written contributions	
http://kaliningradendre.se	277	15 617	19
http://kaliningradeskelhem.se	116	5 827	8
http://kaliningradsanda.se	145	3 705	20
Total	538	25 149	47

5.2. Modes of communication.

Table 1 shows that a great majority of the learners' contributions are written and only a few are oral recordings. The young learners thus mostly chose to write their production but pictures and photos were widely used, either produced by themselves, such as Vokis, or from other sources, such as with direct links to pictures and music or sports activities at Youtube. The analysis of the distribution of

written contributions in terms of only text and text in combination with visual material showed that 486 were only text (90%) and 52 (10%) were combined with visual material.

5.3. Number of words in written contributions
The length of the contributions is relevant for the analysis to see whether learners mostly produced very short messages or wrote more thoroughly at the websites.

Table 2. Number of words in written contributions from September 2012 to May 2013.

Categories	Kaliningradendre.se	Kaliningradeskelhem.se	Kaliningradsanda.se	Total
1 – 10 words	95	27	79	201 (37%)
11 – 30 words	45	33	36	114 (21%)
31 – 100 words	85	41	23	149 (28%)
101 words or more	52	17	7	76 (14%)
Total	277	116	145	538 (100%)

The results in Table 2 show that there is a great variation in the length of the contributions at the websites; some of the learners' contributions are very short with not more than ten words and one or two clauses whereas others are lengthy with detailed accounts and reflections of more than 100 words.

5.4. Young learners' language in the contributions.
The distribution of simple, compound and complex sentences in the learners' production at the websites was investigated, particularly to study the occurrence of complex structures in these young learners' production. Instances are provided below to illustrate simple, compound and complex structures in the learners' production at the websites according to the definitions above.
The material contains examples of simple structures and they are often produced by the young learners. Compound sentence structures occur but are not frequent in the material, however.
The complex sentence structures are of different kinds such as causal, relative, conditional constructions and they serve various communicative needs and tend to be more frequent than compound sentence structures in the material.
The young learners discussed a wide range of topics in their contributions from short statements of like or dislike to extensive presentations of their surroundings. With the help of the classification of themes [14], eleven themes were identified in the contributions: personal identification, house and home, environment, daily life, free time and entertainment, travel, relations with other people, education, food and drink, services, language, and weather. Several themes could turn up in a single contribution and for some contributions, themes were hard to identify.
In general communication worked efficiently at the websites but in some cases we can see evidence of the fact that the young learners did not understand each other. Furthermore it is noteworthy that instances of current non-standard language English were observed with words such as "cuz" and "2" for "to".

6. Discussion
Russian and Swedish young learners adopted a colloquial and informal style of English. This style was probably not taught at school but acquired outside class. Although the young learners are at levels A1 and A2 (cf. above), they adopted informal features and used them in their communication.
The learners developed their English language and proceeded to more advanced levels regarding syntactic complexity, such as complex structures with relative and conditional constructions. Evidently there are communicative needs for these constructions in young learners' communication in English as a foreign language.
A great majority of the contributions were text of which some were combined with visual material. In spite of available technical facilities to record both sounds and films, learners preferred text to combinations text with visual material. Possible interpretations of this finding are that, firstly, the young

learners are more anonymous in texts. Secondly, writing provides more time for planning on formulations. Thirdly, speaking English is perceived as being more demanding than writing. Worth observing is when learners used "vokis" their voices were changed which seems to have encouraged them to the spoken mode.

Many contributions are very short with one or two clauses (responses and reactions) but a substantial part of the material consists of elaborated and detailed accounts. Young learners who are involved in authentic communication in English are encouraged to produce both more complex and contemporary language than probably would be the case in classroom settings. This is in line with the findings by Leffler and Lundberg [7].

7. Conclusion

The present study shows that young learners of English as a foreign language can use English for their communicative needs after having studied English at school in Sweden or Russia for some five to six years. The learners used writing as their mode of communication even if other means such as filming and recording are available. At the same time they refer to other ways of communicating such as Skype, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. The young learners adopted styles of informal spoken English and texting in English and current and colloquial vocabulary. In spite of their limited time of studies of English at school, the learners produce language which has a linguistic complexity which may not be expected from Russian and Swedish 12-year-olds and led to few misunderstandings. The study gives evidence of the English language as an effective means of communication between young Russians and Swedes.

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