Teacher Competences in Telecollaboration:
The Case of Web Conferencing and German for Professional Purposes

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following case examines the use of Web-based desktop conferencing as part of a university-level German for the Professions course, with a particular focus on the competences the foreign language teacher must exhibit in such a learning arrangement. Over the course of one semester, United States American learners of German interacted with invited expert guests from Germany and participated in an associated focused instructional module. As a result of interaction with invited expert guests and focused instruction, course participants increased their ability to make appropriately polite requests, a necessity for effective communication in a professional register. The case also discusses logistical requirements related to planning and facilitating a Web conferencing course component, including both expert-novice and peer-peer models. It will be seen that the successful use of synchronous online communication tools in foreign language instruction is directly dependent upon the teacher's pedagogical competences, digital competences, organizational competences, and beliefs and attitudes.

BACKGROUND

The emergence of robust and reliable Internet-based communication technologies, such as instant messaging, social networking and Web-based desktop conferencing, has greatly enhanced the nature of language teaching and learning, allowing for more immediate and authentic interaction between learners and members of the target language and culture. Foreign language classes now have the means to cooperate with geographically distant partners in the development of linguistic and cultural knowledge. Such online intercultural exchange has been the subject of active study in recent years (e.g., Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2002; Belz & Thorne, 2006; Blake, 2008; English, Furstenberg, Levet, & Maillet, 2001; Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004; Levy, 2007) leading O'Dowd (in press) to conclude that online intercultural exchange "is considered to be one of the main tools for developing intercultural communicative competence in the foreign language classroom" (p. 2). In addition to the development of intercultural communicative competence, online intercultural exchange offers other benefits for foreign language learning, such as the development of conversational fluency (Appel & Mullen, 2000; Lee, 2004; 2007; Levy & Kennedy, 2004; Wang, 2004) and socially appropriate language awareness and use (Belz & Kinginger, 2003; Belz & Vyatkina, 2005; 2008). As these digitally mediated learning configurations become more and more prevalent, and an increasing number of foreign language classes engage in online intercultural exchange, it is imperative that such innovation be guided by a set of best practices to ensure the maximum potential for successful learning.

The following case study contributes to the establishment of best practices in digitally mediated foreign language teaching by describing the implementation of a Web conferencing component within the context of a university-level *German for the Professions* course, with the aim of improving course participants' ability to use a formal/professional register during their interactions with German-speaking professionals located in Germany. As Müller-Hartmann (2012) notes, the case study approach is uniquely suited to capturing the multifaceted nature of online intercultural exchange:

Due to the complex interrelations of this environment and its agents, which involves teachers and learners and the different roles they fill, the tasks that structure the telecollaborative exchange, the computer as a multimodal tool, and the impact the sociocultural context has on the agents and the task-as-process, all variables cannot be controlled...Through its holistic approach to collecting and triangulating data from different perspectives, the case study approach allows a rich contextualization of the process, which is crucial to understand what is happening. (p. 164)

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