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Author(s): Kyppö, Anna

Title: 'So close, yet so different' : reflections on the multicultural course of Slavic languages

Year: 2019

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Kyppö, A. (2019). 'So close, yet so different' : reflections on the multicultural course of Slavic languages. In F. Meunier, J. Van de Vyver, L. Bradley, & S. Thouësny (Eds.), CALL and complexity : short papers from EUROCALL 2019 (pp. 247-251). Research-publishing.net.
<https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.38.1017>

‘So close, yet so different’ – reflections on the multicultural course of Slavic languages

Anna Kyppö¹

Abstract. The complexity of language learning may be expanded to learning the languages belonging to the same language family, for example, Slavic languages. This paper reports on the reflection-on action research aimed at the increase of learners’ multicultural competence and enhancement of critical thinking at the interdisciplinary, blended course of Slavic languages and cultures. The course organized in modules is implemented in Moodle. Course content is designed by the teacher; however, Slavic languages are presented by native speakers of these languages. Learners have an opportunity to get familiar with Slavic languages, history, and culture from the presenters’ perspective, what generally results in the increase of learners’ multicultural competence and enhancement of critical thinking. Learning experience is intensified through reflective learner logs, which serve as a knowledge-sharing medium and cognitive learning.

Keywords: Slavic languages, multicultural competence, critical thinking, reflective learner logs.

1. Introduction

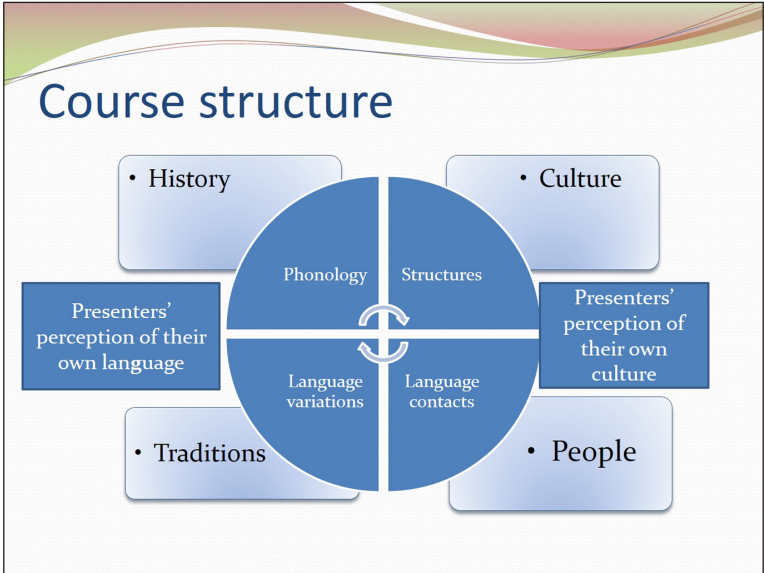
This paper reports on the reflection-on action research aimed at the enhancement of learners’ multicultural competence (awareness of one’s own cultural values and biases; Mio, Barker, & Tumambing, 2012) at the interdisciplinary, blended course of Slavic languages and cultures. The course has been designed and developed at the Centre for Multilingual Academic Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

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How to cite this article: Kyppö, A. (2019). ‘So close, yet so different’ – reflections on the multicultural course of Slavic languages. In F. Meunier, J. Van de Vyver, L. Bradley & S. Thouéšny (Eds), *CALL and complexity – short papers from EUROCALL 2019* (pp. 247-251). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.38.1017>

The course provides basic information about all Slavic nations and languages, including Slavic micro languages, such as Kashubian, Carpathian Rusyn, or Upper and Lower Sorbian. The purpose is to learn about Slavic languages from the linguistic and socio-cultural perspective and raise learners’ interest in learning Slavic languages. In addition to a brief outline of the history and an update of the socio-political situation, the focus is on phonetic and morphological features of Slavic languages as well as some characteristics of phonological and writing systems that are interestingly related to the religious and cultural divisions of Slavic nations. Moreover, lexical features, such as code switching, language variation, and borrowings, which are often the consequences of historical language contacts, are also included. In addition, the concept of linguistic intelligibility – the occurrence of similarities and differences between the languages of the same language family – is tested in practice. [Figure 1](#) below describes the course content and structure.

Figure 1. Structure of the course



2. Method

The course consisted of 30 contact sessions and 20 hours of independent learning. Course participants were both persons with a Finnish degree and exchange students.

The course is module-based and implemented in Moodle. Every module provides basic linguistic and socio-cultural information about one Slavic group, for example, West Slavic, East Slavic languages, etc. Modules offer a variety of sources, including online presentations, links to web-based material such as Slavic web portals, online courses of Slavic languages, videos, and quizzes. However, the first-hand information on language and culture (traditions, people, etc.) was obtained from the presentations delivered by native speakers of Slavic languages, who presented their language and culture from their own perspective, which resulted in the increase of learners’ multicultural competence and critical thinking.

Conclusions and findings presented in this paper are based on the teacher’s perceptions and observations, analyses of learner logs, and course evaluations and informal class interviews. To find out which themes and topics occurred most frequently in learner logs, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used.

The learning experience is intensified through reflective learner logs – learners reflect on the topics brought up in class after every lesson. Individual entries are commented on by the teacher and other course participants. In accordance with the constructivist models of learning, learner logs serve as a knowledge-sharing medium and a cognitive learning tool (Du & Wagner, 2007), thus in addition to reflections on the matters brought up in class, new topics are occasionally discussed. Reflective learner logs are part of the interactive multimodal learning environment, since they enable multidirectional communication (student-teacher, student-student) and knowledge construction.

3. Discussion

The format of the course – language and culture modules offering a static approach to cultural learning (Liddicoat, 2005) – and, on the other hand, personal engagement with linguistic and cultural diversity obtained through Slavic presentations on contact sessions offer a unique learning experience (intercultural approach to cultural learning; Liddicoat, 2005). In addition to Slavic presentations, the concept of mutual intelligibility² of Slavic languages, a relationship between languages in which speakers of different languages can understand each other without special effort, is tested in practice, for example, Slovak and Czech, Russian and Ukrainian, Ukrainian and Belarusian, and Serbian and Croatian, etc. Culture clashes cannot always be avoided, nevertheless, they may result in generating a more dynamic

2. https://www.academia.edu/4080349/Mutual_Intelligibility_of_Languages_in_the_Slavic_Family

intercultural communication practices and finally foster more effective multicultural thinking (Hamedani & Markus, 2019).

Learners' reflections in learner logs revealed not only their awareness of learning, but also the increase of multicultural awareness that involves understanding, sensitivity, and appreciation of the history, values, experiences, and lifestyles of Slavic people. Reflections were generally related to the conceptual exchange of information, for example, cultural identity, intelligibility of Slavic languages, values, history, etc. The most frequently discussed topics referred to the future of Slavic micro languages and the historical, social, and political background of bilingualism/multilingualism of Slavs (Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin; Bulgarian and Macedonian; Sorbian, both Upper and Lower; and Slovak and Czech).

Experiential learning – learning through reflection on doing (Kolb, 1984) – resulted in an evident increase of multicultural competence and critical thinking, as well as in the acquisition of new interpersonal skills based on reflective observation. An excerpt from a learner's log describes the process of (reflective) learning best.

“I noticed that on this course I started to think about something I have never known – how little I know about these countries and languages. I cannot claim I know much now, however, even the ‘little’ I know is the beginning of developing toward something new”.

As revealed in learner logs, the multicultural and multilingual environment of the course, and above all the presence of Slavic guests, strengthened not only learners' motivations to learn Slavic languages, but also their intercultural competence and critical thinking.

4. Conclusion

The primary purpose of this course is to increase learners' interest in learning Slavic languages, especially those lesser known. Due to various, mostly economic reasons, educational institutions cannot offer language programs in these languages. Thus, multilingual and multicultural courses of this type are welcome. The format of the course supports cultural and reflective learning. Learning about the language and culture may be as motivating as learning the language itself, as pointed out by a student.

“When we cannot learn the language, we can learn ABOUT the language... and perhaps one day I will learn the language”.

What are the challenges of learners of Slavic languages today?

Despite various facilities, which are meant to simplify the use of keyboards in writing diacritics, maintaining the language awareness – awareness of learning how to employ the diacritical marks – seems to be challenging, especially in West Slavic languages (Kyppö, 2017).

Nonetheless, new mobile technologies and social media offer possibilities for the development of dynamic multiple learning spaces appropriate for courses of this type. In addition to blended learning, often adopted in learning less commonly taught languages, basic information about linguistic and cultural settings presented in an inspiring way may enhance the increase of learners’ multilingual and multicultural awareness and finally result in raising their motivation to learn these languages.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

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CALL and complexity – short papers from EUROCALL 2019
Edited by Fanny Meunier, Julie Van de Vyver, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouësny

Publication date: 2019/12/09

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Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover theme by © 2019 Frédéric Verolleman
Cover layout by © 2019 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

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ISBN13: 978-2-490057-54-2 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-55-9 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-53-5 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)

Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2019.