Combining online and hybrid teaching environments in German courses

Lucrecia Keim

Abstract. In this article, we briefly offer the main characteristics of a hybrid design for Face-to-Face (FtF) and online German courses in the degree of Translation and Interpreting that combines the textbook with activities moderated with technology. We particularly focus on the activities designed for practicing oral production at level A2.2., where we have included self-evaluation as a component in such a way that each activity is linked to a questionnaire of a reflective nature that enables the teacher to offer feedback on the activity carried out. FtF and online students have been sharing the same classroom and interacting with each other. Students’ perception of the classroom design is positive according to the results of the submitted questionnaire. They highly value the structure of the Moodle classroom, the design of the tasks and the possibility to interact with students of the other modality, respectively. However, the analysis of the self-evaluations of oral activities shows unequal awareness of the potential significance of multimodality as well as a low conscious use of interactional strategies.

Keywords: course design, oral tasks, German as a second foreign language.

1. Introduction

In 2008 the Faculty of Translation and Interpretation at the University of Vic started offering the degree in Translation and Interpreting not only for FtF students but also for online students. German is offered in this degree as a second foreign language and most students begin with no previous knowledge of the language. They are expected to achieve a B1 level after having been exposed to 30 ECTS tuition. The virtual classrooms for online students were designed in a Moodle environment, taking into account the characteristics of online learning and teaching, but following

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the textbook designed for FtF teaching, *Schritte international* (Hilpert et al., 2006; Niebisch et al., 2006). When we began offering the online modality, each group worked in a separate virtual classroom. However, we have been progressively adapting to a hybrid pedagogic design, both with regard to the materials as well as the teaching itself that is briefly presented in this paper.

2. **Teaching concept and methodology**

In the design of the online courses the following points were considered:

- Comparing students’ needs and our teaching goals with the material presented in the chosen students textbook.
- Selecting and ordering the sequence of activities for the students.
- Seeking alternatives for those activities of the textbook that were designed exclusively for FtF teaching and were significant for learning needs.
- Formulating the work guidelines so that they help students, establishing a bridge between the textbook and the Moodle virtual classroom and choosing the digital tool that best suits the communicative goal or the learning need.

Thanks to the kind collaboration of Hueber publishing house, we set up in a pilot version the virtual classroom complementing the textbook with webpages in which we inserted the textbook audios and images of the textbook aiming to reinforce the orientation of the students. Other learning resources (external links, internal webpages, short videos or PDFs) and our work guidelines monitor students in a way which is coherent with the teaching goals and learning needs (*Figure 1*).

As for the activities and tasks (*Figure 2*), we introduced

- Moodle quizzes linked to listening or reading skills or practice of language structures;
- written tasks that can respond to different genres and are mostly individual tasks. Some of them can be adapted to a wiki or a blog format;
- interactive written activities (forum or chat);
- interactive oral activities (asynchronous and synchronous).
Figure 1. Work guidelines in the virtual classroom of German 1

Figure 2. Students working through the Videochat
The result is that FtF as well as online students work following Solares (2014) in a technology mediated textbook-bound context. One of the lessons we have learned is that redundancy in this case plays in our favor and offers supplementary learning opportunities. For instance, forum activities can begin in the FtF classroom and can be continued at home by both FtF and online students. This is one way to trigger and guide the forum.

2.1. Oral production activities

The interactive asynchronous and synchronous activities introduced in the German level 4 course (approx. A2.2.) aim to address different levels of complexity of language, of the task and of the technology. In order to promote, as far as possible, focusing on both the content as well as the form and to motivate students to observe their production and to evaluate their progress, the guidelines and the assessment of each activity were linked to the pre-structured reflective questions of a Moodle quiz (Figure 3).

As a pilot project, with this group of students we joined the platform of the Speaks Apps Project (EU-Project, http://www.speakapps.eu/es/) and had access to the tools Langblog (forum + Video) and Videochat (web conference system).

At the beginning of the course the teacher published in the virtual classroom the schedule for all the activities along with an explanation of the aims and the technical aspects (Table 1).
Table 1. Tasks schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main goal</th>
<th>Task type</th>
<th>Social form</th>
<th>Tool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introducing yourself</td>
<td>Talking about oneself (Video monologue and reaction to others)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Langblog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning an excursion</td>
<td>Reaching a consensus</td>
<td>Pairs chosen by students</td>
<td>Videochat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describing a beloved object</td>
<td>Talking about oneself (Video monologue and reaction to others)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Langblog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apologizing to a friend</td>
<td>Role-play</td>
<td>Pairs chosen by students</td>
<td>Videochat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning a journey</td>
<td>Reaching a consensus</td>
<td>Trios chosen by the teacher</td>
<td>Videochat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Results and discussion

In the questionnaire submitted by 85% (N=32) of all German students, they agreed (4) or strongly agreed (5) on a 1-5 points Likert Scale with the following items that refer to the course’s design (see Table 2).

Table 2. Items that refer to the course’s design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I appreciate the boundedness between the text book and the Moodle classroom.</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I appreciate the links to resources or webpages with additional explanations inserted in the Moodle classroom.</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I appreciate the quiz format in order to practice the language structures and to get feedback.</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider the design of the forum tasks appropriate.</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider the design of the written production tasks appropriate.</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider the design of the oral production tasks appropriate.</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider that when teachers correct me with correction symbols, this fosters my learning process.</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider the formative assessment procedures implemented during the course support my learning process.</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would appreciate the introduction of learning games.</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As for the oral activities in the German level 4 course, we can say that they were well accepted by students if we ignore the complaining about technical inconveniences.
However, FtF students didn’t deliver the questionnaires in a consistent way. This could be related to the fact that these students had the possibility to comment on the recordings in the FtF-classroom.

In their self-evaluations students value positively the possibility of hearing and analyzing their outputs as well as the possibility of working with students of the other modality. Some students mention explicitly that the repetition of tasks reduced the self-perception of anxiety.

In their comments they focus more on the speaker role than on the hearer role. Reflections of lower-level students are more superficial than those of higher-level students, who are able to focus also on form and detect errors. Comments on negotiations of meaning are rare, due in part to the task type. One lesson learnt is the necessity of introducing more task type varieties.

Moreover, some students experienced in a negative way the fact of having to search for new words they needed in the online dictionary during interaction. As a matter of fact, they don’t activate interaction strategies that would allow them, for instance, to apologize for a short interruption and so looking up for words in the dictionary results in a long silence, which stops interaction. In other cases, low-level students seem to be overloaded by the fact of having to attend to the interaction on the screen and looking up expressions in the book simultaneously.

4. Conclusions

Combining a hybrid and an online teaching environment in a technology mediated textbook-bound context has turned out to offer interesting and motivating learning potential for students. In short, lessons learnt are that the design should be not too open but not too restrictive as well as not too optional but not too compulsory. Tools used should be aligned with learning needs as well as communicative goals. Finally, there is still a way to go in order to motivate students to profit from the full potential of multimodality (Lamy & Flewitt, 2011).

References

