

Internet media news chosen, commented and shared on Facebook

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Abstract

This project started in a workshop in Graz 2016 where we planned to compare students' writing skills and vocabulary in two different types of writing assignments, translations and free form writing. That comparison was not unsatisfactory and therefore in the second part of the project we focused on the latter type, made the instructions clearer and gave them shorter time to turn in all parts of the assignment. As a university teacher I worked closely on the project with two classroom teachers. The participating students were 16 and 17-year-old, finishing their fifth and final year in Danish (which is an obligatory subject in Iceland, the second foreign language as English is the first foreign language). We asked the students to choose five news items, share them and write about them in a specific Facebook-group.

When analysing the data, I looked at the level of participation, what kind of news items were shared and how much the students wrote about them. There was an indication that this kind of an assessment may be more suitable or motivating for boys than for girls, more of them participated and they were faster to complete their assignments.

Once the assignment was over, I interviewed the teachers and asked the students to complete a questionnaire on their experience. Most of the students' answers were positive and showed that they enjoy assignments where they are allowed independency and autonomy. I will use these answers to develop this assignment further, in co-operation with the teachers.

Keywords

Motivation, learner autonomy, gender, CALL, vocabulary acquisition

Rationale

I have been interested in CALL and secondary language vocabulary acquisition for most of my career as a teacher and when I was a high school teacher (until 2007), my colleagues and I developed various internet-based writing assignments. This project was formed after the workshop in Graz in November 2016 and was based on one of my interests and that of two other participants in the writing skills of high school students in SLA. To begin with we aimed at comparing students' translations into the second language to assignments where they wrote about news items they had found on the internet.

What did you want to change and why?

We wanted to develop an assignment where the students would have to be independent and use every-day-media in the second language to choose items to write about and introduce to their classmates and teachers.

What was your research question?

In the first part of the project, the research question was if it was possible to measure whether the students' language usage was different depending on the nature of their assignments, i.e. whether they wrote the second language more efficiently in translations or in free style writing assignments.

In the second part of the project, the research question was where and how the gender difference appeared in the choice of news and turning in assignments.

What were your assumptions underlying the question? (Your theoretical assumptions)

In the first part, I assumed that the students would write more fluently in free style assignments rather than in translations, since giving the student autonomy to choose from a variety of news items would motivate them and give them opportunity to learn vocabulary that was connected to their interests. Free writing is also not as rigid as translations tend to be and the original article could be used as an aid for format, syntax and vocabulary.

In the second part, I assumed that the students would use the opportunity to pick texts in the second language, which corresponded in subject and format to the texts they would read in their first languages and therefore encourage them to use media in the second language. I expected that there would be a divide in which news the genders would pick, that boys would choose items on sport while girls would pick stories about famous people. I also assumed that the girls would

work harder and turn in more assignments than the boys turn. I admit that my assumptions were rather stereotypical, but on one hand they were supported by the different topics, the genders presented in the first part of the project and on the other hand my experience in teaching teenagers.

Describe the setting

The project took place at Menntaskólinn í Kópavogur, a high school where I taught for twenty years (until 2007) and where, at the time of the first part of the project, Reynir Eggertsson, who also participated in Graz in 2016, was teaching Danish. He organized the first part of the project and gave me access to the data so I could analyse it. For the second part of the project. I got help of two teachers at Menntaskólinn í Kópavogur to develop the assignments further and assign them to their class.

Classroom or group situation(s)

Studying Danish is mandatory in the Icelandic educational system and the participating students were in their fifth and final year of Danish and on their second semester in high school (most of them aged 16 or 17). The students are expected to have reached level B1-B2 when they finish the Danish program in high school. In the first part of the project, 24 students were in the groups which took part but 56 in the second one.

Describe the action research process / How are your findings linked to the evidence?

After having analysed the first project we developed an assignment in five parts and sent it to the two teachers who incorporated it into their curriculum. A Facebook-group was formed specifically for the students to turn in their assignments, they had five weeks to finish all five parts of the assignment, and I watched how quickly and efficiently the students turned in their assignments. When these five weeks were up, I analysed the data, sent out questionnaires to students and interviewed the teachers.

The research project was carried out over a five weeks period during the spring semester 2018. The participants were students in their first year of high school (mostly 16 and 17-year old), who were in their fifth and final year of studying Danish.

The student shared their chosen news stories and what they wrote about them in a private Facebook-group. I had access to that group and the permission of students and teachers to collect and analyse the student-assignments.

Action research tools used

I sent out a questionnaire to the students, asking them for their views on how they assessed these assignments. The turnout was 60%, and the majority was positive towards the assignment and felt they benefitted from it. I also interviewed the teachers involved to see whether they felt the assignments were beneficial for the students.

Since I was not present or teaching these classes, I wanted to get to know the teachers' perspectives on the assignments and their assessments on the students' participation. I chose to use a questionnaire to get information on how the students experienced and assessed the assignments, since students are more likely to give honest answers when answering an anonymous questionnaire than when asked directly in class.

I interviewed the teachers after the first part of the project on how they wanted to follow up on it, and which changes they thought would improve the assignments. I interviewed them again after the second part of the project on how they felt the improvements had turned out and which changes they would make. I sent out a questionnaire to the students at the end of the second part of the project.

I analysed the writing assignments based on the topics the students chose, whether the genders performed differently, how quickly individual students turned in the assignments and how much they wrote. I used the interviews and questionnaires to assess how the teachers and students had perceived the assignments, what they felt was done well, and what could be improved.

Main findings

Most of the students were positive towards this kind of a writing assignment and said they were willing to participate in larger projects based on the same idea. In the first part of our project we found out that, it was not advantageous comparing translations to free writing assignments because of how different the nature of the tasks were; however, we did notice that girls and boys seemed to approach the free writing assignments differently. We also found that the instructions had not been clear enough, so for the second part of the project we developed the assignments further and paid more interest to the gender difference when it came to choosing material, writing and turning in their assignments.

- **What did you find out?**

Most of the students who answered the questionnaire were positive towards the assignment and expressed wishes to do more assignments that are of a similar nature. The teachers were also enthusiastic and willing to develop this assignment further. The

problem was, however, that several students did not turn in all the five assignments, and some skipped all of them, even though they were a part of the final grade. The participation might be improved if this project was a bigger part of the final grade or if the students were to help design the next step of the project, which could increase their motivation, independence and autonomy.

In the first part of the project, the students had to turn in ten short translations. On average the girls handed in 6.3 whereas the boys handed in 4.2. When it came to the free writing assignments, the gap closed a bit, the girls turned in 5.3 assignments on average, compared to 4.2 per boy. This led me to focus on analysing the gender difference in the second part of the project, where one fourth of the girls did not participate at all (6/24) compared to one eighth of the boys (4/32). Of those who participated, the girls turned in 3.3 assignments on average, but the boys 3.5 (out of 5). By using time stamps on posts on Facebook, I could see that the boys were quicker to choose a news item and write about it than the girls, although the girls tended to write longer texts.

I would need a bigger sample and more knowledge of individual students and how they performed in other classes to be able to assert that the gender difference is significant, but this gives room for speculations whether these types of assignments are better suited for boys than for girls. My experience as a teacher, says, that girls do produce more than boys do, when it comes to traditional assignments. I wonder whether the reason for better participation by boys and the fact that they are faster to share be that they are not as inhibited as girls and not as shy about showing the whole class what they found worthy to be shared. There was also a difference between the genders, regarding the topics of the stories they chose. The boys were more likely to pick items on sports whereas the girls found texts on social issues and crime more interesting.

- **What were the positive outcomes?**

Giving students the freedom to search for and write about news items that interest them gives them a feeling of autonomy and may motivate them to read more in the second language than they would normally do. Moreover, those students who did participate were happy with the assignment.

What were the problems and limitations?

My main problem was approaching this as an outsider and not being a part of the classroom. Although my collaboration with the teachers was good, there were aspects that I never got to explore being an outsider. Another problem was that the assignments were too open and unfocused, I think the students would have benefitted more if the goals and the framework had

been better established. I also think the assignments could be improved by asking the students to help design them and thus encourage collaboration between teachers and students.

What did you learn?

I learned that developing assignments that are meant to engage the students and make them motivated is a long process and that it is hard to find the right balance of structure and freedom.

Most students appreciate assignments that encourage them to think and give them autonomy. The kind of assignment we developed can help them start using online media in the second language, hopefully encouraging them to continue doing so. I also found it intriguing how much better boys seemed to respond to this assignment than to more traditional assignments, but I think more data is needed to make assertions. That is however something I am interested in researching in more detail in the future, as well as whether such open assignments may encourage and motivate more students to participate than more traditional assignments connected to textbooks.

What are your next steps?

I plan to continue developing these assignments next year, in collaboration with the teachers and perhaps the students. My ideas would be to make the assignment a bigger part of the final grade, make the structure and purpose clearer; and have the students work in groups or pairs and deliver more defined writing projects. It would also be beneficial and helpful to have clear guidelines for how the project will be evaluated, for both students and teachers.

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