The use of e-mail in foreign language teaching

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Abstract

In this contribution an attempt is made to look at the language learning potential of e-mail. After a few remarks on the importance of New Technologies in our society I will first sketch out what in my opinion should constitute modern language teaching. After a short introduction concerning the functions of a telecommunications system I will have a closer look at the possible uses of telecommunications in the language classroom: enriching traditional classroom work, project work, newsgroups, chatting, distance learning, and e-mail tandem learning are among the most important. My contribution ends with a few general remarks on the educational potential of e-mail.

Introduction

In many of his publications the French philosopher and telecommunications specialist Henri Levy characterises the society of the future as a society of information and knowledge in which everybody will be able to communicate with everybody else and in which all members will be able to share at the click of a button the enormous wealth of knowledge which mankind has collected in the course of its history. Levy's characterisation may sound utopian for some, for others unreal at least for the time being; but there can be no doubt that the already existing telecommunications networks provide means and ways to get at most of the knowledge resources available, and that it is only a question of time and of funding to attain the stage predicted by him. Both communication and

information have reached a degree of flexibility which was unthinkable until recently. Communication systems are designed in a way that everybody who has a telephone can be reached all the time and at every place (on-line as well as off-line); information systems (like the World Wide Web) are structured so flexibly that the knowledge contained in them can be recalled by the user according to his own needs. The principal feature of a telecommunications system is its network structure: the communication channels are designed in networks but also the knowledge structures (cf. the hypertext and hypermedia design of the WWW).

Nobody denies anymore that it is necessary to introduce the new information and communication technologies into the educational sector. A society which constantly makes use of information technology in the working world and which has understood by now that telecommunications will radically change the key qualifications required for most professions must be interested in introducing the New Technologies in school and at university as well and to employ them as in the working world. These key qualifications include the ability to acquire knowledge independently but also the ability to work together co-operatively, the ability to communicate with each other as well as the ability to make proficient use of new telecommunication and information technology.

It is probably no coincidence that the abilities society demands of our school systems are, to a large extent, identical with the concepts which were brought forward in the last twenty years by cognitive and constructivist learning theories. Learning by construction instead of instruction, learning to learn, learner autonomy, social learning in small groups are key terms in modern learning theory and are also being discussed in foreign language teaching. Our schools are being urged from two different angles, then, to reflect on New Technologies and their learning potential, to experiment with them and to adapt to the societal necessities and the learning theory findings.

In my contribution I would like to take up one of the two central functions of a telecommunications system, the communication function and to show how it can be used in foreign language learning. I will start out by discussing a few key concepts which came up recently in foreign language teaching and which can serve, in my opinion, as principles to design a modern language classroom. This will make clear, I hope, how New Technologies can be embedded naturally into language learning. I will then very shortly look at a telecommunications system and describe the technical features of such a system. The central part of my contribution is devoted to e-mail as a learning tool in the foreign language classroom. I will look at possibilities of enriching language teaching and will focus on project work and on e-mail specific types of communication like newsgroups and chatting. I will also have a short look at distance learning, and at e-mail tandem learning. At the end of my paper I will make a few general remarks on the potential of e-mail in foreign language teaching.

Language learning in the knowledge society

In the title of his seminal paper "Redesigning the language classroom" Michael Legutke (1996) makes clear that even while we are moving into a society of

information and knowledge it is not necessary to rethink the fundamental assumptions of modern language teaching. In the foreign language classroom the use of the foreign language will always be central, the development of communicative abilities will always be the main aim of all learning. The ability to communicate will have to be interpreted in a much broader sense in the future, however, it will have to include listening comprehension as well as reading and writing. The ability to reflect on language and on the foreign language which has always been important in grammar teaching will have to attain a new quality; teachers will have to reflect on how to design more learner-centred activities aiming at language awareness. One new aspect comes up in all discussions, i.e. the importance of learning to learn; it is, however, of equal importance in all subjects taught in school. Redesigning the language classroom means to a large extent "re-weighing" the concepts already available, it also means "re-evaluating" these concepts on the basis of their new learning theory implications.

Communicative competence, reflective competence and (language) learning competence together constitute what has been called language proficiency. It seems possible to derive from this general competence a set of criteria to redesign the language classroom, criteria which are founded on sound empirical findings and which are plausible from the point of view of language teaching. Among them are process orientation, project orientation, authenticity, social learning and autonomy. It will be shown later that these criteria fit well with New Technologies, that New Technologies can be regarded as tools to implement these principles in the language classroom. And it should not be forgotten that the implementation of New Technologies on the basis of these principles will also help "to remove the barriers between learning and living" (Little 1991), between "school knowledge and action knowledge" (Barnes 1976), which is one of the main concerns not only of modern pedagogy but also of our society.

Process-orientation (Multhaup & Wolff 1994) is a term which covers the current discussion on learner strategies. Language users as well as language learners need to know a large number of strategies in order to process and to learn language: comprehension strategies and communication strategies, strategies which allow them to reflect on language structure and language processes, strategies which allow them to evaluate their own learning. Process-orientation means to give the same or similar importance to procedural knowledge as to declarative knowledge, it means to give more prominence to learning techniques. It is not possible here to go into more detail with respect to the potential of New Technologies in promoting strategic knowledge (cf. however Wolff 1997a, Wolff 1997b).

Activity- or content-related project orientation is a principle of modern language teaching which was first discussed by Palmer but has become fairly popular only since the beginnings of communicative language teaching. A content- and project-oriented approach aims at designing the language classroom in such a way that it deals with real-life tasks and activities. Learners are involved when they deal with such activities, and involvement is a key to learning and language learning. It will be shown later that New Technologies and especially e-mail are helpful tools in designing projects in which learners will get involved.

Authenticity has always been a fairly ambiguous term in the field of language teaching. On the one hand it stands for the use of authentic materials, on the other for authentic interaction. I will not go into any detail with respect to the question what authentic materials are; it is sufficient here to underline the importance of authentic interaction which leads to a higher degree of involvement on the part of the learner than the artificial interaction prevalent in the "normal" language classroom. No doubt, telecommunication and especially e-mail have an important role to play here.

In cognitive and constructivist learning theory social learning in small groups is regarded as very efficient. Only in co-operation with others can subjective knowledge constructs of the individuals be adapted and individual hypotheses be tested. With respect to the advantages of social learning in small groups educationalists underline the individual abilities of the members of the learner group and argue that in co-operating learners will be able to recognise and reduce their own weaknesses and take over the strengths of the others. New Technologies allow genuine and authentic forms of co-operation and make group work authentic and more acceptable.

The development of autonomy which has been mentioned as belonging to the set of criteria to redesign the language classroom is a general aim of education. In our society more than in any before learners must acquire abilities for lifelong learning, and the process of acquisition begins in school. Autonomy is the "ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec 1981:3), and the New Technologies provide tools to develop autonomy.

This seems to me a rich framework of criteria which allow us to redesign the foreign language classroom of the knowledge society. The general aim of language learning and teaching is unchanged, attaining foreign language proficiency through language use; the concepts to attain this goal have changed, however. They are concepts adapted to our society and its demands. And they are not utopian because they can be put into classroom practice with the help of New Technologies.

E-mail as a communications tool in the knowledge society

To illustrate the rather theoretical remarks of the first part of my paper and to show how New Technologies can be integrated in the "redesigned" language classroom I have chosen e-mail, probably the best-known electronic tool available for communication. The term e-mail, in general, relates to texts, in particular letters, which are written on a computer and are then transmitted via telephone or another network to a receiver. The Internet was the first e-mail system, it used to be a military communications network in the United States, but already in the seventies it became a communications tool between universities all over the world. The Internet is not the only network, quite a number of others - commercial and scientific - are available and transmit data all over the world. All networks are interconnected and, in general, make use of the public telephone system.

The use of a telecommunications system for communication purposes has

become more than simple in the age of the **"clickable icon".** The software is usually available at no extra cost from the provider who also provides an e-mail address which functions like a postal address and makes the message arrive at the right destination. The software is designed in such a way that it can fulfil all the functions necessary in a modern office: e-mail letters can be stored and filed systematically, e-mail addresses can be saved in an electronic notebook, letters can be sent to different addresses at the same time, attachments can be added to letters, i.e. electronic documents which can consist of data bases of all kinds of digitised data, texts as well as pictures and sounds.

It is understandable that e-mail takes over more and more functions of the traditional postal services. The advantages compared to "snail-mail" are enormous: the high speed (an e-mail letter reaches its destination only seconds later) and the minimal costs are the most important. Exchanges of letters which took days or weeks in former times, take only minutes now. It is also important that e-mail letters and their attachments are in electronic form, i.e. they can be directly processed (copied, printed, sent on etc.) without any further delay. And as most documents are in electronic form nowadays, processing, in general, is greatly simplified.

E-mail as a tool in the foreign language classroom

The discussion about the use of telecommunications in the foreign language classroom has become quite extensive during the last years. Quite a number of research projects have dealt with e-mail in language learning, experts have developed scenarios, and there are also reports of practitioners. In Germany, ministries of education and the German Telecom have propagated a much publicised initiative called "Schulen ans Netz" (Schools into the Internet) through which about 10.000 German schools will be provided with funds so that they can use the Internet in their teaching. In the following I will discuss a number of ideas on how to use e-mail in the language classroom and will also report on the practical experiences made already in this field.

1. Enriching traditional classroom work

In this period of transition when teachers still have to be convinced that New Technologies are a valuable help in their work, it seems to me particularly attractive that e-mail can be easily integrated into the traditional classroom. I would like to take **"pen pals"** as an example. The exchange of letters between learners and native speakers is an activity which has been quite popular at least since the fifties. The use of e-mail has a number of advantages compared to traditional **"pen pal"** projects which should not be underestimated. The speed with which the exchange of letters takes place is probably the most important. Until now it took weeks or even months before a letter was answered, now students can expect an answer within days or even hours. There can be no doubt that this enhances the students' motivation to take part in such activities.

The choice of partners is less limited as well. Whereas in former times it was difficult to find a school in the country of the target language ready to engage in

a "pen pal" project, this has become quite easy now. There are a number of pen pal providers all over the net, an e-mail message is sufficient and the students usually get quite a host of addresses - whether the would-be partners turn out to be faithful is another question, however. Often the partners are not native speakers of the partner language either, and this leads to new topics of interaction which are highly motivating. The native peer as a source of information is still of interest, however.

Speed of interaction has other advantages as well. Learners can ask questions which are of immediate interest about events which have just taken place in the target language country. They can also ask questions with respect to contents of their textbook or questions concerned with the language they are learning. Unlike the contents of text books and grammar lessons which have a highly demotivating and even authoritarian character because they are embedded in a school context, "pen pal" projects are related to real life and thus become part of real life and develop a new quality. And the use of the new technology bridges the gap between the school and real life.

2. Project work

"Pen pal" projects are not far from real project work which was identified above as one of the most important features of modern language teaching. Telecommunications and especially e-mail is seen here as an important tool to organise project work, a tool which offers a much greater scope of possibilities for project work and helps to reduce the problems which usually crop up. When looking at the possible organisational structure of projects three types can be distinguished (cf. Eck, Legenhausen & Wolff 1995) to which can be added a fourth one which is based on the information function of telecommunications and does not include the communications function:

Bilateral projects. Bilateral projects include only two learner groups. The discussions about the project content, about the time schedule and about the presentation of results is part of a mutual negotiating process, during which the foreign language already plays an authentic role. The two learner groups should have different first languages but should learn the same target language, so that communication in the target language is seen by both groups as a necessity. A good example for such a bilateral project is a project which was carried out within the research of Eck, Legenhausen & Wolff (1995). It was called "Christmas", and the two learner groups, one from Denmark and one from Germany collected Christmas customs from their respective countries, compared them and produced a little brochure. The groups used telecommunications to communicate with each other but also to improve their knowledge about Christmas customs. Databases (like the WWW) were a valuable knowledge source in the latter task.

Open projects. Such projects are not limited with respect to the number of participating groups. The initiating learner group plans the project, without discussing contents and scope with potential partners beforehand. Once the project has gone through its planning stage search for partners takes place in the network, normally via the notice board function. Everybody interested can contribute to the project, send texts, give hints with respect to sources of

information and can discuss project contents. The example chosen for this project type also comes from the research mentioned above. In the project called "Europe 1992" a German learner group dealt with the state of European unification in 1992, collected information about the countries of the European Union and opinions about the European idea in different countries, and came up in the end with a well-done brochure bringing together the results of the projects.

Closed projects. Closed projects are limited to a relatively small number of participants. Often the systems provider is also the organiser of the project. The American telephone company AT&T offered, for example, for a number of years so-called learning circles in which specific topics were dealt with by learner groups chosen beforehand. The British telecommunications system CAMPUS 2000 organises every year a Newspaper Day in which a number of schools from all over the world compete to publish a professionally made newspaper within one day.

The fourth type of project makes use of the potential of a telecommunications system only to provide information. Learner groups interested in a specific topic do research within a telecommunications system, look for materials related to the topic, bring the materials together and integrate them into the project. The World Wide Web as the largest information and knowledge system is a very rich research tool not only for learners but also for university students and researchers.

This very short description of possible organisational structures of telecommunications projects shows the much greater flexibility of such an approach. Projects can be organised in different ways, other learner groups can be integrated quite easily, resources are quickly available. Telecommunications makes it possible to overcome the narrow boundaries of the classroom (cf. also Donath 1996 and 1997).

To make this contribution more practical in scope I would like mention here an number of other telecommunications projects which worked fairly well and which were investigated in their outcomes in detail in the research mentioned already (Eck, Legenhausen & Wolff 1995)**. "Being young here"** was a bilateral project which became open after a while and dealt with day-to-day life of young people in different European countries, their aspirations, their problems, their ideals. The outcome of the project was a reader in which the students had collected the most interesting contributions of the participants. "Germans" was an open project initiated by a group of German learners of English who were interested in the opinions other students world-wide had of Germany, the Germans and their history. Although the involvement of the learners and their partners was very high, the results were fairly disparate and the students did not really know what to think of them. So there was no real outcome although discussions had been intense and very controversial. A fairly popular project with students was "The English language around us", a bilateral project in which two student groups collected examples of English in their respective mother tongues, compared their results and speculated about the reasons why these words and phrases had entered their language.

3. Newsgroups and chatting

People who are interested in the same general topic often form newsgroups within a telecommunications network. There are more than 10.000 such groups in the Internet at the moment, groups which discuss all kinds of topics covering scientific, political, medical and other issues. A large number of professional associations and institutions have created such newsgroups. To be able to participate in a newsgroup one has to become a member and will then get all the other members' contributions in his mailbox.

The number of newsgroups in the educational sector is quite large. There are even newsgroups discussing foreign language teaching and learning issues. It is possible of course not only for teachers but also for language learners to become members of newsgroups which are of interest to them. On the whole, participation in such newsgroups should be restricted, however, to advanced learners who can, of course, train their writing abilities especially with respect to producing descriptive and argumentative texts.

The members of a newsgroup normally communicate off-line with each other. There are other services in the Internet, the so-called "chat-channels", which are used for on-line communication. Interaction is possible in a virtual space and takes place at the same time with partners all over the world and about any subject imaginable. A tricky thing for beginners is that the contributions of the participants are listed one after the other - so to speak in the wrong order - on the screen once they have been entered. Consequently, contributions do not follow each other directly depending on the number of participants; so the members of a chat-group have to develop the ability to read selectively and to process only those contributions which are related to what they have said themselves.

No part of the Internet seems to be as attractive for adolescents as the chat function. For motivational reasons "chat-channels" should be used much more often in the foreign language classroom. And as Mause (1997) argues there is another more important reason to make use of the chat function. Like in oral face-to-face interaction learners will develop the ability to react straightforwardly to the utterances of the (native) partner in communication. According to Mause (1997:32) while chatting many students experience for the first time a genuine and authentic communicative situation which is free of the artificiality of normal classroom discussions.

4. Distance learning

Distance learning has taken a new importance since telecommunications networks have been established and developed technically to such an extent that apart from video all materials can be transmitted in high quality. New forms of distance learning are possible nowadays, terms like "virtual school" or university signal that distance learning might develop a quality which is known until now only in face-to-face learning situations.

Clearly, in distance learning not all problems have been solved yet. There still is the problem of feedback which is both a technological and a pedagogical problem. Learners must be given help during their learning process, they might need correction, they might want comments. There are different ways of dealing with this problem. On-line feedback is very costly and involves staff being

available twenty-four hours a day. Off-line feedback might be problematic for learners who do not understand the tutor's comments.

Another problem is psychological in nature. Whereas it is fairly easy in a telecommunications network to provide learners with materials, to correct learners' tasks and even to administer tests it is difficult if not impossible to create a classroom, a seminar room in virtual space and to allow learners to communicate with each other like in face-to-face classroom work. The importance of social learning has been underlined several times already; quite a number of psychologists have serious doubts as to the feasibility of social learning in small groups in virtual space.

A number of cultural institutions like the British Council or the Goethe Institut are experimenting with the potential of distance learning in the field of language learning, but also in language teacher training. The outcomes cannot yet be evaluated; it becomes clear, however, that distance learning should be abandoned in the field of language learning, if the technological possibilities do not allow for more than traditional forms of language learning. Instead, one should then think of learning scenarios which make use of the potential of telecommunications (authentic materials, authentic interaction) but, in principle, remain face-to-face.

5. E-mail tandem learning

Of specific interest in the context of our discussion is the so-called e-mail tandem project initiated by the University of Bochum in Germany. In this project some of the principal ideas of tandem learning are taken up and are transferred onto a distance learning context. In tandem learning (cf. Little and Brammerts 1996) learners of different mother tongues co-operate in order to learn the language of the partner: "Successful learning in tandem is based on the reciprocal dependence and mutual support of the partners; both partners should contribute equally to their work together and benefit to the same extent" (Brammerts 1996:11). Successful tandem learning is a form of autonomous learning.

Making use of telecommunications in tandem learning is interesting for several reasons (cf. Brammerts 1996:13ff). E-mail is fast and cheap; while working together partners can use all technical possibilities of the computer (electronic dictionaries, glossaries, spelling checkers etc.); they can correct texts written by their partners and send them back without having to rewrite them. E-mail texts can also be sent on to other partners and to the teacher for correction. Texts composed by the teachers can be sent to all learners in the project at minimal cost. Materials used in such a learning environment can also be put into databases and can be reused if adequately updated.

Counselling is, of course, a problem like in all forms of distance learning. The universities involved in the tandem learning project have developed two models which are still at a testing stage: counselling via e-mail directed at all members of a learning group (teachers analyse and comment the learning results of their learners), and direct counselling (learners are offered regular face-to-face talks). This last type of counselling only works, of course, with learners of one national

group.

Until now e-mail tandem projects have been organised only at the tertiary level. To my knowledge there are no projects which take place in schools. Therefore the question whether they can be run in the way discussed above cannot yet be answered.

Conclusions

There can be no doubt that with telecommunications mankind has created a tool whose potential has not yet been fully exhausted and whose impact on society are not yet fully explored. The use of this potential in education is still in its beginnings. For the foreign language classroom it is the global network structure which is particularly attractive and makes real encounters with the foreign language and the foreign culture possible.

The use of e-mail makes language learning attain a new quality. Working together with other learners and native speakers in projects leads to a high degree of involvement, makes the use of the foreign language authentic, leads to deeper processing and thus to better learning results. Abilities (reading, writing) are promoted which only play a minor role in traditional communicative language teaching. Texts and materials learners work with attain a higher degree of authenticity (an e-mail letter of an authentic partner is more authentic than an invented letter in a textbook). This holds true, of course, also for materials in the WWW.

When learners co-operate in projects with learners in other countries intercultural encounters of all kinds take place which were not possible until now, encounters between learners and native speakers as well as between learners and learners. It is well possible that by contrasting different cultural experiences learners develop at least a feeling for the "otherness" of the partner and his culture. Whether this leads to respect for the partner and to better understanding for the other culture is a question which cannot be dealt with in this context.

Apart from language learning and intercultural learning a number of other abilities are promoted through the use of telecommunications in the foreign language classroom, abilities which go beyond language learning and belong to the key qualifications in our society. These are the ability to co-operate (using telecommunications enforces work in small groups), the ability to do research (using the WWW as a resources centre makes it necessary to develop strategies of knowledge processing) and the ability to use the available networks competently.

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