

Learning German by Chatting – A Study of Social Interaction and Language Production in an Academic German Online Course

Christine Fredriksson

Högskolan Dalarna/Dalarna University, Akademin språk och medier/School of Languages and Media Studies (Sweden)
cfr@du.se

Abstract

In this presentation I will show my preliminary results from a research project about collaborative language learning in an academic online course in German. The study is based on a sample of 35 chat-logs from 30 students of different language background (Swedish or German as L1) and different levels of German proficiency, working on collaborative tasks in equal and unequal formations of triads or dyads. The data was collected in four of eight online seminars which were an obligatory part of a German literature course at a Swedish university. These seminars were conducted in private chat-rooms in MSN/Adobe connect. The students had to answer open-ended questions about the literature they had read, which they had prepared in advance. The results indicate that Swedish students with a lower level of German proficiency produce longer messages when interacting in formations with native speakers than with peers. On the other hand, interactional modifications or scaffolding where the attention was directed on form or meaning of the L2 overall occurred only to a small extent. This means that learners only get few opportunities to develop new L2 knowledge with the help of experts, a condition which is thought essential by researchers within a cognitive or sociocultural learning approach. Further study of the data reveals that the students frequently make use of imitation of whole utterances or parts of utterances of their collocutors. This strategy may help them to become more fluent in German and may also assist the development of more complex structures of the L2.

1. Introduction

Research and theory on language students' interaction in text-based synchronous computer-mediated communication (chat) has shown that it can be assumed to offer various beneficial opportunities for language learning [1]. Compared to oral face-to-face communication, interaction in chat is more student centred [2], it promotes learner autonomy and learner participation [3]. It also enables learners to establish contacts with native speakers and thus to participate in collaborative dialogue [4], which means that they together with experts construct new L2 knowledge through the negotiation of meaning and form [5]. Because of the written mode, students also get more time to plan and monitor their utterances [6], they can scroll backward to former utterances and reflect on language issues [7]. By providing these conditions, text chat can be assumed to support noticing and the development of metacognitive knowledge.

While previous studies on text chat mainly have focused on modifications in terms of interactional patterns like *triggers – signals – responses – reaction to a response* in the NNS model from Veronis and Gass [8] or *language related episodes* [9] as a means of promoting learning opportunities, little research has investigated learners' alternative language learning strategies. Results from research on oral interaction, however, have shown that L2 learners make frequent use of their interlocutors' utterances in order to create their own [10]. Thus repetition and imitation can be regarded as important strategies in L2 acquisition. As the affordances in chat can be supposed to promote monitoring and noticing, imitation can be expected to be used as beneficial learning strategy in this specific learning context.

In this paper, I present the results from a study that investigated post-production monitoring and imitation as, from an information processing view, two opposed strategies in the discourse between NNSs and NSs of German in an academic German online course in Sweden.

1.1 Methodology

The study is based on a sample of 35 chat-logs from 30 students who studied German literature in their first term of web-based German studies. The students had different L1 and different proficiency in L2 German. Eight were NS of German living in Sweden for several years, fourteen were Swedish students (INNS) at an intermediate level comparable to A2/B1 in the CEFRL, and eight were advanced Swedish students (ANNS) with almost native speaker competence. The students



participated in four out of eight online seminars in text chat (MSN/Adobe Connect), working on open-ended questions about the literature they had read. These questions were prepared in advance by the students. As it was my intention to investigate the interaction between NSs and NNSs in real seminars, the students were allocated to mixed combinations in triads, the most common formations in this literature course. Before they met in the chat rooms, they got a short oral introduction to the topic and instructions on group formation by their teacher, who was not the researcher. However, because some dropped the course or missed one seminar, there were also formations with four or two students.

For the analysis of post-production monitoring I used a model which was developed by Henrici [11] to analyse interactional routines in the negotiation of misunderstandings. This model includes four main components: 1) Manifestation of a misunderstanding, caused by a lack of language knowledge or knowledge about facts, 2) Processing, 3) Attempt at solution, and 4) Reaction to the solution. In accordance with this model, routines were identified in all 35 chat-logs in terms of self-corrections and corrective feedback, and analysed with quantitative and qualitative methods.

Imitation was in accordance with Aguado Padilla's research [12] analysed in terms of repetitions of whole utterances, parts of utterances, and the creative use of parts of utterances from former sequences. The investigation is based on 25 chat-logs from formations with INNS. So far, the data concerning imitation has been analysed with qualitative methods. Next, quantitative analysis will be applied as well, in order to compare which kind of strategy is most common in meaning-focused interaction.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is a socio-cognitive approach [13], which explains language acquisition as an integrative process of using and internalizing language in joined social activity. Based on socio-cultural and connectionist theory, it suggests correlations between humans' interaction in the world and the processing on neuronal level in the human mind.

This view is compatible with a model which Fredriksson [14] has developed on connectionist [15], information processing [16] and variability theories [17] to explain L2 acquisition and L2 development. This model conceptualizes the external context of interaction as a trigger of learners' focus of attention, thus determining the quality of the connections in the learners' minds. When attention is on formal aspects, which is the case in post-production monitoring, manifested in corrective behavior, learners are supposed to build analyzed form-function mappings. On the other hand, in meaning-focused interaction, i.e. when learners discuss certain topics, they are supposed to attend to language items that are useful for communication, but unanalyzed regarding formal aspects. In learners' performance, this kind of unanalyzed form-function mappings can be identified in means of language units which are used in a fixed way, manifested as repetitions of former utterances.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Self-corrections and corrective feedback

Regarding modifications in terms of self-corrections or corrective feedback, only few instances are found in the sample (228 out of totally 6534 replies). This indicates that the students put little focus on formal or lexical issues. However, only few of those modifications were negotiated (39 out of totally 6535 replies), i.e. they were answered by a response from an interlocutor to solve some kind of linguistic problem. Of those, only 13 negotiations lead to a common agreement, which according to Henrici [18] is a necessary prerequisite for the acquisition of new items.

The majority (18/39) of negotiations were caused by linguistic problems concerning lexis (18/39) or content (12/39). In contrast, self-corrections most often concerned orthography (45/77) and grammar (24/77). Corrective feedback was mainly given indirectly and concerned also most often grammar (13/23).

The finding, that modifications regarding formal aspects seldom were negotiated, indicates that this meaning-orientated activity might have impeded collaborative dialogue, as the students focused their attention on the task, and not on form [19]. On the other hand, because of overlaps and delays, the information structure in the students' messages often lacked coherence. As a consequence, the students did not feel obligated to link to each other's posts. This might also have contributed to few instances of negotiation.

3.2 Imitation as a learning strategy

The analysis regarding repetitions has shown that the students made use of the linguistic information in former utterances in different ways and functions. They pasted exact copies or copies of parts of the questions they worked on into the chat window, which can be seen as a strategy to gain time to plan and to formulate the next utterance without losing the right to speak. They also made exact copies or copies of parts of utterances from their interlocutors, which not only increased fluency but also helped them to create more complex utterances. So far, the amount of these instances has not been quantified, but further analysis is expected to give a more complete picture of how imitation is used as learning strategy in meaning-orientated web-based activity.

3. Conclusion

This paper presented the preliminary results from a study of student interaction in text-based seminars in an academic online course in German. The aim was to investigate the students' focus on linguistic items in meaning-oriented activity. The results indicate that meaning-orientated activity does not automatically further a collaborative dialogue, which means that learners are supported by other learners or experts to negotiate linguistic problems. But the specific affordances in chat seem to enable the students to pay attention on language items in former utterances and to use them in their speech production. Text-based chat can therefore be seen as an useful tool to integrate new L2 elements into learner language and to develop fluency in L2 speech.

References

- [1] Lamy, M., & Hampel, R. (2007). *Online Communication in Language Learning and Teaching*. Palgrave: Macmillan.
- [2] Warschauer, M. (Ed.) (1996b). *Telecollaboration in foreign language learning: Proceedings of the Hawaii Symposium*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i. Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center.
- [3] Salaberry, R. (1996) 'A theoretical framework for the design of CMC pedagogical activities', *CALICO* 14: p. 5–36.
- [4] Emde, S., Schneider, J., Kötter, M. (2001). Technically speaking: Transforming language learning through virtual learning environment. *The Modern Language Journal*, 85/2, p. 210-225
- [5] Swain, M. (2000). The output hypothesis and beyond: mediating acquisition through collaborative dialogue. In: Lantolf, J. (eds.): *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [6] Blake, R.J. (2005). Bimodal CMC: The glue of language learning at a distance. *CALICO*: 22/3, p. 497-511.
- [7] Lee, L. (2004). Learners' perspectives on networked collaborative interaction with native speakers of Spanish in the US. In: *Language & Technology* 8 (1): p. 83-100.
- [8] Ortega, L. (2007). Meaningful L2 practice in foreign language classrooms: A cognitive-interactionist SLA perspective. In R. DeKeyser (Ed.), *Practicing in a second language: Perspectives from applied linguistics and cognitive psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press. p. 180–207.
- [9] Sauro, S., Smith, B. (2010). Investigating L2 Performance in Text Chat. *Applied Linguistics*: 31/4: p. 554-577.
- [10] Warschauer, M, Kern, R. (Eds) (2000). *Network-based Language Teaching: Concepts and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Varonis, E. M., Gass, S. (1985). Non-native/non-native conversations: A model for negotiation of meaning. *Applied Linguistics*, 6, p. 71–90.
- [12] Swain, M., Lapkin, S. (1998). Interaction and second language learning: Two adolescent French immersion students working together. *Modern Language Journal*, 82(3), p. 320-337.
- [13] Aguado Padilla, K. (2002). Imitation als Erwerbsstrategie. *Interaktive und kognitive Dimensionen des Fremdspracherwerbs*. Habilitationsschrift. Universität Bielefeld.
- [14] Henrici, G. (1995). *Spracherwerb durch Interaktion? Eine Einführung in die fremdspracherwerbsspezifische Diskursanalyse*. Hohengehren: Schneider Verlag.
- [15] Aguado Padilla, K. (2002), p. 177.
- [16] Atkinson, D. (2002). Toward a socio-cognitive approach to second language acquisition. *Modern Language Journal*. 86, p. 525-545.
- [17] Fredriksson C. (2006). Erwerbsphasen, Entwicklungssequenzen und Erwerbsreihenfolge. Zum Erwerb der deutschen Verbalmorphologie durch schwedische Schülerinnen und Schüler. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. *Studia Germanistica Upsaliensia* 50. P. 23.



- [18] Rumelhart, D., McClelland, J. (1986). On learning the past tenses of English verbs. Parallel Distributed Processing: Explorations in the Microstructure of Cognition. Rumelhart, McClelland, PDP Research Group. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. 2.
- [19] McLaughlin, L.; Rossman, T. McLeod, B. (1983). Second language learning: an information-processing perspective. Language Learning 33. S. p. 135-158.
- [20] Tarone, E. (1983). On the variability of interlanguage systems. Applied Linguistics 4: p. 143-163.
- [21] Tarone, E. (1988). Variation in Interlanguage. London: Edward Arnold.
- [22] Henrici, G. (1995), p. 25.
- [23] Swain, M. (2000), p. 107.