



Motivation to write online: Chats and Forums

Ulf Schuetze, Victoria, Canada

ISSN 1470 – 9570

Motivation to write online: Chats and Forums

Ulf Schuetze, Victoria, Canada

This paper reports on a hybrid second language course using three learning environments

This statement seems to be a bit bold, but it has to be seen in relation to the classroom level factors that influence the sustainability of the student-student interactions. For example, learners need to be matched with an appropriate partner or partners to work on a topic of interest to them (O'Dowd & Ritter 2006: 638). This had already been argued by Shetzer & Warschauer (2000) as well as by Stockwell (2003). Shetzer & Warschauer (2000: 177-178) explained that participants' initial euphoria using a new technology in class will fade if tasks are not perceived as relevant and if the technological tool chosen for a task is not appropriate. Stockwell (2003) carried out a study with 48 students at an Australian and 34 students at a Japanese university who engaged in two five-week exchanges. Stockwell's data (2003: 46-48) showed that a successful interaction of participants might depend on topic choice as well as topic organization in terms of threads.

Evaluating the research outlined above in the application to the practice of supervising a student-student online exchange, the following questions arise: If these factors do play a role in sustaining online exchanges, would the selection of the technology not also influence the student-student interaction, given that these technologies have a motivational value

2. Online Writing; CMC; SLA; and Motivation

Students in a second language class are not necessarily thrilled when they find out that some of their assignments will be done online, as Winke & Goertler (2008) reported in a study on students' literacy for CALL. They carried out a survey with 911 students enrolled in basic-level French, German or Spanish at Michigan State University. The paper-based survey asked about the accessibility of technological tools, the ability to perform computer-based tasks, multimedia use for personal and class use, interest in hybrid language instruction. Winke & Goertler (2008: 494-495) found no direct transfer of students' skills in the use of technology in their personal lives to using those skills in the classroom. In some cases this could be linked to anxiety levels regarding the online components of a language course, as these require skills specific to CALL. The role of the teacher becomes critical in successfully engaging students in these types of courses. Although that is not exactly new, the study is in line with arguments that have been made for careful planning of such courses, in particular if they involve an online exchange. In addition to the planning of such an exchange by the instructor, the cooperation of students in both courses involved in such

were the results when students used the email exchange to create a youth magazine. One of the aspects Massler (2008: 11-13) analyzed was the type of language used in the email exchange as well as the texts created in the youth magazine. She found that the Canadian stu-

Wenn man sich nichts zu sagen hat, ist es egal, wie luxuriös die Lernplattform ist, in der man sich nichts zu sagen hat. Die entscheidende Frage lautet: Haben Lernende in Kooperationsprojekten anderen Lernenden etwas mitzuteilen? (Rösler 2008: 383)

A simple answer to this question would be that learners engage in exchanges if they are willing to do so and if they are willing to share information. In this context, the concept of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan 1985) is rather appealing.

Deci & Ryan (1985) carried out many experiments and eventually identified three basic needs for motivation: self-determination, competence, and interpersonal relatedness. They argued that these needs are born out of people's desire to have a need to experience control over their environment. Applying this to second language learning, learners want to have a choice in what they learn and under what circumstances they learn. In that sense they are self-determined. The energy for this learning is provided by the need for competence. Thus, intrinsic motivation, that is, the motivation from within, is based on the need for self-determined competence:

Intrinsic motivation is in evidence whenever students' natural curiosity and interest energize their learning. When the educational environment provides optimal challenges, rich sources of stimulation, and a context of autonomy, this motivational wellspring of learning is likely to flourish. (Deci & Ryan 1985: 245)

Interestingly, Deci & Ryan's theory is in line with studies on CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) and SLA (Second Language Acquisition). Students can be motivated to participate as long as other students participate (Deci & Ryan 2002). The focus is on the process of learning, interacting, understanding those very processes.

In relation to the context of this study and to the questions raised in the introduction, the first research question was formulated: If the course is carefully planned, do email or chat function as a catalyst to trigger intrinsic motivation? In other words, are students willing enough to use those tools to engage in the online writing process and to keep writing? The second research question had to do with the tools themselves. It is important to distinguish between forums and chats. A forum is an asynchronous tool that gives participants time to reflect on what to write, therefore promoting sentences with greater syntactic complexity (Sotillo 2000). A chat is a synchronous tool that has been described as a conversation in slow-motion with a focus on content rather than form (Payne & Whitney 2002). Therefore,

the second research question was: do students prefer one tool over the other in order to feel engaged in the writing process?

3. The Course

The topics discussed every week in the forum were: 'Die Fussballweltmeisterschaft 1990' (World Cup of Soccer 1990: Germany won th

4. Methodology / Analysis

The study used a questionnaire (see Appendix) which was divided into three sections. It used example questions by Spilitopulous & Carey (2005) as well as Dörnje (2003), which were altered to fit the purpose of this survey:

1. Section One asked about the students' experience with online learning.

4.1 Section One

Overall, results in 2007 and 2008 were similar. Ten (2007 and 2008) of the UVic and eleven (2007) and twelve (2008) of the Kiel students felt comfortable presenting their writing online in class: “It motivates one to pay more attention to spelling and grammar” (Participant 17, Kiel, 2007); “I feel it is more relevant to societal norms’ (Participant 3, UVic, 2008); “I always chat with my friends. But never in German before. Very cool. I didn’t care if I made mistakes.” (Participant 6, UVic, 2007). The comment of Participant 3 was repeated in question nine (comment on any aspect). As the comment of Participant 6 indicated, some students felt that the online writing reflected the writing of their first language in the sense that it was every-day writing rather than academic writing. For example, Participant 9 (UVic, 2008) commented: “I didn’t understand everything the Germans wrote. It didn’t matter. It was not that we were writing like an essay or something.” Similarly, Participant 14 (Kiel, 2008) answered: “It was - to quote the Canadians - AWESOME. They say that all the time. Writing online was okay with me.” Participant 19 (Kiel, 2007) drew an analogy to cell phones commenting that writing online was similar to texting messages. Those were rather interesting comments as they raise the question of what kind of writing students should learn first.

Questions three and four revealed that despite feeling comfortable, the majority of students did not think that their attitude and motivation towards writing differed or was improved according to whether the forum or the chat was being used. However, three (2007) and two (2008) UVic and two (2007) and three (2008) Kiel students found that practicing writing with these tools motivated them to write. For example, Participant 2 (UVic, 2007) answered: “I liked that I could see what others wrote. I am less conscious of my mistakes knowing that others make these very same mistakes also. I was not afraid to embarrass myself.”

In turn, in question five some students answered that they liked the ability to read everyone’s work using the forum. For example, Participant 20 (Kiel, 2007) answered: “It is good to see what other students think. I got ideas myself.”

triggers intrinsic motivation, that is, the motivation from within. The comment of Participant 6 (UVic, 2007) supported that (“I always chat with my friends. But never in German before. Very cool. I didn’t care if I made mistakes”) as well as the comment of Participant 5 (UVic, 2008): “I liked that it was casual. Although it was in German and German is not easy for me, I actually wrote a lot.” However, no other evidence was found. The criticism of Participant 8 pointed in the direction of the attitude of some participants towards participation. This will be further discussed in Section Two and Three.

4.2 Section Two

In this section, students rated the questions from 1 to 5. Results in 2007 and 2008 were similar.

Table 1: Average rating questions one to six

	1	2	3	4	5	6
2007 V	3.83	3.91	3.33	3.19	3.43	3.41
2007 K	3.66	3.76	3.41	3.39	3.47	3.49
2008 V	3.76	3.99	3.45	3.18	3.50	3.54
2008 K	3.75	3.79	3.26	3.37	3.52	3.58

The abbreviations V and K are used for UVic and Kiel university. The numbers one to six refer to the questionnaire (see Appendix).

In both years, UVic and Kiel students felt somewhat encouraged to participate in the forum or chat with a mean score ranging from 3.75 to 3.99 in questions one and two. Students of both universities were neutral towards the usefulness of those tools. The forum was rated between 3.18 (UVic, 2008) and 3.39 (Kiel, 2007); the chat was rated between 3.26 (Kiel, 2008) and 3.45 (UVic, 2008). However, students expressed the view that they were able to engage in interesting discussions. The ratings in question five and six ranged from 3.41 (UVic, 2007) to 3.58 (Kiel, 2008). The interesting point about these scores was that none

was at 4.00 or higher indicating that neither tool was fascinating enough for students to be fully engaged them in online writing.

Most interesting in this section of the survey were questions seven to fourteen because they related to questions in section one. These questions asked if students felt at ease using these tools.

Table 2: Average rating questions seven to fourteen

	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
2007 V	4.17	4.00	3.79(a)	3.61(a)	2.89	2.83	2.21	2.49
2007 K	3.87	3.91	4.57(b)	4.43(b)	2.66	2.79	2.09	2.29
2008 V	4.23	4.05	3.69(a)	3.55(a)	2.81	2.78	2.16	2.45
2008 K	4.01	4.06	4.70(b)	4.51(b)	2.60	2.73	2.02	2.21

The abbreviations V and K are used for UVic and Kiel university. The numbers seven to fourteen refer to the questionnaire (see Appendix). Small (a) and (b) refer to questions 9a/b and 10a/b.

UVic students rated the forum at 4.00 and 4.05 and the chat at 4.17 and 4.23, feeling at ease

These results are particularly interesting in view of the comments made by some partici-

speech resemblance). More importantly, the value of online writing for practice and to improve writing skills could be emphasized. Instructors could draw students' attention to cultural references, idioms, phrases, slang, abbreviations that are expressed through language. An introduction on the relation of language to culture, in particular the socio-linguistic variation of language use, might encourage students to use these sources for their own online writing. Along the same line, it might be helpful to familiarize students with the

Appendix: Survey

Section One

1. Have you used electronic tools such as a Forum or Chat or any other in a second language classroom before? If so, describe your experience.
2. How do you feel about presenting your writing online in a class or school?
3. Have your attitudes and motivation towards writing differed or improved over the course of

12. I express myself with more ease using the FORUM than I would in a face-to-face classroom:

Nothing 1 2 3 4 ()5.1()10eul

Online: Forum

Nothing 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal

Online: Chat

Nothing 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal

Other.....

- 3. With regard to your **vocabulary**, in which environment did you learn the most?
Please circle one number.

In the classroom

Nothing 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal

Online: Forum

Nothing 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal

Online: Chat

Nothing 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal

Other.....

- 4. With regard to **cultural knowledge** in which learning environment did you learn the most? Please circle one number.

In the classroom

Nothing 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal

Online: Forum

Nothing 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal

Online: Chat

Nothing 1 2 3 4 5 a great deal

Other.....

Biodata

Dr. Ulf Schuetze was recently appointed to the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada, where he works as the language program and exchange coordinator for German. He teaches courses on German as a second language, intercultural communication, foreign/second language pedagogy and research methodology. His research interest is in information technology in its application to second language acquisition, in particular on computer-mediated communication. He has recently contributed a chapter to *Learning and Teaching Across Cultures in Higher Education* published by Palgrave MacMillian.

Keywords: Computer-mediated communication – Information technology – Foreign/second language teaching – Motivation – Language learning environment