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Promoting multilingual communicative competence through multimodal academic learning situations

Anna Kyppö¹ and Teija Natri²

Abstract. This paper presents information on the factors affecting the development of multilingual and multicultural communicative competence in interactive multimodal learning environments in an academic context. The interdisciplinary course in multilingual interaction offered at the University of Jyväskylä aims to enhance students' competence in multilingual and multicultural academic communication by promoting the use of their entire linguistic repertoire in various learning situations. Throughout the course, we observed the students' engagement in multilingual and multicultural activities. These observations suggest that simultaneous use of multiple languages in synchronous and asynchronous learning environments has evident impact on the development of learners' multilingual and multicultural competences as well as increases their multicultural awareness. Learners' experiences, collected through learning journals and reflective feedback, suggest that the use of multimodal interactive learning environments may support multilingual and multicultural learning and enhance learner agency.

Keywords: multilingual communication, multicultural communication, multilingual and multicultural academic communication competence, multicultural awareness, learner agency.

1. Introduction

This empirical study presents information about affordances for the development of learners' multilingual and multicultural communicative competence in interactive multimodal learning environments. The context of the study is an interdisciplinary course in multilingual interaction aimed at enhancing students' competence in multilingual and multicultural academic communication by promoting the use

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of their entire linguistic repertoire in various social learning situations. A major source of inspiration is the MAGICC project of the EU Lifelong Learning Programme 2012-2014 (<http://www.magicc.eu>), which emphasises the role of languages and communication as part of academic expertise. Of similar importance is [Blommaert's \(2010\)](#) perception of multilingualism as a complex of semiotic resources and a repertoire of varying language abilities. The focus is on various aspects of multilingual and multicultural communication. Due to the multilingual character of the course, students are required to have partial competence in at least two languages other than their L1. Furthermore, the presence of four to five teachers with various linguistic repertoires facilitates the creation of multilingual social space. To enhance learner agency and increase learners' multilingual agility, task-based learning is employed. Multiple languages in synchronous and asynchronous learning environments are used simultaneously, an approach which results in multidirectional teacher–learner interaction and the enhancement of multicultural skills.

2. Method

Even though the concepts of multilingualism and multilingual competence have been explored from various perspectives, our focus is on learning. Our theoretical background, therefore, is to be found in [Blommaert's \(2010\)](#) definition on multilingualism (see above) and in theories related to translanguaging ([Garcia, 2009](#); [Park, 2013](#); [Swain & Watanabe, 2012](#)). The purpose is to promote the development of learners' multilingual communicative competence through multilingual mediation and meaning-making. Learners' multilingual repertoires are activated through various interactive scenarios. In these they are expected to employ their problem-based learning strategies to find a solution or to act in a situation that is close to real life. The lessons are in line with scenario-based e-learning ([Pappas, 2014](#)), which gets learners involved in 'real-life simulations' and provides them with learning experiences aimed at gathering skills which may be useful for their future working life. Through the lessons, various aspects of multilingual and multicultural communication are addressed, including non-verbal communication, various mediation activities such as intercomprehension, activation of receptive skills between typologically related yet different languages ([Berthele, 2007](#)), and persuasion and negotiation in multicultural settings. In mediation activities, one or more languages are used for reading or listening and one or more other languages for speaking or writing. To enhance learners' collaborative social skills, the educational mobile platform REAL, developed by the Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences, is used in scenario-based assignments, while the web-based learning platform Optima serves as the course

workspace. Optima further acts as a uniting factor facilitating the common learning experience. Learner logs have been used to obtain information on the usefulness of tasks, technology choices and the achievement of learning outcomes. In addition, a final survey on learner agency – on their commitment to and engagement in the learning process (Mercer, 2012) – was conducted.

3. Discussion

The course aim was to activate learners' overall linguistic repertoires. Students found that the course helped to develop their linguistic agility and viewed it as a safe learning environment in which to share their ideas on various aspects of linguistic and cultural identity.

“this class gave an important opportunity to reflect upon my recent and not-so-recent experiences in multilingual and multicultural environments... I had the chance to make sense and understand on a deeper level some of the things that I had encountered in the real world. Also, this class helped to break the barriers we tend to build between languages. It helped me understand that my language skills reach over the boundaries of languages, I understand and speak languages that I don't officially understand or speak. That is an important discovery that everyone should get the chance to make already in high school, for example” (Student learner log, unedited).

The feedback on the task design and use of the mobile platform received from students' learner logs and course feedback forms was very significant, especially for the teachers. The mobile platform REAL was tested in scenarios related to the concept of culture and receptive multilingualism. The tasks consisted of communicative assignments, such as searching for information, negotiation and decision-making. Students were obviously not only aware of the *raison d'être* of scenarios, but they were also excited by the use of this particular platform due to its flexibility and the user-friendly mobile application.

“This app [REAL] is innovative, functioning... it enables sharing the ideas... The chat is quick and dynamic, and what is best, it is accessible from more than one device. It is near to us, young people's lifestyle, since we master the technology...” (Student learner log, unedited).

Students felt that they were free to express their opinions via REAL and preserve their privacy at the same time. Voting and commenting was considered to be attractive and

to increase participants' engagement in discussions. From the teachers' viewpoint, the use of new technology offers not only a unique opportunity to document the flow of discussion, but also the possibility to pinpoint some ideas or recurrent themes in students' discussions by means of word clouds and other visual tools.

While student reflections and feedback collected through learner logs generally referred to the task design and the use of the mobile platform, the end-of-course survey provided information on students' learner agency, that is, on their activity and initiative as well as their personal engagement in the learning process. According to [Mercer \(2012\)](#), agency reflects not only the learners' attitudes and observable actions, but also their behavior, beliefs, thoughts and feelings, which may not be observable through the feedback and learner logs. The survey reveals that the majority of students took responsibility for shared learning situations and perceived the co-students as a resource for learning. The technological solutions used on the course were regarded as supportive for teamwork. Furthermore, they were perceived as providing a meaningful learning experience.

4. Conclusions

As the challenges of international and multicultural working life have increased, the need for multilingual and multicultural courses at the university level has grown. Courses in multilingual and multicultural communication may enhance learner agency and provide students with tools and strategies that will be useful in their professional careers. Furthermore, the integration of multiple languages into subject studies and the use of multimodal interactive online resources are essential because they present an integrated part of people's professional frameworks.

The experiences of learners and teachers collected on this course reveal a range of issues that would be important for further study: interactive multimodal learning environments, which seem to be a major affordance for both parties; the development of multidirectional networking skills and the acquisition of multilingual/multicultural communication competences.

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