



Students' Engagement and Written Production in Project-Based Language Learning: The Potential of Using Learner-Generated Content

Christine Fredriksson¹, Marjan Asgari², Ferran Suñer³

1 University of Gothenborg, Sweden

2 Free University of Bozen, Italy

3 Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium

Abstract

The present paper presents an interventional study on the implementation of a Learning Scenario (LS) [1] that aimed at better integrating learner-generated and personalized content into the task and thus increasing students' behavioral (e.g., spent time, text length), affective (e.g., enjoyment, interest), and cognitive (e.g., syntactic elaborateness) engagement [2] [3]. The study was carried out with a group of N=23 students in their 6th year of L3 German at a Swedish upper secondary school. The students produced informative texts on their favorite feel-good places, enriched them with their own pictures and published their productions in the form of an integrated digital city tour using the tool Thinglink®. We documented the implementation of the LS through video-recorded sessions, students' productions, a questionnaire on students' perceptions, and a teacher interview. In this paper, we will discuss the benefits of integrating learner-generated content in terms of students' engagement and writing performance as well as the implications for the teaching practice.

Keywords: Engagement, L2 writing, Project-based language learning, Learning Scenario

1. Introduction

The introduction of the task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach has stressed the importance of developing language skills through tasks that reflect or are directly anchored in real life [4]. Accordingly, tasks should include communicative and meaningful situations based on learners' personal experiences, be linked to functional language use, and state a clearly defined outcome that might require learners mobilizing linguistic and non-linguistic resources [5] (p. 223), [6] (p. 124). Although TBLT has proven to be efficient in supporting learners' language development when compared to more teacher-centered approaches, e.g., [7], some authors have suggested that tasks based on teacher-generated content might not always sufficiently consider learners' intrinsic interests and real-life experiences, which in turn can lead to decreased motivation and disengagement during task performance [8]. In this context, the choice of the topics and the contents for the task are deemed essential for promoting meaningful language use and facilitating learners' engagement in discourse communities. Against this backdrop, the present paper reports on the implementation of a Learning Scenario (LS) that uses learner-generated content to increase students' cognitive (e.g., questioning and evaluating the quality of the ideas, searching for information), behavioral (e.g. getting actively involved in class activities, discussing ideas with peers), and affective (e.g., enjoyment, interest) engagement when writing on their favorite feel-good places. We also analyze the syntactic elaborateness of students' text productions (i.e., the sophistication of the syntactic patterns used) as an indicator of their cognitive engagement and text length as an indicator of their behavioral engagement.

2. Method

2.1 Research design and participants

In this project, 23 students of L3 German in Swedish upper secondary school, 14 girls (Pseudonym F) and 19 boys (Pseudonym M), participated in working with one of the Learning Scenarios (LS) developed in co-operation of teachers and researchers in the Erasmus+-project "E-LearnScene". The students had learnt German for an average of 5 years. They were informed about the project and had given their agreement to participate and being filmed when working with the LS. The teacher was handed out the materials and was given a tutorial on the technical aspects of the tool Thinglink®.



Although he was used to teaching learner-centred, he had no previous experience in implementing such LS.

2.2 Treatment and materials

A LS is characterized by a fixed structure of several phases and activities that guide the working process as a whole: introduction to the context and the task, planning of (language) activities and determining learners' roles, preparations, and performance of the task, and finally, presentation and evaluation of the final product. It also provides language resources concerning vocabulary and grammar.

According to the instructions of this specific LS, the learners visited and took pictures of their favorite places in their neighborhood, and they wrote descriptions which they posted on a virtual map created with the tool *Thinglink*® (see Figures 1 and 2).

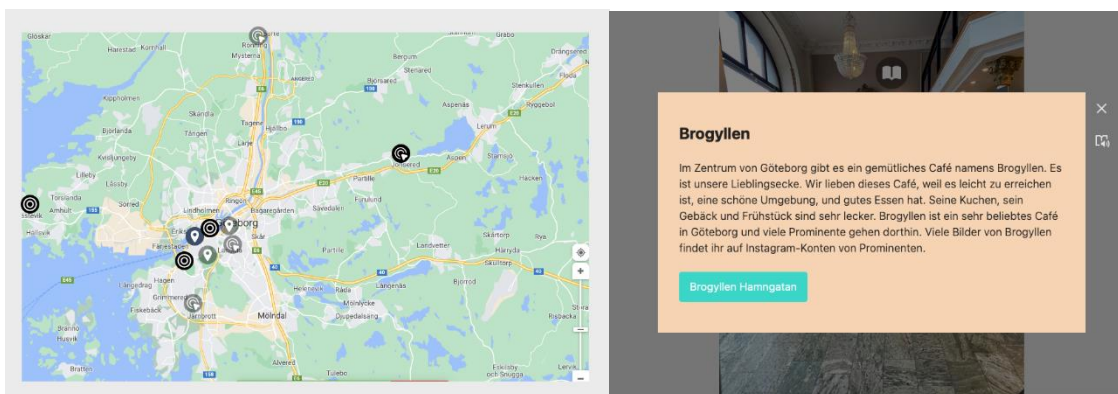


Figure 1. Overview of students' productions on the map with clickable symbols; Figure 2. Example of a description of a feel-good place.

The final product was a virtual tour to the students' favorite places, which was undertaken in whole class in the last lesson (see table 1). After the teacher's introduction to the LS in the first lesson, the students worked on the task during the three subsequent lessons, which included visiting the places outside of the school. As they were free to work individually or in small groups, the texts about the places were written groupwise (1 group with 5 students, 3 groups with 3 students) in pairs (3) or individually (3 students) in *Google Classroom*®. The teacher functioned as a back-up for learner questions and filmed the students when working with the activities in class. Before publishing the final product on *Thinglink*®, the teacher reviewed and corrected the first draft of students' texts. The time frame for the project and the activities in each lesson are listed in Table 1.

Timeframe		Activities
October 2021		
Week 1	Lesson 1	Introduction/ impulse/exchange/ Introduction to the tool (Thinglink) /Planning
	Lesson 2	
Week 2	Outside of the classroom Lesson 3	Visit of the places Text production in class
Week 3	Lesson 4 Lesson 5	Final text production and publication Virtual tour on Thinglink/discussion Online survey about attitudes

Table 1. Time frame and activities of the LS

2.1 Data collection procedure

For purpose of this study, in the last lesson, students voluntarily (n=16) completed a questionnaire with open questions on their perceptions and attitudes towards working with the LS. The questionnaire was conducted in *Google Forms*®. The video-recordings, the students' answers, the first drafts, and the corrected versions of the texts were made available to the researchers by the teacher. Each group



compiled their texts in a single word document, i.e., a total of 10 documents were analyzed. The teacher was also interviewed orally regarding the implementation of the LS.

The answers to the questionnaire were analyzed by using qualitative content analysis following the first level of the Documentary Method [9]. The analysis of the students' texts was conducted in *Atlas.ti* by using a coding scheme based on "Learner Profile Analysis" developed by Grieshaber [10] (p. 3). According to Grieshaber, there are seven levels of syntactic complexity determining learners' syntactic elaborateness in L2-German written production: Level 0 comprises fragmentary clauses; level 1 comprises main clauses with canonical word order (SVO); on level 2 are clauses with the infinite verb in final position (e.g., modal constructions); level 3 refers to clauses with SV inversion, and level 4 to subordinate clauses with the finite verb in final position; level 5 comprises embedded subordinate clauses, and level 7 complex noun phrases. By relating each clause of a text to one of the seven levels, the proportional distribution of low-level clauses and high-level clauses can be calculated so as to determine the overall learner's profile.

3. Results and discussion

In the following, we present the results from the analysis of students' text productions, the questionnaire, the teacher interview, and the video-recordings and discuss their implications regarding students' engagement in scenario-based language learning.

3.1 Text length and syntactic elaborateness

The results concerning text length as a measure for behavioral engagement, and elaborateness as a measure for cognitive engagement, are shown in table 2.

Group	Mean length of text	Level 0: fragmentary clauses	Level 1: Main clause	Level 2: Position Verb 2	Level 3: Inversion	Level 4: Position finite verb in subordinate clause	Level 5: Embedded subordinate clauses
M01	62	0	7	1	3	0	0
M02	113	0	13	1	0	3	0
F04	113	0	5	2	7	2	0
M03, M04	30	0	4	3	3	0	0
M05, M06	46	1	5	1	4	3	0
M08, M09	50	1	10	0	1	2	0
F01, F02, F03	68	1	12	1	9	4	0
F05, F06, F07	28,3	0	7	1	2	2	1
F08, F09, F10	35,3	1	4	1	4	4	0
F11, F12, F13, F14, M07	64,4	0	13	6	14	8	1
Total	55	4	80	17	44	28	2

Table 2. Results from the analysis of students' written productions.

The mean length of the texts, calculated by word account, is 55 words for all students. With a range from 28, 3 to 113 words, the text productions vary considerably in quantity between groups. However, since there was no specification of expected text length in the task, this result rather shows the different approaches of the students to presenting their favorite places, whereby pictures also served as an important means of expression.

As far as the syntactic elaborateness of the texts is concerned, the students mainly use low-level clauses (Level 0 to 2: 58%), which may relate to the text type used in the LS, i.e., descriptive texts. However, there is also a very strong tendency to use structures at higher levels (Level 3 to 5: 42%).

According to Grieshaber's [9] "Profile Analysis", five texts reached level 4, three texts reached profile level 3, two texts reached profile level 1. The range between profile level 1 and profile level 4 in second language acquisition shows the need for internal differentiation, which can be achieved through teaching methods such as the one underlying the LS implemented in our study.

What is striking here is that learners used structures that were made available to them as linguistic resources in the LS such as "Wenn..., dann..." (Engl. *If ..., then ...*), which is a conditional



subordinate clause followed by a main clause with SV inversion. Out of 28 subordinate clauses (level 4) 16 clauses follow this pattern, contributing to an increase of high-level structures of various scope and content. This result, concerning elaborateness, indicates that students dealt with the content of the LS, which also can be related to the students' cognitive engagement when working with the LS.

- *Wenn Sie die Tür öffnen*
- *Wenn Sie das nächste Mal Brogyllen besuchen*
- *Wenn ich eine Pause brauche*
- *wenn du willst*
- *wenn du Lust auf Eis hast*
- *Wenn ich manchmal müde bist,*
- *Wenn ich irritiert oder gestresst bin*
- *Wenn Sie Lust auf Kaffee oder etwas Gutes zu trinken haben*
- *Wenn Sie hungrig sind*
- *und wenn man in diese Restaurant gehen*
- *Wenn wir in der Cafe gehen*
- *wenn sie einen Tagesausflug zu de schönen Inseln unternehmen*
- *Wenn Sie hungrig auf Kaffee oder hungrig sind*
- *"Wenn ich traurig/müde bin,..."*
- *Wenn ich mich ärgere,*
- *Wenn ich schlechte Laune habe,*

4. Perceptions and attitudes

A written anonymous survey with a semi-open design asked how students perceived the learning scenario after they had completed it. The questions explored students' behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement. 92% of the students said they would like to do a learning scenario again during class in the future, 8% answered "maybe" to this question. They emphasized the free movement outside of school, which supported the learning process in German as a foreign language: "It was fun to do something new in class and to leave the classroom and work together with others. You could also learn new German words because we didn't work with the places before" (anonymous). As is clear from the questionnaires, most groups were able to benefit from collaboration during the writing process. In one group, individual responses to the topic at hand led to the creation of individual written products: "In my group we all had different places, which meant that we were all actually working for ourselves, so it didn't really become a group effort. If we had all chosen one or two places, we could have written together" (anonymous). However, the majority of the respondents stated that the task was appropriate (100%) and that it was easy to cope with the task through group work (86%). Overall, the questionnaires show a high behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement of the students. Also, the video-recordings of activities in class show the students' active engagement, and a deliberate use of German in planning and evaluation activities.

When asking the teacher about his impressions about working with the LS, the following issues were mentioned:

- The material could be used directly
- The learners immediately understood their task
- They used the language resources provides by the LS
- Collaboration worked well
- Text quality was beyond expectation in terms of length and elaborateness
- Students were engaged and motivated to present their places.

4. Outlook

When implementing TBLT approaches, teachers are expected to select relevant content and determine the focus of the task, ideally based on their relevance to students' personal experiences, interests, and specific needs [11] (p.166), see also [12]). However, the results from the present project suggest that including learner-generated content might be even more useful than teacher-generated content in terms of students' engagement, which is in line with findings from some previous studies [8]. For example, students appreciated having an out-of-class activity that included exploring place-based contexts and performing embodied interactions, undoubtedly a way to increase behavioral engagement and to "rewild" language learning (see [13]). Also, the analysis of the syntactic elaborateness in students' written productions showed students' tendency to use more sophisticated syntactic patterns, which is associated with an increased cognitive engagement. However, it should be



mentioned that the small number of students participating in the project and the relatively short duration of the intervention do not allow us to make strong claims. Future research should consider looking into longitudinal effects as well as controlling for individual variables, e.g., whether students with a higher proficiency level benefit more from learner-generated content compared to less proficient students who might be somewhat overwhelmed due to their lack of linguistic autonomy.

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