

Developing Interpersonal Communication Skills in an Online Environment

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Pre-Research Discussion

As a foreign language teacher at a school with a 1:1 laptop program, I am constantly trying to figure out how to implement technology in a manner that supports the three modes of communication (interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational). My students are very capable of being consumers of language (interpretive listening and reading) and it is very simple for me to direct them to authentic language sources such as websites, podcasts, news clips, and blogs. It is also quite easy to find a variety of ways for my students to be producers of language (presentational speaking and writing), as my students are well versed at using iMovie, recording with Audacity, and posting on Padlet.com. Despite my perceived successes in developing my students' interpretive and presentational skills, the challenge still remains in how to use technology to develop students' interpersonal communication skills.

Interpersonal communication is commonly explained in the language teacher community as the “negotiation of meaning” between individuals. In addition to face-to-face conversations, this could also be an exchange of written correspondences such as letters, emails, or even threaded forum discussions. This requires students to be both consumers and producers of language; they must be able to read and write as well as listen and speak synchronously and spontaneously. This is a skill that is commonly developed through interaction with the classroom teacher or through activities managed and overseen by a classroom teacher. The classroom teacher — an “expert” with advanced language and pedagogical skills — is able to actively and spontaneously negotiate meaning by interpreting the students' language and providing logical, comprehensible language in response. The classroom teacher is the cornerstone to the development of interpersonal communications skills.

As almost all other teachers will say, my favorite part of my job is working and interacting with my students. I enjoy communicating with them in German and helping them negotiate their way through a conversation to achieve a goal — effective communication. The development of interpersonal communication skills is one of the few times where I abandon technology and teach my students in an “old fashioned” but effective manner. I often wonder how this skill fits into a 1:1 learning environment. One of the district’s mantras is that “time is the variable and learning is the constant.” This means our students should all be able to learn at their own pace and our 1:1 program is the tool that will make this possible. One of the ideas that has been discussed in our high school is going to a 4-day school week with one day of virtual learning. This means that I will need to figure out how to make the most of the virtual day and still ensure that my students are continuing to develop their language skills in my absence. My question is: How do I develop my students’ interpersonal communication skills in German via online / distance learning?

Post-Research Discussion

This research was quite interesting and will prove itself useful as I continue to develop my online teaching skills. I have a better idea of how I can develop my students’ interpersonal communication skills in an online setting. It is probably most important for me to focus my efforts on task development. Almost all of the articles referenced some form of task-based learning. Additionally, the format in which students are engaged — written, spoken, synchronous, asynchronous — have different advantages and disadvantages and will result in different outcomes. Students who are engaged in asynchronous tasks will likely have more accurate use of language, but it is harder to achieve consistent engagement. On the other hand,

students who are engaged in synchronous tasks will have less accurate use of the language, but may communicate with better content. Spoken tasks may also result in less accurate use of the language, but may also be more sustained than written tasks. Regardless of whether the tasks are synchronous, asynchronous, written, or spoken, the instructor is still the cornerstone to success in online interpersonal communication.

In hindsight, I think my concern actually was not about how to develop my students' interpersonal communication in an online setting, but rather how to teach without a teacher. I'm only in the beginning stages of learning how to teach in a blended environment; this is my first year teaching at a 1:1 school. When I've engaged my students in online interpersonal activities, they've been responding to a prompt and then commenting on each other's responses. I wanted to remove myself from the equation and have the students interact with each other. I would observe and look over their responses and make mental notes, but I never really participated in the interactions. Simply put, I haven't been teaching. The instructor, not the technology, plays the most important role in developing students' interpersonal skills in an online course.

It is important for me, the instructor, to be an active member of the online component of my course. The instructor is responsible for modeling, mediating, and motivating students as they engage in interpersonal communication. The same methodology I employ in my classroom instruction can and should be used in an online setting. However, the research has suggested that an online component tends to limit the unstructured interaction found in a face-to-face environment. I wonder, though, if this would still occur in a blended environment where the students are more familiar with the instructor and each other. I look forward to improving my

online presence in my blended courses and better engaging my students in the interpersonal communication that I model in my face-to-face classes.

Annotated Bibliography

Arslanyilmaz, A. (2012). An online task-based language learning environment: Is it better for advanced- or intermediate-level second language learners? *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology - TOJET*, 11(1), 20–35. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ976564.pdf>

This article explores the extent to which participants developed their interpersonal writing skills when communicating synchronously in homogenous pairings participating in a task-based learning scenario. The participants were given computer-based activities that required them to interact with each other either via an online chat tool. The communicative tasks were both “split-information tasks” (p. 22), in which person A and person B have different information they must exchange, and through “shared information tasks” (p. 22), in which person A and person B have the same information to work with while working on task completion. The study found that students in the intermediate-level homogenous pairs “engaged in more negotiated interaction than students at advanced-level language proficiency” (p. 31). However, the students in the advanced-level pairs appeared to “enhance their language production in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity” (p. 32). This means that both groups were able to demonstrate improvement through “online task-based language learning environments” (p. 32).

I find the article to be a good source of information for establishing learning outcomes for intermediate- and advanced-level students who are participating in an online course. The article is very well researched and cites many contemporary resources, as well as several seminal studies that reference significant findings in the study of second language acquisition theory. In the conclusion, the researcher compares and contrasts the findings of this study with a landmark study from 1986. In this comparison, the researcher finds some common ground, but also cites significant differences between the face-to-face study from 1986 and this study in which participants communicated through an online chat tool. I believe this contrast helps make the findings significant in the digital age; it demonstrates the positive influence that technology has on learning.

This article has some benefit to me as a high school language teacher. Very rarely do high school students reach advanced-level skills, but they do spend a lot of their time at the intermediate level. My research question is about developing interpersonal communication skills in an online setting, and this article suggests that by engaging my students in both split-information tasks and shared information tasks, my intermediate-level students will indeed engage in the negotiated exchange of information. This means that the intermediate-level students, generally students their third or fourth year of study, will benefit from the exchange of comprehensible input, one of the cornerstones of interpersonal communication (p. 32).

Heins, B., Duensing, A., Stickler, U., & Batstone, C. (2007). Spoken interaction in online and face-to-face language tutorials. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 20(3), 279–295.
<http://doi.org/10.1080/09588220701489440>

This article discusses a study in which researchers compared students' spoken interaction in a face-to-face (f2f) setting with the spoken interaction in an online audio and screencasting setting using Lyceum, "an audio graphic conferencing environment" (p. 280). Each lesson is referred to as a tutorial, meant to complement a German distance language course called *Rundblick*. The research monitored the tutor-student, tutor-to-student, and student-student communication in both f2f and online audio settings. There was "slightly more student-to-student talk online than in the f2f tutorial" (p. 286); however, "tutor talk is dominant in online tutorial whereas there is a balance between tutor and student talk in the f2f environment" (p. 290). The researchers also discuss the quality of the interaction, suggesting that the f2f environment leads to more spontaneous interaction and more "unstructured talk" (p. 292) than in the online setting where there was a "turn-taking netiquette" (p. 291). The conclusion was that "spoken interaction is successfully taking place in both the online and f2f learning environment" (p. 292).

As with the previous article, this article also appears to be very well researched. There is thorough research in the field of second language acquisition theory (SLA) and the role of interaction in SLA; the researchers cite Krashen's input hypothesis and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. These theories were addressed indirectly in my pre-research

discussion and my concerns for providing comprehensible input and engaging students in the interaction. The research accounts for these theories and the role they play in computer-mediated communication (CMC). The research presents the findings objectively, leaving the reader to decide the value of the two environments, online and face-to-face.

My research topic was chosen based on my concern for how interpersonal communication should take place in an online environment, given how important the teacher's role is in promoting this interaction in a face-to-face setting. This research did not remove the teacher from the equation in an online setting. Instead, this research indicates that when a teacher (or tutor in this case) is involved, the teacher can actually be "dominant" (p. 290) in the online discussions. When it comes to the use of the second language (L2), there is a "higher ratio of L2 input/output by students" (p. 292) in an online environment. This suggests that an online course would better be able to maintain an immersion setting, but does so at the cost of impromptu and unstructured communication, which is a valuable component in a language classroom (p. 293). I like that I would be able to do better in maintaining a German-only setting, but I value my unstructured communication with my students and do not feel that an online environment would be to their benefit, based on the information from this article.

Hew, K. F., & Cheung, W. S. (2012). Students' use of asynchronous voice discussion in a blended-learning environment: A study of two undergraduate classes. *Electronic Journal of E-Learning*, 10(4), 360–367. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ986637.pdf>

In this article, the researchers discuss the use of software called Wimba Voice Board to facilitate an asynchronous voice discussion in a blended-learning environment. The researchers cited the social component involved in learning and teaching and the value of interaction (both student-student and student-teacher) as reasons for researching this topic. Additionally, the researchers cited students' lack of participation in online message board and questioned if a "possible reason for this lack of student participation could be the medium by which the online discussion is conducted" (p. 361). The students in the research were speakers of English as a second language and the researchers believed the asynchronous nature of the project would allow students to prepare before posting and that the voice component would add verbal cues that would aid comprehension (p. 362). They also anticipated disadvantages such as student esteem about their voices, the inability to edit a recording, and the fact that one cannot simply skim a recording (p. 362). When compared to students who were engaged in written interaction, they concluded that there "was no significant difference in the students' degree of participation" (p. 363), but "the online discussion is more sustained in the voice discussion group" (p. 364). This could suggest that the quality of the discussion increased even though the quantity of the discussion remained unchanged.

This article appears to be very well researched and is also very well written. The size of the experiment, however, makes me wonder if the data presented are reliable. The researchers themselves acknowledge that the sample (42 participants) should be "interpreted with caution" (p. 365). The study was conducted in Singapore and many of the students were

doing voice recordings for the first time in their lives (p. 365). Somebody who is unfamiliar with the sound of his or her own voice may be more reluctant to participate in a recorded voice discussion. If this research were redone with students who are familiar with voice recordings, the results could be notably different.

This article addresses asynchronous voice discussions, something I have never been able to do with my classes. Any interpersonal communication done online by my students has always been asynchronous writing via forums or synchronous writing via chat rooms or backchannels. I like how spoken interactions make students focus more on the content and communication than grammatical accuracy and I think there is room for an activity like this in my courses. I do think the concerns mentioned in the research — insecurity, the inability to edit, and inability to skim — would also be concerns for my students (p. 364). But unlike the research participants, my students are quite familiar with voice recordings and I think that an online asynchronous voice discussion would increase both the amount of participation and the degree to which the conversation is sustained and advanced. As my school pilots Schoology next year, I hope to find a way to add an activity like this to my online component.

Murphy, E. (2009). Online synchronous communication in the second-language classroom.

Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology, 35(3), 10–22. Retrieved from

<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ896571.pdf>

This article is about a study conducted with sixth grade students in Canada who were learning French as a second language. The researchers used observations, reflections, and interviews to assess students' "textual, audio, and visual interactions within the online synchronous environment" (p. 12). The researchers found that the peer-to-peer interaction online developed independence because the teachers were not directly involved and the students were forced to figure out how to communicate with each other (p. 15). The absence of the teacher during the peer-to-peer activities made the communication more authentic and the anonymity (students interacted with peers in different schools) lowered students' affective filter (the "fear" that makes students hesitant to participate in a foreign language class) (p.15). The challenges addressed by the researchers involved teacher-related concerns such as classroom management and preparation and technology-related concerns such as sound quality and connectivity. The researchers concluded that the online synchronous communication promotes "independence and student-centeredness" and improves "motivation, confidence, and self-esteem" (p. 19). They also confirmed "there were no measures taken of linguistic gains beyond anecdotal reports from teachers and students" (p. 19).

This article does a good job at providing strategies for increasing student engagement and lowering students' affective filter. The research, however, is based on the collection of qualitative data — observations, reflections, and interviews — and does not include any quantitative data. Qualitative data could be organized and interpreted differently by

different researchers. This makes it difficult to determine if the results of this research would be achieved by another researcher conducting an identical experiment.

I find it promising to hear that the students responded positively to the online synchronous discussions. It is important that the students enjoy the activities they are doing and, as the researchers also concluded, students will respond more actively when they are enjoying the activities. The researchers also indicated that anonymity was an important factor; the students were able to take risks because there was no fear of a social consequence. This would not apply to my students who would find themselves in a blended class. This article makes me think of how I can create online interpersonal activities that the students would enjoy (and therefore be more likely to participate in). I do not believe, however, that this article provides me with any strategies that I can employ to improve my students' interpersonal communication skills.

Yamada, M. (2009). The role of social presence in learner-centered communicative language learning using synchronous computer-mediated communication: Experimental study. *Computers & Education*, 52(4), 820–833. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2008.12.007>

In this study, participants (Japanese students learning English) engaged in four different types of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC): videoconferencing with an image and voice, audioconferencing with a voice but no image, text chat with an image but no voice, and plain text chat with neither an image nor voice. As it pertains to second

language acquisition (SLA), “CMC is effective in communicative language learning, because it promotes social interaction such as negotiation of meaning between learners, and facilitates comprehensive input and output” (p. 821). Building a social community in an online setting is believed to increase interaction between the participants and SCMC may be effective in increasing this social interaction between course participants (p. 822). The researchers found that “text chat can enhance learners’ consciousness of grammatical accuracy as compared to videoconferencing and audioconferencing” (p. 830). The participants are able to review and edit their language as they produce it and before other participants are able to see it. The audioconferencing promoted natural communication and the videoconferencing appeared to promote more frequent responses (p. 830), but at the expense of grammatical accuracy (p. 831). The qualitative and quantitative data lead the researchers to believe that the “lack of social cues encourages learners to be conscious of the accurate transfer of meaning during communication in text chat” (p. 831). They were able to conclude that the instructor’s choice of communication tool (audio, audiovisual, text) influences the participants’ communication skills, each with its own advantages and disadvantages when compared to each other (p. 830).

This article is very thoroughly researched and very well written. It makes reference to seminal research in the area of SLA and references other sources that have appeared in the other articles I have read. Additionally, the researchers collected both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data is presented with statistical information that give the findings and added level of credibility. Within the domain of interpersonal communication,

the study takes into consideration both written and spoken interpersonal language and it provides comparative data for both forms. This article comes across as very credible.

I find this article the most useful of the articles I read. It is the most relevant article in terms of SLA theory as it pertains to online interpersonal communication. My research question was about how to develop my students' skills in interpersonal communication via an online course. This article tells me that the format in which I chose to engage my students will affect the results. If I want my students to focus on grammatical accuracy, then I should have them correspond in writing. If I want my students to focus on communicative skills and content, then it would be best to have them interact via videoconferencing.

Additionally, while the article does not address asynchronous interpersonal communication, it does make a good case for SCMC.

York, C. S., & Richardson, J. C. (2012). Interpersonal interaction in online learning: Experienced online instructors' perceptions of influencing factors. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 16(4), 83–98. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ982684.pdf>

This article summarizes the results of a series of six interviews that the researchers conducted with online instructors about how they establish an interactive learning environment in their online courses. The interviews yielded strategies that the online instructors use and find successful based on their personal experiences in developing effective interaction. "Effective interaction is not necessarily more interaction; rather, it is

interaction resulting in learners thinking in new and more profound ways” (p. 84). The interviews yielded three common themes pertaining to interpersonal interaction: course structure, feedback, and facilitating discourse (p. 86). Structure refers to how the instructor organizes the course, the assignments, the sense of community, and the time provided for assignments (p. 87). Effective feedback does not only include the content of the feedback, but also the timeliness in which it is delivered and the medium in which it is delivered (audio, typed, handwritten, etc) (p. 88). Lastly, effective discourse used by the facilitator includes the frequency and immediacy of instructor interaction, the extent to which the instructor participates in the interactions, and personalization such as emoticons and personal anecdotes (p. 89). The researchers do not provide an analysis which supports any specific methodology as being more effective than another.

The article appears to be well researched and well written. The review of literature discussed several themes and trends that were found in other research articles, but does not appear to make many connection to seminal studies. The researchers gathered information solely from interviews about instructors’ perceptions. This means that the findings of this study could change significantly given a different population. All of the interviewees had a doctorate degree and ranged from five to sixteen years of online teaching experience. Additionally, all of the participants were chosen by the researchers — it was not a random population. This would suggest that the population may not be objective.

Despite my critical thoughts on the study sample, I find the information in the article useful. I like how the article essentially identifies human characteristics of teaching — personal interaction, interest in students, and enthusiasm for teaching — and lists them as successful strategies for engaging students in interpersonal communication. The article also alludes to the value of well-designed tasks. Each of the instructors interviewed had a task that had a specific function and a specific approach to complete it. Sometimes the approach (e.g. changing the subject line when responding to a post) seemed to add a tedious step to the process, but it served a greater function in the task (e.g. making the student focus his or her reply). I don't think this article has necessarily given me any strategies that will drastically change how I teach online, but it does give me hope that online work can still have a personal touch and can still promote interaction between and among my students.