

Reflective practice

Using Facebook to improve L2 German students' socio-pragmatic skills

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Abstract

This study explores ways of using Facebook as a tool to improve the pragmatic competence of students of German as a foreign language in Japan. Nine students of a textbook-based German class (CFER level A2) voluntarily participated in this blended learning approach, in which they were assigned weekly online tasks aimed at eliciting speech acts commonly used in online interaction. The tasks required the students write posts concerning their daily routines onto the timeline of a dedicated Facebook Group page and to comment on each other's posts. In order to find out what difficulties learners face when producing certain speech acts, the students' posts and comments were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively by determining the frequency, accuracy, and appropriateness of speech acts performed per task. The results suggest that the tasks developed seemed to be appropriate for eliciting a large number of speech acts, while types, frequency, and appropriateness of the speech acts produced varied significantly. As was revealed, difficulties in task performance did not only stem from a lack of L2 (socio-pragmatic) knowledge, but also from inexperience in the use of the network itself. For task performance, students strongly relied on the expressions provided in pre-task activities. As the results of a post-course students' survey indicate, most students agreed that using Social Networking Sites (SNS) is an appropriate tool for language learning, and that they were able to increase their knowledge and use of German speech acts significantly during this course. However, only those students who frequently used SNS in their everyday lives seemed to be able to reap the full benefits of the project.

Keywords: Facebook, Social Networking Sites, pragmatic competence, speech acts, blended learning, collaborative learning.

1. Introduction

This paper is based on the commonly held assumption that Japanese L2 learners lack pragmatic competence in German as a foreign (GFL) language as well as opportunities for authentic L2 interaction (Harting, 2006 and 2008). In order to enable students to tap into online and offline German resources through SNS (Social Networking Sites) and at the same time to provide opportunities to use the L2 outside the classroom, the author introduced a Facebook-project in a third-year textbook-based GFL class, which addresses the following research questions:

1. How do GFL students in Japan respond to using Facebook for learning German?
2. How should Facebook tasks be designed to facilitate the acquisition of speech acts?

3. Is Facebook an appropriate tool to improve GFL students' socio-pragmatic competence?

The analysis is based on the textual communication of nine Japanese university learners of German, adjudged by their German teacher to be at the A2 CEFR level. In order to analyse authentic communication, the study employs Facebook posts and comments. Weekly tasks related to the learners' daily routines were provided and students were asked to make their own posts and respond to their classmates' posts. These subsequent responses offered opportunities for the learners to engage in a variety of speech acts (e.g. greetings, thanks, apologies, requests, as well as expressions of (dis-)like, (dis-)agreement, surprise, and emotion). The posts and comments on the Group's timeline were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively according to the frequency, accuracy, and appropriateness of speech acts produced per task. Class discussions ensued, and evolved organically to consider the relative pragmatic appropriateness. Such discussion appears to raise both pragmatic competence as well as awareness. Results and implications of this explorative case study are discussed in this paper, along with potential suggestions for future practice and research.

2. Theoretical Background

Due to the growing popularity of SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, Mixi, etc., increasingly also among university students in Japan (Russel, 2012), numerous studies have emerged, which point out the benefits of utilising such networks for L2 learning (Lomicka & Lord, 2009; Stevenson & Lui, 2010; Wang & Vasqu ez, 2012; Kent & Leaver, 2014). Blattner & Lomicka (2012) attested higher levels of motivation, affective learning, and a positive classroom climate. Kok (2008) and Rovai (2002) found that the use of SNS increases willingness to share data, information, and ideas, thus encouraging collaborative learning. In pedagogical contexts, however, it has to be ensured that SNS are used not only legally and ethically, but also in socially and culturally appropriate ways (Prichard, 2013).

Blattner & Fiori (2009) discovered that the use of SNS may also enhance learners' socio-pragmatic skills, because they require the performance of speech acts such as greetings, thanks, requests, apologies, etc. In order to develop pragmatic competence, learners need both opportunities to practice communication as well as activities that raise their pragmatic awareness (Kasper & Rose, 2003). In this regard, Blattner & Fiori (2011) utilised the 'Group' application offered by Facebook, because it allows learners to observe authentic target language communication in other 'open' groups and provides them with the analytical tools necessary to inductively generalise about pragmatic aspects. Hanna & de Nooy (2003) observed that learners easily adapt to the conventions of communication regarding politeness, register, netiquette, and medium genre, and that they manage to interact in a productive manner with other individuals despite limited L2 abilities.

As far as the use of Facebook in L2 teaching in Japan is concerned, Promnitz-Hayashi (2013), who initiated group discussions by means of a private Facebook page, found that even more introverted students became actively engaged in tasks, and that the use of Facebook contributed in developing learner autonomy. In Dizon's (2015) study, students appreciated the ease of use, convenience, and low-stress environment of using Facebook's Group function for discussing pictures, videos, and links they shared with their classmates. In his action research study on using Facebook to provide learners with more opportunities to interact in their L2 English, Prichard (2013) found that Facebook is an effective tool for learners to develop digital literacy and to enhance L2 learning.

As far as German as a target language is concerned, Leier & Cunningham (2016) investigated differences between students' private and teacher-assigned Facebook interactions at a university in New Zealand. As for GFL students in Japan, Waragai et al. (2014) found that learners make more use of the L2 within private messaging than

within assigned activities for concerns of formal adequacy. Clearly, more research is needed on both students' private usage as well as study-related SNS use in order to arrive at an understanding of how learners might be assisted best in their endeavour to utilise such technologies for their L2 learning.

3. Participants and Procedures

The Facebook-project was carried out in a voluntary German class (CFER level A2) for third-year students with different majors consisting of two instruction units of 90 minutes per week. One unit was conducted in a CALL-classroom of which 45 minutes were devoted to the project. The participation in the project was voluntary and did not affect students' grades. Nine of the eleven students participated in the project; two chose not to participate, but were assigned alternative tasks to be submitted by email instead.

In order to maintain students' privacy and safety, a private Facebook Group page was set up by the teacher. This page was expected to serve as a platform for students to observe authentic target language communication in other 'open' groups as well as to engage in various speech acts themselves while sharing personal experiences with their classmates. Apart from the weekly assigned tasks, the students were also encouraged to use the Group page as a platform for class-related communication, such as apologising for a missed class, requesting or giving information or advice concerning their studies, as well as for other questions, announcements, or materials they wanted to share with this group.

At the beginning of the course each student received a speech act manual, which contained basic speech acts commonly used in online interaction (including greetings, thanks, requests, apologies, compliments, (well-)wishes, as well as phrases for expressing opinions, feelings, empathy, (dis-)like, (dis-)agreement, and surprise). The expressions compiled in the manual stem from GFL textbooks (CFER levels A1 to B1) as well as from the students' own repertoire, which was established by a pre-course survey. Apart from serving as a source of reference during task performance, the speech act manual also contained space for students to write down examples or other relevant information concerning the use of the speech acts they encountered throughout the course.

The Facebook tasks involved accounts of the students' experiences, feelings, or activities and aimed at eliciting different speech acts listed in Table 1. To facilitate the fulfilment of the tasks, pre-task activities were carried out in class to ensure that students were familiar with the relevant L2 expressions to perform the speech act(s) aimed at in the tasks. In order to encourage students to write more, the teacher sporadically also engaged in the Group's timeline. In the lesson following the task completion, the students were asked to read their posts and comment on the timeline aloud, and the teacher provided corrective feedback placing particular emphasis on the correctness, adequacy, and appropriateness of the speech acts produced.

4. Task Aims and Analysis

The aim of the data analysis was twofold: 1) to determine what difficulties GFL learners face when producing certain speech acts in online communication and 2) to generate ideas for improving the tasks and the approach, so that students can be better assisted in this pursuit. The data collected for this study consist of the students' posts and comments on the Group's timeline as well as a pre- and post-course survey to get an insight into the students' expectations and experiences concerning the project. Table 1 lists the ten tasks given throughout the course, the speech acts to be elicited in these tasks, and the criteria used for the analysis.

Table 1. Analysis of speech acts produced.

	Task	Speech acts to be elicited	Analysis
1	Speech Act Search	any	none
2	Suggestions for a 'Group' photo	suggestions, (dis-)agreement	frequency grammatical accuracy idiomatic appropriateness pragmatic appropriateness
3	Reporting on the spring vacation	(dis-)likes	
4	Expressing feelings	feelings, (dis-)likes	
5	Expressing one's opinion on an article	opinions, (dis-)agreement	
6	Describing activities	(dis-)likes	
7	Expressing wishes	wishes, advices	
8	Reporting on an experience	(dis-)likes	
9	Requesting advice on learning German	requests, advices	
10	Describing plans for the vacation	(well-)wishes	

Task 1 differed from the other tasks inasmuch as it only addressed students' passive pragmatic knowledge. In order to raise their awareness of L2 speech acts, they were exposed to authentic L2 online communication. For that purpose, they were asked to observe the interactions within an open Facebook-Group of their choice, to take screen shots of speech acts they identified, and to paste them on the timeline of the class' Group page for discussion in class.

Tasks 2 to 10 required students to make more active contributions by writing their own posts according to the tasks given and by commenting on their classmates' posts. As can be seen in Table 1, each of these tasks aimed at eliciting certain speech acts. In order to evaluate how adequate the tasks developed are regarding the elicitation of speech acts, the frequency of their occurrence per task was calculated. To gain further insights into the pragmatic competence of the learners, the speech acts they produced in their posts and comments were analysed according to grammatical and idiomatic correctness, as well as pragmatic appropriateness.

In order to determine students' attitudes towards using Facebook for learning German and to ascertain to what extent they could improve their pragmatic skills throughout the project, a pre- and post-course survey was carried out. The survey contained open questions to generate ideas for improving the project as well as closed questions aimed at assessing students' enjoyment and difficulties concerning task performance and determining the frequency of their SNS use by means of Likert scales.

5. Results

5.1. Students' use of Facebook before the project

As far as the students' use of Facebook before the project is concerned, the results of the pre-course survey showed that only five of the nine students who participated in the project had used Facebook before. They described themselves as rather 'passive' Facebook users. Judging from their ratings on a 4-point frequency scale (0, 1, 2, 3), their Facebook activities mostly consisted of checking message updates (1.8), reading the newsfeed (1.6), and liking friends' posts (1.4); while functions that require more initiative or personal input received considerably lower averages, such as commenting on friends' posts (0.6), chatting with friends (0.6), sharing information (0.6), sending messages (0.4), and writing one's own posts (0.2). The survey also revealed that

students had no previous experience with using any kind of SNS for L2 learning, but most of them were optimistic regarding the Facebook-project as the following comments show: “SNS are helpful, because the communication with native speakers may accelerate our learning” and “SNS are convenient, because we have access to information, however, we need to use social media in an appropriate way.”

5.2. Students’ task performance during the project

In order to assess the appropriateness of the tasks developed for this project, Table 2 shows the number of comments and speech acts (S.A.) elicited within the posts and comments of each task, as well as students’ perception of difficulty and enjoyment of the individual tasks determined by the post-course survey. For the enjoyment and difficulties the table displays average results obtained from ratings on a five-point frequency scale (-2, -1, 0, 1, 2).

Table 2. Quantitative findings concerning task performance.

	Task	Comments	S. A.	Difficulty	Enjoyment
1	Speech act search	---	---	-0.1	0.3
2	Suggestions for a ‘Group’ page photo	43	34	1.7	1.4
3	Reporting on the spring vacation	38	28	0.7	1.7
4	Expressing feelings	47	35	0.4	1.0
5	Expressing one’s opinion on an article	33	48	-1.2	1.0
6	Describing activities	57	48	0.3	0.9
7	Expressing wishes	70	71	0.0	1.2
8	Reporting on an experience	42	42	0.0	1.0
9	Requesting advice on learning German	19	33	-0.2	1.3
10	Describing plans for the vacation	71	58	1.4	1.7
Averages		47	44	0.3	1.2

As Table 2 shows, an average of 47 comments and 44 speech acts were produced per task; divided by the total number of nine participants this meant that on average each task prompted five speech acts and comments per student. The tasks ‘expressing wishes’ and ‘describing plans for the vacation’ generated most comments and speech acts and can therefore be regarded as appropriate for practicing pragmatics. As the figures for the individual tasks also indicate, the tasks of ‘requesting advice on learning German’, ‘expressing wishes’, and ‘expressing one’s opinion on an article’ elicited more speech acts than comments. Therefore, such tasks seem to be particularly appropriate for challenging the pragmatic competence of the learners. Relatively few speech acts compared to the number of comments were found in ‘reporting on the spring vacation’, ‘expressing feelings’, ‘describing activities’, and ‘describing plans for the vacation’.

As far as the difficulty of the individual tasks is concerned, there are considerable differences between the tasks. While ‘making suggestions for a Group photo’ and ‘describing plans for the vacation’ were perceived as rather easy, ‘requesting advice on learning German’ as well as the ‘speech act search’ were considered to be quite difficult. As for the enjoyment of task fulfilment, an average of 1.2 (based on ratings on a -2/2 scale) indicates that on average the tasks were seen as rather enjoyable. The notable

exception is the 'speech act search', which was rated as least enjoyable. Comparatively high scores for enjoyment were attained by the tasks of 'describing plans for the vacation' and 'reporting on the spring vacation'.

To provide further insights into how accurately the speech acts were performed, Table 3 lists the types of speech acts produced by the students on the Group's timeline according to the frequency of their occurrence (Total) and whether they were produced correctly or contained grammatical, idiomatic, or pragmatic inconsistencies.

Table 3. Frequency and accuracy of speech acts performed.

Speech Act	Correct	Grammatically incorrect	Idiomatically inappropriate	Pragmatically inappropriate	Total
Expressing like	80	11	4	0	95
Advices	37	23	0	3	63
Agreements	41	5	3	3	52
Well-wishes	46	2	1	0	49
Expressing empathy	25	3	3	3	34
Expressing feelings	17	3	3	1	24
Thanks	19	2	2	0	23
Wishes	19	2	2	0	23
Requests	9	2	0	0	11
Opinions	7	1	0	0	8
Greetings	7	0	0	0	7
Expressing dislike	2	0	0	0	2
Compliments	2	0	0	0	2
Disagreement	2	0	0	0	2
Expressing surprise	1	0	0	0	1
Apologies	1	0	0	0	1
Total	315	54	18	10	397
Percentage	79%	14%	5%	3%	100%

Among the total of almost 400 speech acts produced during the tasks, likes, advice, well-wishes as well as expressions of empathy, and agreement appeared most frequently, while apologies, compliments, and expressions of dislike, disagreement, and surprises were used only rarely. Most of the speech acts were performed accurately. However, expressing feelings, empathy, and likes as well as giving advice or thanks, and making wishes and requests often entailed grammatical or idiomatic inadequacies. Pragmatic appropriateness seemed to be problematic for suggestions, advice, and agreements as well as for expressing feelings and empathy.

Considering the fact that the students had no previous experience using the L2 in social networking, it may come as a surprise that almost 80% of the speech acts on the timeline were performed accurately. This result may be partly attributed to the pre-task activities carried out in class, in which students could already practice the speech acts for the upcoming task. Some students also tried to 'play it safe' by only using tokens of speech acts they were already familiar with or by using the same expressions as their classmates; at times, however, including (spelling) mistakes.

Most inconsistencies in the speech acts were grammatical errors (14%), for example wrong verb conjugation in the compliment "*Du fotografier[s]t gut! (You take good pictures!)*" (Task 2), a missing particle in the advice "*Ich empfehle dir, Aktien an[zu]kaufen und [zu] verkaufen! (I suggest to buy and to sell stocks!)*" (Task 7), a missing object in the wish "*Ich möchte [die Stadt] wieder besuchen! (I'd like to visit that city again!)*" (Task 2), or a missing article in the agreement "*Das ist [eine] gute Idee! (That's a good idea!)*" (Task 9). Idiomatic mistakes, which only appeared in 5% of the speech acts, were for example the following expression of like, for which a wrong adjective was chosen, "*Das ist fröhlich! [lustig]! (That looks happy [nice]!)*" (Task 6) or the choice of a wrong verb in the agreement "*Du bist [hast] recht! (You have [are] right!)*" (Task 5).

Pragmatic inconsistencies, which only appeared in 3% of the data, are, for example, the choice of a wrong speech act as in the following reaction to a wish for good health "*Bitteschön! (You're welcome!)*" (Task 5) in which an expression of gratitude was mixed up with its acknowledgement. In other cases, it was not the type of speech act, which was wrong, but the token chosen for its performance. For example, in order to show 'genuine' compassion regarding someone's misfortune, the token "*Schade! (Too bad!)*" (Task 8) as a reaction to a post concerning rude treatment would be considered as too weak. In this case an expression which shows greater concern, such as "*Das tut mir Leid für dich! (I feel sorry for you!)*" would have been more appropriate. Similarly, the expression "*Ich beneide dich! (I envy you!)*" (Task 6) would be considered as too strong for commenting on a post containing a picture of a fruit shake. Here, less intrusive expressions, such as "*Das sieht lecker aus! (That looks delicious!)*" or "*Du hast es gut (Lucky you!)*" would be more common in German.

Finally, the choice of address forms may also contradict pragmatic norms. In a voluntary post, a student addressed me as "*Herr Axel! (Mr. Axel!)*" instead of "*Lieber Axel (Dear Axel)*". It is important to make students aware of how to use such address forms appropriately, because in online communication, where interlocutors do not necessarily know each other personally, they may cause offence. In this regard, the post-task activities conducted in this project proved to be quite effective, because they enticed learners to investigate cultural differences and language-specific nuances between the L2 items taught and related L1 expressions.

5.3. Project evaluation

As the quantitative analysis of the post-course student survey revealed, the implementation of the Facebook project as well as the usefulness of SNS as a tool for language learning were assessed positively (both with an average of 1.3 on a -2/2 scale). In their written comments, the students expressed an increase of their L2 skills regarding their pragmatic competence "*I enjoyed the project, because I learnt new things in an entertaining way*", "*I learnt to express myself in a way that my classmates can understand*" and "*I learnt common German expressions, which hardly ever appear in textbooks or in the classroom*". However, when performing the tasks, students strongly relied upon the expressions provided. Since most of the items taught were new to the students, some wished to have more time to explore nuances between them before actually using them. Other students pointed out social advantages of using Facebook "*Since I normally don't talk to my teacher or classmates outside the class, it was a good chance for us to get to know each other better.*" and "*It was interesting to*

find out what my classmates are doing in their free time, and what they think on certain subjects."

However, some critical comments also emerged, for example concerning the use of the medium Facebook itself *"Since I normally don't use Facebook, I found it hard to get into the habit of checking the newsfeed regularly and to comment on my classmates' posts."* For others, performing the tasks posed problems because they either lacked the required L2 skills to fulfil the task as in *"I wanted to comment on my classmates' posts, but I did not know how to express myself in German"* or they encountered cultural difficulties *"I found it difficult to express my feelings and opinions"*.

6. Summary and Discussion

The results of this explorative study will be summarised according to the three research questions listed in section 1. As far as students' response to using Facebook for L2 learning is concerned (research question 1), the learners in this study seem to have enjoyed the project as their resourceful posts and comments on the Groups' timeline, their active participation in pre- and post-task activities, and their overwhelmingly positive comments in the post-course survey show. Taking into account that learners in Japan are rather shy, the use of Facebook encouraged them to apply their L2 knowledge and to state their opinions more freely than they would normally do in face-to-face interactions, which has also been observed in the studies conducted by Promnitz-Hayashi (2013) and Dizon (2014). They felt encouraged to share personal information with their classmates and enjoyed completing the tasks collaboratively, which increased their motivation and led to a positive classroom climate, confirming observations made by Kok (2008) and Blattner & Lomicka (2012). As the comparison of students' comments in the pre- and post-course survey also revealed, those students who were already frequent users of SNS, profited most from this blended learning approach. As pointed out by Prichard (2013), learners of the net generation may have little technical difficulty getting accustomed to the use and functionality of SNS, but they need guidance on how to use them in culturally appropriate ways.

Regarding the appropriateness of the approach used in this project (research question 2), the tasks developed seem to have been effective for eliciting a large number of different speech acts. Judging from the students' feedback, most tasks were rated as 'enjoyable' since they related to their interests and activities. However, it has to be admitted that the students' posts did not purely derive from an authentic desire to socialise or to share information, but were a requirement of their language class. In this regard, it has to be further investigated how differences between students' private and teacher-assigned SNS interactions affect L2 learning (Leier & Cunningham, 2016; Waragai et al., 2014). In their more learner-centred approach, Promnitz-Hayashi (2013) let students design their own tasks, which significantly increased the number of prompted comments as compared to teacher-assigned tasks. As for the speech act search (Task 1), the learners in this study perceived it as rather difficult and far less enjoyable than the other tasks. It was hoped that this task would entice students to incorporate speech acts they encountered in authentic L2 interactions into their own repertoire. However, as their contributions on the Group's timeline revealed, they mostly relied on the expressions provided in pre-task activities.

As far as the potential offered by Facebook for acquiring L2 pragmatics (research question 3) is concerned, the overall results of this case study are in line with Blattner & Fiori's (2009 and 2011) findings, which highlight the benefits of observation-based awareness-raising tasks for the development of pragmatic competence. While the tasks developed for this study placed a stronger focus on speech act production, rather than observation, the approach chosen proved to be equally beneficial for improving learners' pragmatic skills. As also observed by Hanna & de Nooy (2003), the learners in this study managed to interact effectively with each other despite their limited L2 abilities. However, to what extent they will be able to communicate in a pragmatically appropriate manner outside the 'guided' Group framework of this blended learning

approach, still remains to be determined. In order to get a deeper insight into learners' acquisition and development of pragmatic skills, finer research tools are required, such as introspective interviews with learners, think-aloud protocols of their writing processes, as well as longitudinal and comparative studies. Most of the studies on the use of SNS for language learning to date, including the project described in this paper, are exploratory in nature. More empirical research is needed to confirm the conclusion of these studies.

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