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Combining Skype with Blogging: A chance to stop reinforcement of stereotypes in intercultural exchanges?

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Abstract

This paper looks into whether combining Skype, blogging and class discussions reinforces or refutes stereotypes. The hypothesis was that some students do not have an adequate chance to reflect on their skype experience and course content. To see if students have made improvements in reducing stereotypes, the Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Culture will be used to evaluate their blog entries. In addition a survey will be given at end of the semester to analyse the student's perspective of their own learning.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, stereotypes, blog, cultural metaphor, skype.

1. Introduction

Tandem has been used successfully for many years at universities as a means of improving language skills. The Modern Language Center at Leuphana University started offering Tandem in winter semester 2009/2010 and Teletandem in 2010/2011 for credit points. These courses have been part of the curriculum since then. The purpose of this paper is to look beyond the language skills focus of Tandem and investigate how skyping as well as in-class blogging can help stop the reinforcement of stereotypes which can occur in Teletandem.

2. Theoretical Implications

2.1. Skype

Godwin-Jones (2007) sees telecollaboration as a good way to avoid oversimplified or tourist-like treatment of culture found in many text books. However, he points out that communicating, whether face-to-face or virtually, does not promise effective communication. He sees reflection as a way to prevent cultural misunderstandings. According to a Europe-wide study from the INTENT project team about online international exchanges the study, only 5% thought stereotypes had been reinforced via exchanges, and 26% were not sure (Guth, Helm, & O'Dowd, 2012, p. 28). Yet the participants' responses to "By doing my online exchange(s) I confirmed what I thought about members of other cultures." were divided up almost equally between agree, undecided and disagree (Guth, Helm, & O'Dowd, 2012, p. 47). Additionally, García and Craprotta (2007) see 'synchronous exchanges', i.e. via Skype, as 'unreflected' because an immediate answer is required; however, asynchronous communication, e.g. online forums for *Cultura*, allows for 'reflection and analysis'. These authors mirror my experience (Kirschner & Mißfeldt 2013) that face-to-face contact does not guarantee reflection. Therefore, a blogging component was added to the course Blog-Versity.

2.2. Blog

Although personal blogs are conducive to self-reflection, collective blogs, where small groups exchange ideas and information, are more beneficial to collaborative learning (Lee 2011). Therefore, my students used personal blogs for reflective purposes. According to Dewey, reflection is an "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (Dewey, 1933, p. 16). In the course Blog-Versity, students took an active role through blogging. Because three Skype sessions were required and there was overlap in their topics, they were also persistent. Before blogging, students discussed their conversations and compared them with the course content, thus giving them 'careful consideration.'

Regarding the benefits, Sideka and Yunusa (2012) view blogging as able "to support reflection and communication in realistic circumstances". They describe the blogging process as being stimulated by new knowledge, understanding the text in this case, and thinking about what has been learned and how to put it in their own words. This is in line with Dewey.

However, blogging does not always have positive associations. Scharma and Xie (2008) and Helm, Guth, & Farrah (2012) both mention unfamiliarity with technology or poorly functioning technology as a means of frustration. Additionally, Sharma and Xie (2008) and Hosack (2004) pointed out that lack of privacy could also contribute to negative associations. Therefore, a blog patterned after WordPress and stored on and supported by the Leuphana University server as well as pseudonyms were chosen.

2.3. Metaphors

According to Lee (2011), "Critical reflection, however, relied on the teacher's guidance and feedback". Since blogging alone is not always sufficient, cultural metaphors (Gannon 2010) and feedback were used during class discussions. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) popularized metaphors, suggesting that humans perceived the world through metaphors. Gannon then adapted this idea to the cultural metaphor "which is any activity, phenomenon, or institution that members of a given culture consider important and with which they identify emotionally and/or cognitively... As such the metaphor represents the underlying values expressive of the culture itself." (Gannon, 2010, p. XV). This notion also supports reflection and careful consideration.

Additionally, metaphors are used to show an abstract or unfamiliar idea in a more understandable way. Singh (2010) states that it is "the constructivist view, which asks the listener or reader of the metaphor to go beyond the literal in order to create his or her own understanding of reality." This implies that there is a wide variety of 'realities'. In my experience, students often view cultural terms used by Hofstede, Hall and Trompenaars in a bi-polar way. This is not intended but can be the case sometimes. In order to avoid this pitfall, students blogged about cultural metaphors.

3. Methodology

3.1. Course background

In winter semester 2013/2014, the participants of the Blog-Versity course (level B2.2) at Leuphana and the participants from University of Minnesota course German 3011(level B1) skyped three times within 5 weeks. Blog-Versity is a course where advanced writing skills are improved via the acquisition of information about culture and intercultural communication competencies. Data was only gathered for Blog-Versity.

In between the three Skype assignments and continuing throughout the semester, students blogged about their Skype findings and observations. The course curriculum

included detailed information and discussions about terminology (e.g. Hall, Hofstede, Trompenaars, Schwarz), communication, intercultural communication, cultural competencies and stereotypes (final 3 sessions). All Skype exchanges were finished before the topic of stereotypes was discussed.

3.2. Tasks

After a schedule of Skype times was distributed in the first class session, the Leuphana students needed to discuss topics to elicit information about possible differences from their Skype partners and then try to find commonalities. The following questions were discussed:

- First Skype session: How do students see the world?
- Second Skype session: The perfect society – vision of the future
- Third Skype session: Globalization and Culture – How has globalization changed culture?

The topics were kept vague to allow students to develop a conversation naturally. The blog entries following the Skypes had to include both the German and American viewpoints.

In week 6 and 9, students were asked to create a metaphor, first about Germany and then about the US. They later blogged about cultural metaphors, and their last blog entry involved assessing these entries for any 'stereotypical' wording or comments.

After completing workshops on technical blogs and writing, students completed three collaborative writing tasks as well as thirteen blog entries throughout the semester. Most of the blog entries were started and then completed within the week. Group assignments were completed in class. Students received feedback from the instructor about organization, grammar and sentence structure. Content was never commented on unless it was off topic.

4. Data collection and analysis

For this paper, the National Standards in Foreign Language Education in the culture section is used. It lists 2 standards: "*Standard 2.1: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied*" and "*Standard 2.2: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied*" (<http://www.actfl.org/node/192>). Like many standards, this is more of a guideline with a wide range of possibilities; therefore, more specification was necessary. In Shrum & Glisan (2010) quoted in Troyan (2012), they specify: "Students identify, examine and discuss connections between cultural perspectives and socially approved behavioral patterns" for 2.1 and "Students identify, discuss, and analyze such intangible products of the target culture as social, economic, and political institutions, and explore relationships among these institutions and the perspectives of the culture" for 2.2.

Using the Standards for Foreign Language Learning as a basis, the blogs about the first and last Skype assignments were evaluated for topics of culture associated with these standards. Although there are 5 parts to this scale (communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities), only the cultures section was used for the sake of brevity. Additionally, a class survey about the students' Skype experience was done in week 4 (Skype) and 11 (cultural metaphors) where students were asked about similarities and stereotypes respectively.

4.1. Skype and Blog data

The first Skype assignment was set up so that students could identify what they view as important. By discussing both US and German views and trying to find similarities or differences, they also had to examine the connection between two cultural perspectives

and behaviours. Interestingly enough, students not only listed cultural practices (self-responsibility, building friendship, typical university social events) but also included cultural products (e.g. political systems, free trade, social inequality, economic power and responsibility.) All but 4 entries mentioned both the practices and products from the very beginning.

Not all students discussed both parts. Of the 19 blogs, six of them were either off the topic, not clear if it was a general opinion instead of their own or if a Skype partner's opinion was stated. One blogger, knaufi, referred to her Skype partner twice as 'hard-headed'. Others posited possible reasons for dissimilarities:

- "U.S. do not reflect as much as students from other countries because they see their own country as a well-structured place, they do not have a varied comparison to other countries like Europe and get only one sided information through a powerful news station." Blogger Charly.
- "Similarities can be found as well as some differences due to the country's history, the educational system and the geographical location of the countries." Blogger Ladida.
- "Canadians and Americans are similar because they both speak English." Blogger Butterfly.

When stereotypes are mentioned, most students look for a reason. Although this does not guarantee the reasons are free of stereotypes, at least students are trying to find an answer. However, one drawback of the National Standard involves the difficulty of deciding when practices become products and vice-versa.

The first class survey in week 4 mirrored the topics mentioned. Only a few cases of stereotypes were mentioned. When asked why they found more similarities than differences, the students offered several hypotheses. Many believed this was due to either the types of questions asked, or that they were in a similar situation i.e. college students. Others thought that looking for common ground was more typical when getting to know someone. A few even posited that they might not always have understood indirect disagreement.

The third Skype assignment showed similar results. Of the 18 completed blogs, five were either off the topic or not clear if it was a general opinion instead of their own or if a Skype partner's opinion was stated. The most notable change was how they phrased their views:

- "It appears rather inconvenient when one movie-making elite has the same cultural background and decides where to lay the focus." Blogger X.
- "Hearing (Skype partner's name) saying all the negative things about the world, I was surprised." Blogger Palim.
- "I thought that despite my appreciation of the Americans, I do not like their politics either." Blogger Budoka.

In most cases when students mentioned a negative trait, they used hedging techniques (seems, appears, could be, perhaps). Others had their stereotypes deconstructed, e.g. blogger Palim and Budoka. Again the problem of product vs. practice was an issue.

The final survey in week 11 and the last task of assessing their cultural metaphors of Germany and the US in week 14 showed that most of the reduction in stereotypical language and thoughts took place without the students realizing it. In the survey, students were asked: "What surprised you the most while skypeing?" Of the 17 students present, 11 students said that their partners criticized the US government. They discovered that their partners were open-minded about religion, knew a lot about Germany and not all of them were against gun control. All of these aspects are typical stereotypes that many Germans have about the US. When students were asked which

stereotypes had been refuted, they could not come up with an answer. After having this discrepancy pointed out to them, they realized that their stereotypes had been refuted.

When students assessed their cultural metaphors for Germany and the US, 7 of the 15 students were surprised about their results. The reasons for this were various. Some were amazed at how positive they saw their country or the US. Others were surprised that they seemed to have a negative outlook on life. However, 8 of the 15 were not surprised. These students saw themselves as people friendly. Others said that they purposely tried to not use stereotypes. The most interesting statement came from blogger Balou: "Every stereotype could be seen either positive or negative and sometimes it is not possible to say."

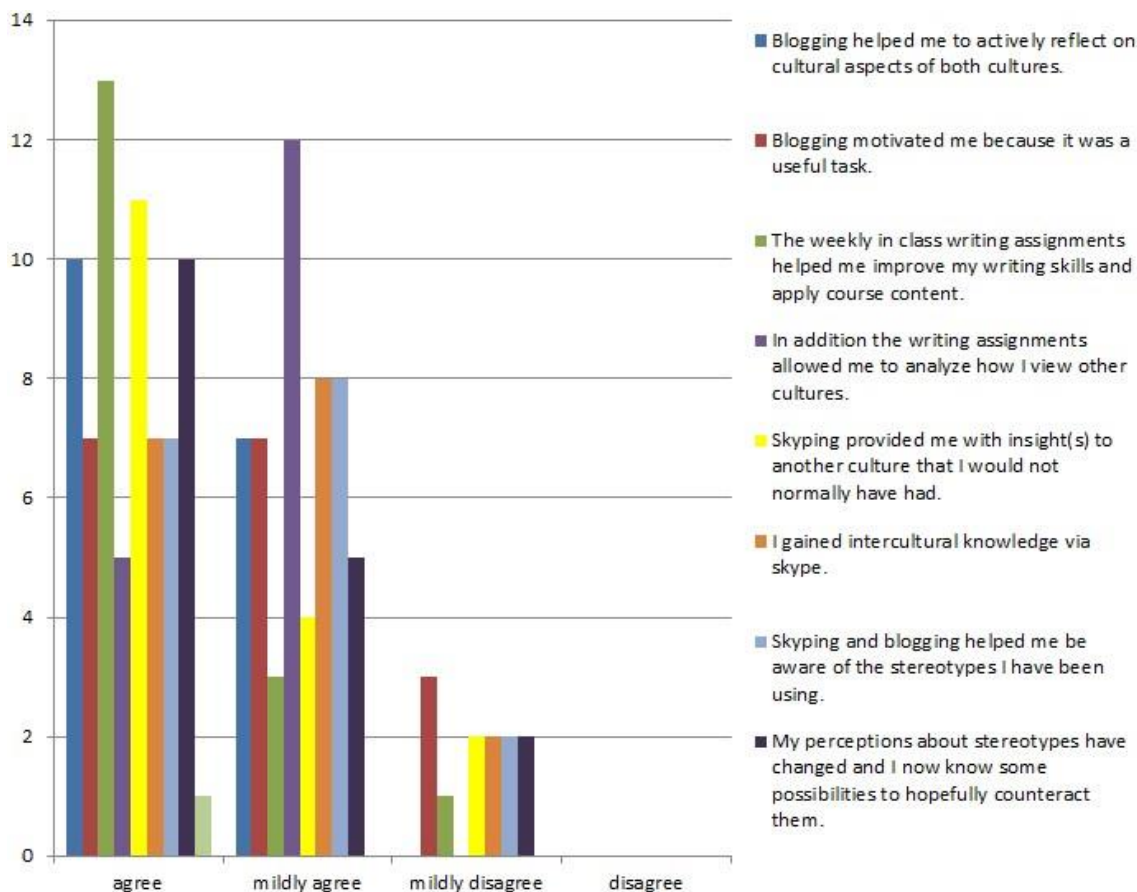


Figure 1. Results of survey completed by students.

5. Conclusion

Using only one of the five points in the National Standards in Foreign Language Education did not provide an adequate measurement. However, this has more to do with its application in this study than the actual standard. This approach was chosen due to the tight time schedules instructors face. It underscores the need for a quick and easy way to check cultural competencies. Nonetheless, "the assessment of ICC development is "not a visible process, nor is it a linear process" (Helm, 2009, p. 101). Additionally, "it emerges slowly over time" (Troy, 2012, p. 25).

Despite the lack of success with using a singular step in the National Standards, the various surveys, reflections, and writings show that the students made an improvement by using less stereotypical language and thoughts. Only by writing a blog, taking surveys, and requiring students to occasionally reflect on their thoughts throughout the semester was it possible to see progress in reducing but not eliminating stereotypical reinforcements.

6. Outlook

Since learning in general requires time, future courses will also need a variety of instruments be it a blog, class discussion or class surveys as well as time for reflections in order to make progress in intercultural understanding.

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