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SOCIAL MEDIA IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION – THE WAY BEYOND JUST LEARNING LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Higher education of language and intercultural learning nowadays requires new approaches to second language acquisition to increase both motivation and interaction in courses of ESP for university students. For several years co-operation with student-interactive video-conferences (VCs) between universities in the Czech Republic and Sweden has been carried out in an ongoing project. Communication prior to and after video-conferences is organized with the help of writing in Facebook and speaking using Skype. Gradually other means of communication than these two ones start to be introduced by the students to facilitate interaction. As the second language is best learned and taught through interaction [1], these individual contacts tend to be of increasing significance in order to prepare and to evaluate the matters discussed in the VCs since they do not give the full opportunity to all members to participate as much as they would like. In addition, the interaction in the VCs is highly dependent on group dynamics and thereby open up for maximal individual production when the students negotiate toward mutual comprehension of each other's message.

The authors provide detailed insights and analysis of the shift in the perspective of SLA theories based on the research carried out within the last decade and the hands on experience with social media used in intercultural communication. The potential of social media in language learning provides opportunities not only to integrate language skills but also to support the development of cultural awareness and critical literacy. These opportunities mirror contemporary and authentic uses of social media in the students' ways of communicating in their everyday lives. [2] The conclusions and results are based on data collected in ESP courses at both universities.

Keywords: Second language acquisition, language teaching, social media technology, intercultural communication, video-conferencing

1 INTRODUCTION

New approaches to second language acquisition are developed and needed to increase both motivation and interaction among language students of higher education. A number of different methods and approaches can be identified when studying language teaching in a historical perspective.[3] Often the individual teacher has used combinations of them to make the learning as efficient as possible in the various groups and thereby also for the individual learner. In this way a postmodern phase in language pedagogy is discerned, [4] whereby beliefs in the one and best method are questioned and instead alternative and multiple ways of planning for students' efficient language learning are put into practice.

Communicative language teaching is one of these approaches which has had a great influence on practices carried out in classrooms of English language teaching throughout the whole world. In addition and in a historical perspective, the grammar-translation, the direct and the audio-visual methods are regarded to have played important roles [5]. Currently, the view that communication is the central concept to have in mind when teaching English is still predominant. The idea that a second language is best learned and taught through communication and interaction is both widely spread and recognized [1].

At the same time the English language has strengthened its position as the means of communication in international and intercultural communication in the world. As a consequence, the English language is the most common first foreign language learnt at primary schools which in turn and furthermore will contribute to an increased use of English in writing and speaking when international partners cooperate in business, or in organizational and political contexts. The new role of English in the world with the growing interest in English as a lingua franca (EFL) puts new demands on the researcher with an interest in English as a foreign language (EFL) as well as on the teacher of EFL. There are needs for further research on issues related to the new varieties of English when the English language is no longer the property of the native speaker [6] and this leads to pedagogical implications when communication gradually more and more often takes place between non-native speakers of English [7].

Learning about cultures is a natural part when studying foreign languages. This approaches employed when learning cultural dimensions in foreign language learning have to be scrutinized and evaluated. It goes without saying that learning about the cultures where the foreign languages are spoken is one of the expected and important parts of the content in teaching materials of foreign languages. In a study on the learning about different cultures in foreign language textbooks and curricula in Sweden, the results show that the presentation of the different cultures in curricula and foreign language textbooks in the last 50 years are basically organized from three different perspectives and can be described and summarized in the following three ways: “a completed fact”, “a competence for the future” or “an encounter in an open landscape” [8]. But today there is a need for looking at cultural differences in a new way thanks to phenomena such as materials available online, intensified globalization, rapid virtual communication due to ICT and the impact of social media. This redefining of cultural differences has consequences for how intercultural communication is to be understood, defined and regarded in the light of the development of ELF in the world [9].

With the new view on intercultural communication, the significance of interaction and the priority often given to authentic communication in language learning, it is worth considering the potential of social media in language learning. Communication in social media tends to be directed to an international interlocutor or reader, is authentic, is there “for real” purposes, and automatically entails cultural components. Motivation plays a crucial role for successful learning and relevant encounters with interesting interaction of mutual interest in well-organized contexts with clear and useful visual support as could be the case with the help of social media definitely have a potential for developing strategies in language learning.

Net-based language learning in higher education (distance learning), with its platforms such as Moodle, has come to stay. In these contexts authentic interaction and meaningful communication, both written and spoken, are as in other learning contexts to be included. Here social media can play a role to connect lecturer-students or particularly students-students for meaningful and authentic communication. Previous studies show that tools of social media, as for instance Facebook (FB), are useful and work as successful complements in these language learning contexts [10] [2]. Beetham [11] declares that new technologies including social media influence the learning process when defining it as a system of personal and interpersonal activities deeply based in social and cultural context. When this context changes, the process of learning changes as well.[11] The social media has in the research of the present study been used mainly as a supportive means of communication and integration of the students in intercultural communication. Tess [12] provides the information in his study that the omnipresence of social media is best reflected at the universities. In higher education social media is used by tutors not only for assigning tasks but also as an effective tool for increasing the active learning process. Facebook itself seems to be a very effective tool in learning processes giving the students the opportunity to participate in chats, sharing study materials as well as comments and also in evaluations of the course itself [12]. So where Facebook works mainly as a means for organising chats and sharing information, Skype functions as a real tool for face-to-face communication.

2 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the present study is to investigate Swedish and Czech university students' perceptions and experiences of intercultural communication and second language acquisition. The context is courses of ESP with a part of the course being communication in student interactive video-conferences together with the use of social media. The research questions to be answered are the following:

- What are Swedish and Czech students' expectations, experiences and ideas of using video-conferences and social media as a tool in learning EFL?
- How can social media be used efficiently to facilitate foreign language learning at advanced levels?

The method used is an approach with triangularity and a case-study format with European university students in two different cultural and educational contexts.. The five tools used in the investigation are: (1) Observations by the researchers in the video-conferences, (2) Textual analysis of the Czech students' reflective diaries, (3) Analysis of the Swedish students' overall course evaluation, (4) and (5) Comparisons of the Czech and Swedish students' answers in the special research project questionnaire.

During a period of five weeks in the latter part of 2017 students at a Czech university (Pardubice) and students at a Swedish university (Uppsala) were engaged in communication in the framework of courses of ESP at the respective university. Four video-conferences were scheduled for the purpose of practicing communicative and intercultural skills. The students were organized in twelve teams of Czech and Swedish students (some ten students per team) in Facebook and initially instructed to start to communicate there. All instructions for video-conferences and the assignments were also placed there by the teachers in the courses. Two Swedish lecturers and four Czech lecturers were engaged in the project. During the five weeks of the project the students were encouraged to communicate with their international partner on an individual basis to plan and evaluate the common four assignments. In this communication the students were encouraged to use other means of communication such as Skype and Facetime. In order to arrange for relevant and meaningful communication between the Czech and Swedish students, assignments were to be prepared for the weekly video-conferences.

The research sample is in total represented by 138 students of the above mentioned universities. There are 66 Swedish students and 72 Czechs. All Swedes are students of the first semester of the Business bachelor program. Six of the total twelve Czech student's groups were students of Information Technologies, four of Business and Administration and two of Chemistry. Majority of the students were first year bachelor program students 43.6%. 25.7% of them were second year bachelor program students, 15.8% first year master program and 12.9 % third year bachelor program. As far as the gender is concerned the prevailing gender was male (66.3%) with 33.7% of female gender proportion. This slight disbalance in gender has been caused by the majority of male students in IT program at the Czech side. Almost half of the participating students age was between 19 - 21 (45.5 %), and slightly less (43.6%) were 22 - 25 of age. When it comes to sociodemographic parameters we can speak of almost homogenous group of young students of similar age and well balanced gender proportion and nationality. For 91.2% of them this was the first experience with using social media and video-conference for active language learning.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Students' experiences of the video-conferences

For a great number of the students (91%) this was their first experience of participating in a video-conference. After having participated in the four video-conferences a majority of the students evaluated the number of sessions as being "appropriate and relevant" (51.5%) or even that there could have been more sessions (22.8%). In addition, 74.3% of the students regarded the organization of the video-conferences as "clear, relevant and appropriate". The results showed similar tendencies for the assessment of the content of the video-conferences as 66.3% considered them "relevant and interesting". To sum up, the students had their first experiences of participating in these video-conferences and most of the students were quite pleased with both the organization and the

content. Evidently, this does not mean that there were no critical opinions. Some students, and particularly some Swedish students did not see the meaning of including video-conferences and international communication in their studies of ESP at university level.

Generally the students see the strongest point of the concept of the VCs being the intercultural communication and the fact that they meet new people and learn about a different culture in Europe. This opinion was the most common one which was expressed which is illustrated by the following two students' answers about the strongest point about the VCs in the questionnaire:

"Sharing cultural differences and being forced to communicate with people with other opinions than yourself." (1)

"Communicating with people from a different countries and understanding the value of really knowing the true facts about the other country and not just go on typical stereotypes." (2)

The Czech and Swedish students have different languages as well as cultural and educational backgrounds of studies of the English language from pre-university levels. It goes without saying that these students have experiences of different ways of teaching and learning English according to different priorities in curricula in their school systems. It is interesting to find that for these university students in the Czech Republic and in Sweden, most of them considered their knowledge of English to be sufficient for this kind of communication (84.2% agreed to this statement). At the same time the fact that there are great differences in language proficiency is stated as the weakest point about the VCs.

The following quotation from a reflection by a Swedish student with quite poor results illustrates the opinion and conclusion that many students with some difficulties shared after the VCs:

"The four video-conferences we had with the Czech students were very interesting and I learnt a lot, but it was also a challenge. It was difficult to interact with people from another culture and be able to speak English and I do not find it so easy to express myself in the language. I think it went very well and that we understood each other. I discovered that Sweden and the Czech Republic are very different as people and in the society." (3)

3.2 Students' experiences of communicating in social media

As planned in the project, communication was to take place between the participants on an individual basis before and after the video-conferences in social media. The students could choose thus how this communication was to take place when they were to discuss the tasks in the assignments of the VCs. The results clearly show that three ways of communicating were used: Skype video-chat (32%), Facebook video-chat (29%) and Facebook chat (29%). Since the students were already engaged and organized in Facebook groups it may be expected that one options in Facebook is to be their first choice. At the same time, Skype was a frequently used alternative by these students in order to communicate efficiently internationally. What is more, no guidelines or instructions in any way were provided for this interactive and spoken communication. Nevertheless the students took the initiative and completed their tasks in cooperation and in English as a lingua franca. Additionally, the students showed in their responses that in various ways the students are used to communicating in Skype and Facebook.

The reasons for the students' using Facebook chat or video-chat are, as stated above, that they were already engaged and organized in a Facebook context and are illustrated by the following quotations from the questionnaire:

"We were already friends on facebook so we just formed a group and talked there." (4)

" It was the easiest and fastest way and we already had had a Facebook common group." (5)

Even though the opportunity of spoken interaction was available, some students preferred to use the chat function and then to write in their communication and there were two reasons stated which the following quotations show:

"I prefer writting than speaking and I think it is the easiest way." (6)

"...videochatted trough Facebook first but it was more comfortable just chatting since you can ask and answer at any time." (7)

The first reason is that it was easier to write than to speak and the second reason is that communicating in chats is more convenient since there does not have to be decided meeting times for the communication.

This communication in Facebook and/or Skype took place during a period of five weeks and the students were then in contact five times (14%), four times (21%), three times (33%) or only once or twice (19%). (The remaining 13% of the students were not sure how many times they were in contact.) In the students' answers to the question when the communication took place two words can be identified, namely *randomly* and *regularly*. The quotation (5) below illustrates the 8 instances of the toal 96 answers that include the word *regularly* and the quotation (6) provides an example of an answer of the 9 instances that give a reason for deciding the time to meet and then include the word *randomly* in the answer. Many answers contain words such as *usually* and *every ...* which indicate that the meetings were planned and decided in advance.

"Unfourtunately, regularly every Tuesday evening before the VC." (8)

"Randomly when it suited everyone in our group." (9)

The communication with Skype and Facebook was mostly carried out at home (76 out of the 90 answers) and otherwise at university or in a few cases at a bar. The students spent approximately the same time in these interactions on the tasks and topics of the assignments as off the the tasks and topics and thus discussed other everyday matters.

A clear majority of the students were pleased with the two tools used, Facebook and/or Skype, for the partner communication in an international context. The arguments are that Facebook is widely spread and known all over the world so it is easy to refer to it and use it. Evidently the students also state that their choice depends on the circumstances but on the whole Skype is a first choice when speaking and Facebook messenger is preferred for writing or chatting. The significance of seeing one another when speaking in order to have effective communication is emphasized by several students.

3.3 The use of video-conferences and social media when learning English as a foreign language

The purposes of the interactive communication in video-conferences and in social media were to make the students aware of intercultural matters and to make them practice oral communication with interlocutors in EFL and in an authentic contexts. At the same time, the idea was to increase their motivation for continued learning of English at advanced levels after many years of classroom instruction at school by including an authentic and applied use of language as a part in the course outline. By including tools such as group video-conferences and individual spoken communication in social media in the learning process there is an opportunity to plan for an emphasis on fluency and interaction in speaking besides the more common priorities at advanced levels, namely accuracy and formality in writing.

The individual conversations in social media provided possibilities for some of the students to be active in conversations which they did not experience in other contexts which is illustrated in the statements below by two students.

"I have learnt more in the private videos chats because it was easier to communicate and talk more" (10)

"In private video chats because we were speaking more time and more intense."(11)

Many students concluded that they had the experience that they did not learn much more English in terms of vocabulary or structures than they actually knew before but rather that they just practiced talking and learnt about the culture of another country which can be seen in the following two statements when they were asked about the VCs and social media from the language point of view:

"Maybe from the aspect of "small talk". (12)

"I've learnt about Czech Republic but not increased my English at all!" (13)

Based on the observations at the VCs and the students' descriptions of their communication in Facebook and Skype, it is clear that the cultural learning that took place in the Czech-Swedish communication could be described in terms of "an open landscape" where individual interlocutors meet and share their experiences with the use of ELF. Language-wise, the focus was on the ability to adapt one's language to a speaker with another profile of language proficiency and a different background when it comes to learning EFL as is formulated by two student in their answers about the strongest point of the VCs in a question of the questionnaire in the following way:

"You get to talk English with people who don't speak your own language, so you have to figure out how to get the message across." (14) "learning how to adapt your language" (15)

These meetings in social media and VCs gave the students the opportunity to practice functions such as taking initiatives in communication, self-repair when in difficulties and reformulating messages in order to meet the other at an understandable level and to avoid misunderstandings. In this way they developed their spoken interlanguage which is something a few of them do regularly and are very used to which can be seen in this student's account in the answer to the questionnaire:

"To be honest, there was not much for me to learn, since I already know how to speak properly, because I have a lot of experience using VOIP in video games with british people and now in my current job, I talk with my american supervisors daily. My point is, that I spoke with native english speakers before, so talking to swedes, does not really improve my skill, however it was still an interesting experience." (16)

4. CONCLUSIONS

The students are well-acquainted with communicative tools such as Skype and Facebook video-chats. Therefore it is important that language learning processes are currently updated and include such instruments in order to keep up with contemporary means of communication and at the same time use these means for authentic communication in English in students' acquisition of EFL.

When spoken communication in EFL is to be learnt, quite a few students can have the idea that it is to be carried out only with native speakers of English in order to be a successful part of their learning process. It is then of significance to make students aware that in their future careers with international communication in English, for instance in Europe, most of their encounters will probably be with interlocutors who do not have English as L1 and they will thus experience communication in ELF. In these contexts intercultural awareness may be of more importance than language accuracy. It may be a challenge for lecturers in higher education to be able to include these aspects of language learning in their syllabus. When plans are carried out for students' communication in VCs and social media, it is valuable to emphasize that the focus will be on intercultural matters, international authentic communication and the strategies that the speaker will need to use in order to be successful in getting the message across.

When students learn EFL at advanced levels the acquisition of structures and vocabulary is concrete and progress is clearly measurable whereas other skills such as interactive communication and intercultural awareness are harder to identify. For many students, and particularly the ones with high ambitions, more traditional instruction with lectures on grammatical accuracy and written exams are preferred to situational and communicative aspects of language use such as interaction, turn-taking, communication styles, pronunciation skills and intercultural awareness. Nevertheless these skills are important in the everyday use of English and it is therefore time to find ways of providing relevant contexts and adequate ways of practicing these skills so that the students find them both interesting and useful for their future careers.

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