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Web 2.0 Tasks in Action: EFL Learning in the U.S. Embassy School Election Project 2012

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by Joannis Kaliampos and Torben Schmidt

Exploring topics that are personally relevant and interesting to young adult English as a foreign language (EFL) learners remains a core challenge in language teaching. At the same time, the advent of Web 2.0 applications has many repercussions for authentic language learning. The “U.S. Embassy School Election Project 2012” has addressed these questions by combining a close focus on the U.S. Presidential Election with an interactive project scenario. Over 1,400 students across Germany participated in this project and produced an election forecast for an assigned U.S. state based on a survey of regional news media and social network data. Their predictions were in many cases more accurate than those of major U.S. broadcasting networks.

This paper discusses the general educational potential of such projects in the contexts of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), intercultural learning, and learning in a task-based project environment. The authors have applied a multimodal qualitative approach to analyze tasks and learner perceptions of tasks in the context of the election project. In a first step, the micro-perspective of the perception of web-based tasks is investigated by example of one selected task cycle and a focus group of three learners. The second part of the analysis represents a bird’s-eye view on the learner products arising out of such tasks.

Introduction

There are few political events that receive as much global media attention, especially also in Germany, as the U.S. presidential elections, which uniquely illustrate the moods, opinions, and political polarities of a diverse U.S. population. As a cultural event, the election and the corresponding political campaigns stand out as examples of mediatized discourses that have been increasingly shaped by the advent of social media. While the 2008 presidential campaign was received as a novelty for its tentative introduction of social networks and crowd funding into the domain of political campaigning, the use of these elements was massively extended in the 2012 campaign to become necessary fields of action for both competing parties. Political observers widely commented on a new culture of political accountability caused by the pace and permeability of YouTube (cf. Hediger) and the candidates’ dependence on social media to win the election (cf. Comart). At the same time, this mediatization seems to appeal especially to a young and international audience. Several large-scale studies in the context of

German teenagers have reported that social media are the most extensively used Web-applications for communication and entertainment in this age group (cf. Calmbach et al., MPFS 2012).

In this sense, the U.S. presidential election represents a promising and stimulating topic for the intermediate-advanced EFL classroom. It is a cultural discourse that provides a twofold authenticity for young adult learners: it serves as an authentic representation of the target culture and it utilizes the same means of computer-mediated communication as many young adults do as a matter of course today. The “U.S. Embassy School Election Project 2012” (hereafter: election project) presented German EFL students with the challenge of finding out precisely what makes Americans tick politically. Learners were to act as political observers, retrace processes of political opinion formation in the target culture, and make a reflective prediction of the election outcome against the backdrop of local concerns, demographic and social realities, and political traditions.

This paper aims to elicit the processes and products that occurred in this task-based and web-supported intercultural learning environment as they occurred during the project. Section 1 provides a general overview of the election project and delineates the three domains of the project’s educational potential, i.e. task-based language learning and teaching (TBLT), intercultural and civic learning, and computer-assisted language learning (CALL). In section 2, we discuss the classroom-based research design of this study as well as the scope of analysis. Section 3 sets out to facilitate a micro- and macro-perspective on task performance in this project. While in the first part, task performance procedures of three focus students in the context of a selected task are described, we concentrate on the array of learner products in this project in the second half.

1 The Concept of the U.S. Embassy School Election Project 2012

1.1 Project Context

Based on the experience with a previous EFL project in the context of the 2008 U.S. presidential election, the U.S. Embassy in Germany initiated an organizational partnership with representatives of teacher education and foreign language research (Leuphana University Lüneburg), curricular state agencies (Landesinstitut für Schule und Medien, LISUM Berlin-Brandenburg), and non-profit e-learning specialists (LIFE e.V., Berlin), as well as EFL practitioners in secondary schools throughout Germany. As an underlying idea of the project, EFL classes throughout Germany were supposed to adopt one U.S. state and virtually become citizens and critical experts for their state by investigating local socio-demographic statistics, media, political parties, and elected representatives in order to produce an informed and accurate prediction of that state’s electoral behavior in anticipation of the 2012 election. This prediction was to be presented in the form of

a creative product, such as a video, website, blog, a song etc., and was to be submitted in a competition. These predictions together were to form a mock election shortly before the actual presidential election would be held.

Teachers registered their courses for the project and were provided with a private e-classroom on the Moodle-based project platform¹, which included teaching materials, additional teacher notes, access to a shared ‘meeting room,’ i.e. a virtual town hall to meet and communicate with other project participants, and four interactive task cycles addressing these topics of (a) the U.S. electoral system, (b) the presidential candidates, (c) the central campaign issues, and (d) the campaign in the adopted state (cf. section 2.3 for more details on the materials). Within a few weeks, 113 participating courses registered on the platform and 1,437 learners and their teachers from different parts of Germany enrolled in the project and set up their profiles on Moodle. Even though the participating learner groups came from different educational and organizational settings, a majority of 78 percent of them were in the German academically oriented Gymnasium, predominantly in grades 11 and 12. Thus, the participants were mostly intermediate learners (i.e. ‘independent users’ on levels B1/B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, cf. Council of Europe 2002) in the German school system. On average, they had received EFL instruction since third grade and the majority had selected the subject of English as their specialized course in the upper secondary grades (i.e. ‘Leistungs-/Profilfach’).

Arising from the core topics of the project and its facilitation through Moodle, at least three essential domains of pedagogic principles and objectives were implemented. These components of task-based language learning and project work, intercultural learning, as well as computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and learning with web 2.0 applications, will be discussed in the following sections in more detail.

1.2 From Task-Based Learning to Project Work

In the process of conceptualizing the project and designing its components, a task-based approach to language pedagogy was applied. This approach reflects the concept of communicative language teaching (cf. Piepho; Breen and Candlin; Littlewood, *Communicative Language Teaching*), according to which the language learner is viewed (a) as a unique individual with idiosyncratic ways of learning while being at the same time (b) a social being who learns best in co-operation; (c) as a responsible student who takes their learning seriously; (d) as a self-directed individual able to make independent decisions; and (e) as capable of developing didactic expertise and becoming a practitioner of learning (cf. Allwright and Hanks 4-7). In such a pedagogy, learning is ideally organized and structured through tasks that require L2 performance and, at the same time, provide a connection to authentic communicative situations outside the classroom. Thus, van den Branden’s widely accepted task definition states that “[a] task is an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the

use of language” (van den Branden 4). It emphasizes a primary focus on meaning, integration of language skills, and authentic language use with the pursuit of personally relevant goals. Tasks are usually organized in meaningful sequences, providing opportunities for the practice of complex skills and linguistic forms, and allow students to gradually master more complex demands in the target language within the protected space of their classroom while drawing on the support of peers, their teacher, and available tools and resources (Littlewood, “Task-Based Learning” 40-57).

Following these principles, the election project’s first task cycle required students to explore the U.S. electoral system and led them to critically compare it to the more familiar German system. In order to do so, learners were first introduced to the necessary vocabulary and concepts through a short animated video² and a word cloud³ from which the learners selected important terms to be defined in a learner-generated glossary. Based on the processes explained in the video, they then formed expert groups for further research on one of the individual stages of the electoral process and presented their findings to classmates in an online forum. Thus, the task’s emphasis was on the subject matter (the electoral process) and the communicative target of exchanging information with their peers, as opposed to the isolated study of linguistic structures. The individual activities depended on each other insofar as the use of the word cloud and glossary elicited new vocabulary, the video introduced new concepts of the electoral system, and the small group phase provided room for the discussion of these concepts. These stages together provided the kind of instructional support without which the mastery of the target task would not have been possible. An example of the principle of meaningful sequencing and focus on meaning will also be discussed in the analysis of a role play in section 4.1.

However, before delving into the details of a particular task cycle, let us also emphasize that, on a macro-level, such a sequence of activities can easily exceed the boundaries of a single task and thus constitute a learning arrangement that we define here as a project (cf. also Stoller; Legutke “Projekte und Szenarien”). The U.S. election project as a whole qualifies as such a learning arrangement in the sense that it directs students through a sequence of task cycles that enable them to master a comprehensive target task (i.e. predicting the election outcome, participating in the competition, see above), which in turn meaningfully builds on preceding activities. In order to investigate the structure and educational potential of such projects, a closer examination of research on project work in foreign language pedagogy appears fruitful. Legutke and Thomas echo Dewey’s (1916) call for “experience and thinking” in their definition of project work:

It [i.e. project work] is a theme and task-centred mode of teaching and learning which results from a joint process of negotiation between all participants. It allows for a wide scope of self-determined action for both the individual and the small group of learners within the general framework of a plan which defines goals and procedures. Project learning realizes a dynamic balance between a process and a product orientation. Finally, it is experiential and holistic because it bridges the dualism between body and mind, theory and practice ... (160)

In the election project, the mock election held by German students together with the creative competition functions as a general goal-orientation, while the focus on the presidential election and the adopted state form a complex and rich thematic framework for content-based learning. In keeping with Legutke's and Thomas' contribution, the individual stages of the project can be broadly described in six steps: (1) In the *opening phase*, the project was initiated with a state lottery in which participating classes were assigned their U.S. state roughly two months ahead of the elections. It was also at this stage that individual e-modules containing general and state-specific materials and tasks were made available to each course. (2) In the *topic orientation phase*, the thematic framework was introduced to the learner groups. Students gained a first overview of the electoral system and were sensitized towards general campaign issues. (3) Depending on the actual implementation procedures on-site, the phase of self-directed *research and data collection* ensued relatively late in the project. It was geared towards the discussion and planning of the course product, including decisions regarding its form and content; an examination of necessary communicative and non-communicative competences; and identifying potential activities and tools that would facilitate task completion. During this phase, students researched their assigned state's political history, demographic statistics, the current news media landscape, prevalent controversial topics in mass and social media, and participated in discourses with experts on their state and through personal contacts with partner schools and local citizens using information and communication technology. (4) In the *preparation of data presentation* phase, students then agreed on the form and content of their predicted election outcome, and planned and produced their contribution to the competition. A glimpse at these submissions reveals the accuracy and diversity of project outcomes. The participant groups submitted more than 70 contributions in the form of websites/blogs, comics, newspapers, videos, songs, posters, and multi-media presentations. They predicted the election outcome correctly in 48 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia (student contributions to the competition are the focus of analysis in section 4.2).⁴ (5) The *presentation* of results took different forms: learners presented their work in their courses and schools; all of the contributions were made accessible on Moodle along with an interactive feedback and rating function open to all registered users in the project. Many videos, blogs, and presentations were publicly accessible through data-sharing and video platforms; students presented their work at concluding events in Berlin and Hamburg; and a number of local and national print and TV media reported on the project and the

participants. (6) A final *evaluation* stage was undertaken in individual participant classrooms (cf. Legutke and Thomas 169-81 for a discussion of schematic project stages).

1.3 Intercultural and Civic Learning

The thematic framework of the project, by definition, lends itself to the promotion of intercultural and civic education objectives (cf. Sander, who defines 'civic education' as a cross-curricular challenge in the German education system). In designing the project tasks, a communicative and reflective concept of intercultural learning inferred from Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) was adopted. This concept takes van Ek's model of communicative competence as a point of departure while criticizing its exclusive focus on verbal communication and its normative orientation that institutes the educated native speaker as the sole model for language learners (Byram 10-11). ICC is thus defined as consisting of interrelated *savoirs*, or skills, namely the cognitive level of knowledge about one's own and other cultures, the skills of interpreting and relating cultures to one another, of discovering and interacting in different cultures, and the learner's attitudinal dispositions to relativize their own and value other cultures (Byram 34). In such a competence-oriented conceptualization, ICC is set apart from traditional approaches to foreign language teaching, which view sociocultural competence mostly as the accumulation of (factual) knowledge about other cultures, thus disregarding the focus on method and implying a reductionist and monolithic understanding of foreign cultures (and thereby of the learners' native cultures as well).

The election project actively embedded intercultural learning processes in competence-oriented task frameworks. Learners, e.g., were not merely asked to research the presidential candidates' biographical backgrounds, but to also act out their findings in a role play. In a similar way, they were not just asked to research local political preferences, sociocultural factors, and historical developments that drive political action in a selected state, but to make an informed prediction of the adopted state's voting behavior and potentially publish the prediction online on Web 2.0 platforms. They thereby participated in, or even initiated, public discourses centered on the topic of the project.

In addition to this competence and communication-oriented approach to ICC, it has been argued that intercultural understanding involves psychological and emotional dispositions that cannot be operationalized as easily as communicative competences (Bredella 120). At the core of these dispositions lies the ability and readiness to alter between *insider and outsider perspectives on cultures*. As Bredella argues, in order to understand a foreign culture, learners need to make an effort to develop an insider perspective on it so that views and values that appeared unreasonable or wrong from the outside can become reasonable and understandable—a process that may facilitate, but also necessitate the development of empathy (120). This is the case in the mock election as the target

task of the project. The students are asked to perform a shift of perspectives between their own identity and an outsider perspective on U.S. politics on the one hand, and the potential identities of citizens in their adopted state and these persons' insider perspective on the election. This perspectival shift appears challenging considering the predominantly held opinions regarding the U.S. elections in Germany and the focus of German mass media before Election Day as opposed to some drastically different political views and affiliations held by certain parts of the U.S. population. In order to perform this shift, learners had to develop a detailed understanding of their adopted state that largely exceeded the mere analysis of political advertisements and extended to the analysis of local media, demographic statistics, and especially also informal sources of information like social media. They also especially had to acknowledge that in trying to understand foreign cultures they need to reject absolutisms and instead acknowledge that cultures are *heterogeneous interplays of individual identities* that might not collectively fit into a pre-conceived image (cf. Bredella 121). In doing so, learners explored the *dialogic and reflective process of intercultural understanding* as they began to question the alleged matter-of-fact nature of their own identity as well as their native culture and language. Their prediction of the election outcome in the mock election, then, represents an attempt to manifest their newly gained critical cultural awareness, a third place (Kramsch) that draws on influences of both native and target cultures (cf. also Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-von Ditfurth 26–27).

1.4 Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Web 2.0

From the perspective of language pedagogy and research, the approach of CALL has, until today, become one of the most prominent fields of occupation in the discipline. It is commonly defined as “the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning” (Levy 1). CALL emerged as a sub-discipline in the context of behavioristically oriented, mainly drill and practice-based applications in the 1960s. It has since then widened its scope parallel to the technological advancement (cf. Warschauer) and progress in foreign language pedagogy (cf. Bax) to now represent a cross-sectional field of activity with the potential to inform a multitude of language teaching and learning contexts (cf. Davies, Otto, and Rüschoff for a historical overview). While a substantial amount of research has been conducted in the wider context of CALL, we know relatively little about how learners actually utilize digital media in the foreign language classroom (Müller-Hartmann 207). At the prospect of a growing availability of mobile devices and Web 2.0 applications, the ‘how’ of CALL from the vantage point of the learner in the form of learner perceptions, interpretations, and performance of tasks shifts into the center of attention (Kumaravadivelu 2007).

Today, computer- and Web-supported learning activities are also commonly referred to as “e-learning,” a buzzword that can denote virtually any form of learning with or through digital media, from the mere utilization of learning materials online to complete self-learning courses, from behavioristic online-

tutoring programs to synchronous and asynchronous communication between learners and/or instructors (cf. Rösler, “E-Learning”). Nevertheless, all of these possible appearances of e-learning tend to rely on one or several of the following components to varying degrees: digital distribution of teaching and learning materials, use of instructive materials that are accessible online, use of authentic materials that are accessible online, co-operative learning arrangements through online platforms or online communication, and learners in the position of authors and publishers of learner texts (cf. Rösler, “E-Learning”). The election project’s Moodle platform implemented these principles in various ways: all learning and teaching materials including task directions for learners and notes for instructors were distributed through the platform; these materials were included both instructive materials that were specifically designed for this project as well as authentic materials like TV documentaries, statistics, news media, and links to social media; in addition, teachers and learners could communicate through the Moodle platform in forums or private chats, and they could share their own learner texts with other participants.

That being said, it still needs to be emphasized that the field of CALL has been substantially modified by the advent of the Web 2.0. As early as in 2005, Tim O’Reilly introduced this concept into the broader discourse about the development of the World Wide Web as an increasingly interactive, interconnected, and participatory platform in which users interact with other users and create, share, and publish their own content individually or in collaboration. Typical platforms and applications in the 2.0 age which also have been implemented in EFL settings are, amongst others, social networking sites like Facebook (cf. McBride), weblogs (cf. Ellermann, Raith, and Carney), audioblogs or podcasts (cf. Travis and Joseph; Schmidt), video platforms such as YouTube (cf. Thaler), learning management systems like Moodle or lo-net2 (cf. Netz; Donath and Klemm), interactive whiteboards (Cutrim-Schmid), mobile devices (Wang and Heffernan) or micro-blogging applications like Twitter (Mork). All of these practice reports involving the use of Web 2.0 applications have in common that they use the Web not just as a static source of information and a channel for communication, but as a network, or rather a platform, that builds on the diversity and dynamics of social communities while using technology for its intended purpose, i.e. a medium to facilitate learning (cf. Sturm et al. 370-1; Fuchs and Snyder). Some of these applications have been implemented in the election project and their use in language learning will be analyzed in section 3.

2 Research Design

2.1 Focus of Analysis

As we have laid out above, the election project was intended to implement the pedagogical potential of TBLT, ICC, and CALL. In the subsequent analysis of learning processes and outcomes, we shall primarily focus on the former, i.e. TBLT and on the others specifically through the lens of TBLT. For this purpose, we use

the constructs of the task, and learner perceptions of tasks respectively, as a core unit of analysis as it bridges the domains of teaching, learning, and research. However, as Richards et al. argue, tasks have a “complex personality when implemented in the classroom” (175). Based on Breen’s work (“The Evaluation Cycle”), they define the relationship between the task-as-workplan, the task-in-process, and the task-as-outcomes as follows:

The task-as-workplan is the intended pedagogy, the plan made prior to classroom implementation of what the teachers and learners will do. The task-in-process is the actual pedagogy or what actually happens in the classroom. The task-as-outcomes is whatever is physically produced [during the task]. (175)

These different manifestations of tasks reflect the views of instructors and learners to varying degrees. The task-as-workplan clearly elicits a teacher perspective and takes the learner into focus only as a hypothesis, i.e. as an anticipated vantage point of instructional efforts. The task-in-process, however, is more capable of eliciting a learner perspective on the task insofar as it is constituted by the learner handling and performance of the task.

In addition, the relationship between these manifestations can take different degrees of linearity. Learners’ task performance might closely correspond with the intended pedagogy, or might deviate from it more or less drastically due to an array of contextual factors, task implementation factors, or personal learning dispositions. In fact, if we are to take social constructivist learning theory (cf. Sturm et al.; Jonassen) seriously, then learners cannot be conceptualized as predictable and uniform executors of tasks. In other words, tasks unfold their educational and communicative potential only in the very environment of the classroom and the precise circumstances of task implementation. In this process, learners are likely to re-conceptualize tasks according to these circumstances and individual needs, expectations, prior learning experiences, and interests, and thus make their own contributions to task design (cf. Breen, “Learner Contributions”). Such instances of learner reinterpretations can address various dimensions of tasks, e.g. task objectives, subject matter, necessary task procedures, conditions and context of task performance, and the identification and realization of language learning opportunities (cf. Breen, “Learner Contribution” 335-36). In the light of the interplay of these possible learner contributions as well as the increased possibilities for learner autonomy afforded by the use of digital media in this project, it appears improbable to assume that the task-as-workplan will translate directly into predictable processes and outcomes. Thus, the subsequent analysis will investigate such learner reinterpretations during a selected task-in-process as well as individual learner texts in the task-as-outcomes.

2.2 Research Context

The data analyzed in this paper were collected in the context of one of the author's doctoral research during the election project in fall 2012. Taking micro- and macro-perspectives on learner perceptions of tasks into account as well as quantitative and qualitative data elicitation techniques, a qualitative-dominant quan→QUAL→quan mixed methods approach (cf. Morse; Johnson et al.) was designed to elicit the complex construct of learner perceptions of tasks in this project-oriented context. Such a mixed research paradigm, following the work of Johnson et al., "is the type of research in which a researcher ... combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches ... for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration" (123). In this sense, a two-part quantitative questionnaire study component and a qualitative classroom-based component were integrated for the purposes of increasing the strengths of complementary research instruments by negating individual instruments' weaknesses, connecting the macro-perspective on the entire election project to the micro-perspective on individual learner groups and individual learners in selected task performance sequences. Thus, the validity of research findings is improved through the convergence and corroboration of different data sets (cf. Dörnyei 45; Denzin 294).⁵

2.3 Participants

The overall group of participants includes over 1,400, mostly intermediate EFL students in 113 courses in different parts of Germany, predominantly in 11th and 12th grade of the German upper secondary school ('Gymnasium'). They took part in the project as part of their regular EFL classes. The purposive and typical sample of focus groups (cf. Dörnyei 127-28) serving as subjects of the qualitative study are three intermediate-advanced 11th grade EFL courses of the German *Gymnasium*. The courses comprise 64 students taught by three teachers in two schools in Lüneburg, Germany. Course sizes varied between 18 and 22 students. Learners were on average 17 years old and had been learning English at school since third grade, i.e. they had been exposed to roughly eight years of school-based EFL instruction. All focus courses were scheduled twice a week for 90 minutes (i.e. two consecutive 45-minute lessons in the German school system). At the beginning of the data collection period these students had been learning together in this constellation for not more than two weeks. The project was carried out in these groups between September and November 2012 for four to five weeks.

2.4 Setting of Data Collection

The setting of the qualitative study follows the principle of naturalistic classroom-based research (cf. Gass and Mackey) and includes the regular classrooms of the focus groups and their schools' computer labs. While one course teacher decided to relocate his course to the school's computer lab for the full duration of the project, the other two classes were only scheduled for 45 to 90 minutes per week in the computer lab and met in their regular classrooms on the remaining

occasions. For the duration of the project, all classes were recorded using two steady cameras, further audio-recording devices during small-group interactions, and an additional computer-webcam and screen capturing software (Camtasia) during computer-assisted activities. The project was implemented in the participants' regular curriculum through intensive discussions between teachers and the researcher prior to the project initiation and ongoing consultations during the project. However, the recorded courses were preserved in their authentic classroom structure as pedagogical alterations or organizational modifications for the purpose of data collection procedures were kept to a minimum. Before each class, the teachers briefly announced the upcoming lesson's structure and content to the researcher, who occasionally functioned as a co-instructor when directly addressed by students or teachers during class. After each class, focus students were interviewed individually or in small groups, teachers recorded their reflective comments on the lesson, and selected focus students reflected on their task perceptions in a personal learning journal. All three classes submitted a contribution to the competition, took part in an official concluding event organized by the U.S. Consulate General in Hamburg, and completed the project with a formal class exam.

3 Results: Task Analysis—Focus on Performance and Products

We now turn to the analysis of the idiosyncratic processes of communication and negotiation of meaning which occurred in the context of two selected tasks within the project. In the first part of the analysis (section 3.1), we try to facilitate a critical insight into individual learners' task interpretations and task performance processes in their actual EFL classroom, whereas in the second example (section 3.2) a bird's-eye view on the range of learner texts and project outcomes through the lens of TBLT as defined above is applied.

3.1 A Micro-Analysis of Task Performance

In this first example, a case from the project has been selected that allows for a condensed and deep insight into the complexity of task perception and performance in the context of the project.

Task Description

Students in one of the observed learner groups engaged in a role play activity in the context of examining the presidential candidates' biographies. They were given the role of one of the candidates, their wives, or journalists, then had to conduct Web-based research on their given character, and subsequently present their findings in a role-play structured as an interview. The teacher assigned a double lesson (90 minutes) for the whole task cycle, the first half of which was spent in the computer lab and the remainder in the regular classroom. The teacher had modified the task from the Moodle platform. She had merged components from a task that asked students to conduct a Web-research with a second one in which

students should perform a TV interview of the candidates with their wives. Most of the task implementation decisions (i.e. time frame, location, planning and support, social configuration etc.) were made by the teacher as well. The task description in figure 1 was distributed among students as a handout and read aloud and discussed in class prior to task performance:

Preparing a Role Play: An Interview with the Candidates and Their Wives You will be given a sheet with your role for the role play, which will be an interview between a journalist from a newspaper, a TV or radio station and the presidential candidates together with their wives. Using the information provided on the platform and the internet, research your role and memorize and take notes about the information.

If you are one of the presidential candidates or one of the wives, then look at their biographies, important events, dates, their education, university degree, further qualifications, their political career, the effects of their biographies on their campaign, and the support which is provided by the wives and their families.

If you are one of the interviewers, then inform yourself about the couple you are going to interview, think of possible questions which you might ask (see aspects above). Try asking questions which might be interesting for viewers and the public. Maybe ask a controversial question in order to provoke a reaction.

Figure 1: Task-as-Workplan: an interview with the candidates and their wives

Regarding the language learning procedures involved, the task can be classified in terms of intended language use, required language skills, cognitive complexity, distribution of information among learners, and projected outcomes, following Ellis's ("*Task-Based Language*" 17 and "*Language Teaching*" 200) framework for task evaluation. On the basis of the task directions, it can be inferred that the task offers a high degree of learner choice and autonomy as, e.g., there is no formally prescribed language use, and the outcomes cannot be clearly predicted, especially in terms of its potential content and, equally, its linguistic form. Additionally, the differing anticipations of students regarding the sheer amount of potential Web-resources to be used, and the spontaneity of the role-play situation render this task cycle a cognitively highly complex challenge. This, of course, has repercussions for the task performance procedures involved.

Task Performance Analysis

In the retrospective interview data addressing this lesson as well as throughout the project, many students revealed a distanced, sometimes stereotypical attitude towards political conservatism in the U.S., as exemplified through Mitt Romney's presidential campaign and its representation in German media. Students, e.g., expressed their lack of interest in travelling to their assigned state, Oklahoma,⁶ or argued that if they were to vote in the election, they would probably opt for Obama due to his perceived likability.⁷ This awareness of their own pre-existing prejudices appears as a fruitful departure point in the following description of task performance. Classroom data as well as retrospectively elicited data show that task performance procedures varied highly according to the learners' interpretation of subject matter and learning objectives as well as with regard to their media choice and use. The following presentation of task performance of three focus students illustrates this assumption.

*Focus student 1—Francesca:*⁸ Francesca is an active Twitter user in her free time and quickly decided to retrieve the presidential candidates' Twitter feeds as she realized that the suggested research materials on Moodle, i.e. video clips from documentaries, timelines, and Wikipedia articles, "were, however, fairly general, i.e. insightful but without a direct personal opinion. How was I supposed to ask critical questions based on such a 'curriculum vitae'?"⁹ This remark points towards Francesca's media awareness as she expresses her ability to evaluate the different informational values of encyclopedic articles such as those in Wikipedia, as opposed to the personalized contents of the Twitter feeds. By comparing the two presidential opponents' feeds, she quickly realizes that the information displayed there is highly opinionated and she explains in retrospect how Romney's many direct attacks on the Obama administration made him appear more aggressive and less likable than the sitting president. Francesca also explains how she used these materials to support her classmate in preparing her assigned role as Mitt Romney. Both students commented positively on the co-operative task component that evolved spontaneously when Francesca reported her research findings.

Video 1: Francesca (S1) and her partner (S2) discuss Mitt Romney's Twitter feed controversially

In video 1, the learners' divergent task perceptions become visible. While Francesca uses social media for her research, her classmate's sole source of information during this phase is the Wikipedia entry about Mitt Romney. This appears to correspond with the two students' perceptions of the task's goal orientation. While her classmate is seeking factual information on Romney, Francesca accesses informal social media contents in order to study *how* Romney would behave in an interview—not exclusively *what* he would say. Consequently, Francesca evaluates Romney's Twitter feed as generally useful for addressing this task, whereas her partner is appalled by his statement, as it contradicts her own sense of political correctness. The availability of social media—and Francesca's ability to recognize and acknowledge a Twitter feed as a potentially useful source of information—in this situation increases her readiness to discover the target culture. At the same time, her interpretation of these contents is facilitated by her knowledge of, and experience with, Twitter. She takes the communicative characteristics of Twitter (subjectively biased, limited to 140 characters per entry, immediacy and volatility of the message) and the heated situation of the presidential campaign into consideration when evaluating her sources. She confirms in the post-task class reflection: "Yeah, well, I know that Mitt Romney is ... he's playing = well, I know that for the elections, that they [the political candidates] have to play unfair roles and they have to play unfair."

Finally, Francesca reflects upon this experience after the project and expresses how her critical cultural awareness developed in the process. Her attempt to comprehend the conservative narratives during the election presented a twofold challenge to her. On the one hand, the cultural context of the U.S. and the particularities of American regionalism along with the tabloidization of political

discourse and, on the other hand, the distance in value-orientations between Francesca and Mitt Romney, made the role play task a “difficult” but “also an interesting experience, I think. I mean that you had to open up [towards Romney’s positions], so to speak.” In this sense, she partly dismisses the security afforded by her ethnocentrism in order to develop a deeper empathetic understanding.

Focus student 2—Philipp: Philipp proceeds differently in his attempt to research his role of Mitt Romney. He explains how he avoided linear texts entirely during the research phase, instead navigating through an interactive timeline with multimodal contents and several YouTube videos about Mitt Romney. In fact, Philipp emphasizes the motivational effect these interactive media had on his task performance. Because he did not have to consult exclusively text-based resources like Wikipedia, he had a chance to focus less on factual information and instead on aspects of Romney’s personality and behavior, similar to Francesca’s approach discussed above. The motivational aspect in his following comment seems to correlate with what Byram defines as the necessary skill to discover and interact with another culture:

Yes. I, too, think it is better. It was fun. I think it is also better when you can actually watch a speech than just reading it. This is also a bit better for practicing the English language, I think. But it is also completely different to actually see a person, e.g. in this video. I also like this in other contexts, because then I am more motivated than when I just turn a page in our textbook and then there is yet another text in the same layout [and so on].

He confirms the motivation and particularly also his self-perceived learning progress in his learning journal later that day:

I think I learned a lot [about the candidates] in that lesson, which was probably due to the way of accessing and processing the information. That way, you get a whole different image of a politician and you are less bored.

Video 2: Philipp explains retrospectively the interactive timeline about Mitt Romney

Focus student 3—Jonas: Finally, it must be acknowledged that the use of digital and especially social media for the purpose of task-based and intercultural learning does not always automatically lead to beneficial learning processes. The following example of task perception and performance appears symptomatic of the given project context. During the research phase, Jonas mostly worked individually and initially sought predominantly factual biographic information about his given character, Ann Romney. In video 3, he first accesses the English Wikipedia article about her and takes notes of the biographical information. He then proceeds to type a complete question into the Google search field, uses an ungrammatical form simply because the search engine suggests it (“when did ann and mitt Romney marriage”), accesses the first link provided, but abruptly interrupts his search when this link appears to be blocked by the school’s Web filter. In a next step, he then ignores his teacher’s instruction to use sources in English and proceeds to the German Google website and eventually accesses a written interview with Ann Romney that has been translated to German. He then even translates it back to English using Google’s translation platform. Video 3 is an edited screen recording of Jonas’ computer screen during his task performance.

Discussion

The issues that arise from these examples are manifold and a close examination of each of them would exceed the limitation of this article. Nevertheless, a certain idiosyncrasy of task performance procedures can be identified, especially when comparing the three focus students above. Apparently, this task has facilitated a high degree of learner autonomy with regard to choice of media, contents, and the quality of outcomes. As opposed to the previous focus students, Jonas utilizes linear texts and traditional, Web 1.0 media for his research with the exception of the translation website. His approach to using the Google search function reveals a lack of methodological competence, a simplified understanding of the functionality and mechanisms of online search engines, and a clear need for careful teacher scaffolding. The need for assistance is of particular importance when considering the fact that in all three examples learners express the novelty of these media in a formal learning setting and their lack of experience with regard to formal class work: Francesca was insecure whether she were allowed to use Twitter at all, using the interactive timeline was new to Philipp but motivated him to explore a new culture, and Jonas clearly struggled with the use of even basic functions of Google in a target-oriented task environment. In a similar vein, these three examples show how the learner autonomy afforded by the task design can help individualize learning procedures in a Web-based environment, but at the same time the potential for individualization does not always result in effective learning. One aspect deserving attention in addition to those already mentioned is the use of the learners' L1. Francesca as well as Jonas frequently reverted back to using German during the task.¹⁰

3.2 A Bird's-Eye View on Task Outcomes and Learner Texts

Task Description

The scope of analysis now shifts from the processes to the outcomes of tasks in the form of learner texts. We apply an inclusive notion of learner texts that exceeds the products of written learner composition to virtually include any form of learner L2 text production using different channels and media of communication, for instance a drama performance or a multimedia presentation (cf. Legutke "Lernertexte"). The exemplary task below (figure 2) served as the target task in the project and, following the task-based approach, built systematically on the preparatory work addressed by the preceding task cycles in the project. At this final project stage, students had to research several factors of their adopted state collaboratively, make a reflective prediction of their state's election result, and publish this prediction in the form of a creative product of their choice.

Figure 2: Task-as-Workplan: the Mock Election (screenshot from Moodle).

In terms of linguistic components and demands, the task description does not provide much information that would limit the necessary language competences. The information on the basis of which learners should draw their predictions included a selection of demographic statistics and Web-links for each state that were provided on Moodle,¹¹ but students were encouraged to seek other information resources at will. Similarly, there is no limitation to the form and content of the potential outcomes, but students are well aware that these outcomes are going to be published online, entered in a competition, and thus should meet appropriate linguistic and formal criteria as well as display a high degree of creativity and originality. It can be assumed that only part of the potential demands for students will have possibly stemmed from the design features of this task that, in essence, puts the learner as a choice-maker into the center of attention. The external factors of this complex task, i.e. the predictions' relevance for the outcome of the mock election ("Is it going to be accurate?") as well as the publicity of the creative product ("How are people going to respond to it? Will we win the competition?") should be evaluated as equally relevant to the learners' task perception.

Task Outcome Analysis

The learner predictions' degree of accuracy is significant: The participants did not only predict the election outcome in all but two states correctly; the outcome of the mock election, i.e. the victory of the Democratic Party and their candidate, Barack Obama, turned out more accurate than many polls that were broadcast in national U.S. media.¹² This is a first, albeit tentative indicator of the learners' detailed understanding of their adopted states' population and political culture. In total, 77 learner products were submitted including multi-media presentations (16 submissions), videos (14), posters (13), texts like poems or role play scripts (9), comics (4), blogs and websites (3), and even songs (2) and audio-recordings (2).¹³ Two of these products are the focus of the following analysis and discussion of project outcomes.

Massachusetts—Presidential Debate Animation Video

In the first example of learner texts we examine a contribution for the state of Massachusetts in which the students present their prediction of a Democratic victory through an animated presidential debate (video 4). The students have produced this video using the online platform GoAnimate,¹⁴ a Web-portal for simple animated video production. Set in the living room of Massachusetts Obama supporter Sarah and her friend awaiting the Presidential debate to begin, the video introduces the two women expressing their hope of Obama's re-election accompanied by their statement that it is improbable for Massachusetts to vote Republican. During the five minute debate, the opponents touch upon some of the most heatedly discussed campaign topics, i.e. unemployment, health care, foreign policy, same-sex marriage, social equity, and the Massachusetts voting history, and thus tersely cover the core positions of the two platforms. The learner demands connected to the production of this learner text are varied and include, among others, linguistic demands regarding the video script and the exact and pointed dialogs; content-related demands, i.e. the research of prominent campaign topics and the candidates' positions towards these; demands related to the use of media, especially the animation software, but also the choice and design of the scenery, characters, music, etc.; and intercultural demands of discovering and understanding state-specific political preferences and, generally, typical characteristics of the presidential debate as a genre.

Video 4: Massachusetts, "For whom is Massachusetts going to vote?"

This learner text can be classified as a simulation, or rather, an interactive appropriation of the target culture. As Landriscina defines it in his work on Simulation and Learning, "[a] simulation is an interactive representation of the system to be studied, based on a model of the system" (6). Here, the learners approach the system of U.S. political culture through their research on campaign issues and differing political approaches towards these. They do so by utilizing the model of the Presidential debate. However, this model is not being reproduced in a static manner, but rather interactively. The learners embed the debate in the context of the two presented women's process of opinion formation. The setting and scenery of the debate in the form of the press conference room at the White House, as well as the characters' appearance on stage and in the audience have been carefully selected by the students and their mimics and gestures edited. By the same token, the language use is of great importance for the creation of the epistemic character of this cultural simulation. Unlike the semi-improvised role play activity above, this product imposes on the learners the need to not only formulate more accurately, but especially also to compose a dialog that is authentic of the candidates' rhetoric as well as embedded in a compelling narrative structure. The latter demand is met here insofar as the individual arguments logically refer to one another, the debate gradually becomes more aggressive, and climaxes in the pun when Obama insinuates that his opponent suffers from 'Romnesia,' a certain type of amnesia that refers to Romney's alleged constantly changing policy:

Barack Obama: I don't think that they'll [the Massachusetts electorate] change their mind about me after the majority was insulted by their former Governor.

Mitt Romney: I already clarified my position on that. I didn't mean it like that. I care about 100 percent of the American citizens.

Barack Obama: That's what they all say: You change your opinion very often. Your statement was very clear but apparently you suffer from 'Romnesia.' [*Laughter from audience.*] But don't worry, Obamacare covers pretty much everything. [*Laughter from audience.*]

This final sequence also shows how the students tried to meet the former demand. The dialog does not only reflect the specific contents of the two platforms; it also incorporates the rhetoric and mimicry of the two candidates. When Obama ridicules his opponent in this scene, it becomes evident that the students echo one of his previous stump speeches in Fairfax, VA, where he first introduced this joke in front of a public audience just days before the students produced and submitted their video.¹⁵ This learner text, thus, evokes a form of intertextuality with regard to the typical characteristics of a presidential debate as well as some very specific discourses in the run-up to the elections, such as the Romnesia joke or the reference to Romney's critically received 47-percent statement.¹⁶ Yet, it is the selection and creative rearrangement of these characteristics that make this learner text an interactive simulation of the target culture evolving out of the learners' understandings and interpretations of the discourse.

Arizona—Non-Linear Hypertext Website

The second example features a non-linear learner text in the medium of a publicly accessible website on the campaign in Arizona. Under the domain <http://www.uselection.coriox.de> this learner group published their learner product, mainly consisting of cross-referenced informative texts. Smaller editing groups of four to six students independently worked on the sub-chapters (a) Home, (b) Electoral System, (c) Candidates, (d) Campaign in Arizona, (e) Campaign Issues, and (f) Our Prediction, composed informative and analytical texts for each of these sections, researched or created appropriate illustrations, and composed "Did you know...?" boxes intended to attract reader attention by providing "interesting or even funny background information" (cf. title page of the website).



Figure 3: Website focusing on the state of Arizona as a learner text
(<http://uselection.coriox.de>)

The individual text contributions on the website reflect a deep and detailed understanding of the target culture that resulted from an extensive and systematically orchestrated collaborative research phase by the learners. In the sub-chapter “Campaign in Arizona,” e.g., the learners critically address the contents of their adopted state’s geography, history, economy, religion, overall political culture, and voting history in order to form a comprehensive and accurate image of Arizona’s probable voting behavior and its population’s political priorities and preferences. In the context of their election forecast, the students draw a multifaceted picture of the state’s voting behavior and take well into consideration that its population’s concerns might not be congruent with their own, i.e. the students’ political preferences:

Finally, we’ve gathered together all our information to get an explicit conclusion. In order to make an accurate forecast, we discussed the manifesto of the several candidates and compared it with the interests of Arizona’s population. ... All facts considered, we predict Romney to win the election in Arizona, but only with a slight head start. We think that Romney will get 52,9 percent and Obama 47,1 percent (cf. website section ‘Our Prediction’).

Discussion

One observation concerning both discussed learner texts and potentially many more of the Web 2.0 learner products in this project relates to the public character of these texts. Both learner groups decided to make their work publicly accessible, either by sharing it on YouTube or by registering their own public website URL. In doing so, the learners break through the seemingly unavoidable artificiality that is

inherent to much of the interaction in foreign language classrooms (cf. Rösler, “Warum es sinnvoll ist”). As opposed to traditional learning contexts, the students in the classrooms discussed above addressed a real and potentially responsive audience that exceeds the limitations of their formal learning environment; they act as authors and editors of personally relevant messages. The Web 2.0 technologies used in these environments create the context for this real and foreign language communication; they function as a stepping stone to move from form to meaning-focused foreign language interaction that can easily exceed the communicative situation as initiated by the teacher so that it does necessitate further teacher assistance and can even progress without the teacher even noticing it (cf. Rösler, “So echt wie möglich” 106). This authenticity, in turn, has a number of repercussions for language learning. Raith, e.g. showed that reading diaries tend to be longer and grammatically more accurate and complex when written for a public audience as opposed to the foreign language classroom alone. In the same vein, the awareness of a target audience that is potentially larger and more international than the learners’ own classroom is likely to have similar effects on the creativity and originality of learner texts. Learners seem to be interested in using the different Web 2.0 tools to produce creative, appealing products for an audience that, in fact, chooses to view the learner texts for their informational and aesthetic value. Thus, foreign language competence becomes, to a certain degree, a necessary pre-condition for learners to initiate and participate in cultural discourses. They make use of participatory Web 2.0 platforms and applications as a public stage for foreign language performance and an arena for the negotiation of, and experimentation with cultural identities (cf. Schmidt).

Conclusion and Outlook

The data discussed in this paper represent only an exemplary and small fraction of the collected data in the scope of the election project. The first part of the analysis represents a typical case that draws on qualitative classroom data collected in the context of one selected task cycle in one learner group, giving emphasis to individual focus students. The results obtained in this study are, thus, to a certain degree preliminary, the conclusions drawn tentative, and yet the choice of a multi-layered interplay of qualitative research instruments within a mixed-methods design and the effort to observe and record EFL learning processes as they occur and unfold in the specific environment of the classroom have facilitated a detailed inspection of computer-assisted task-performance procedures and learner perceptions. The non-linear relationship between task-as-workplan and task-in-process appears as a component at the core of the presented school project that heavily relies on the use of CALL and Web 2.0-supported activities. It also seems to escape a research focus that would investigate learner products only in dependence on teaching materials and view the learner as an executioner of tasks. The analysis of intercultural and computer-assisted task performance procedures has shown that these procedures are highly idiosyncratic and that the learner autonomy in this Web 2.0-supported project imposes demands on instructors and learners alike. The teacher in the analyzed classroom sequence is

not in the position to filter the resources being used by the learners with regard to their content and language. Many of the learners, on the other hand, lack classroom-based experience involving the use of social media and Web 2.0. Their recorded task performance procedures show that even though they make frequent use of these media outside the classroom, there is a need for learning strategies that would allow them work more effectively in the outlined learning environment. In this regard, the data suggest that learner autonomy does not exclude the need for careful teacher scaffolding during task performance.

The bird's-eye view on learner texts arising from the project has facilitated a glance at the variety of potential learner products. They are authentic products especially because a number of them were published on openly accessible online media. They thereby easily exceed the communicative boundaries of the classroom, appealing to diverse audiences on the Web. The motivational factor of the project task and particularly the digital applications applied by the students becomes visible in the creativity and originality of these learner texts.

Finally, the analysis of task performance and learner texts points towards further research questions arising out of the present data. The preliminary conclusions will have to be applied in comparative analyses of the micro-structure of task performance in varying Web 2.0-based task arrangements and different learner groups. In the process, task perceptions by individual students will have to be contrasted with those of peers as well as teacher intentions and evaluated with regard to their development throughout the project. The analysis in this paper also calls for a longitudinal monitoring of learner performance in the outlined learning environments. Relevant research questions revolve around the aspect of the development of strategy use by individual learners in Web 2.0-based learning environments and how these strategies can and should be implemented effectively in teaching. Such longitudinal data should also address the aspect of how learners might use their Web 2.0 products as stepping stones for further authentic communication that does not necessarily has to be limited to the boundaries of the classroom. Finally, the attitudinal developments among learners and teachers with regard to their acceptance of such tasks arises as a promising theme for further research out of the data.

Notes

1 Available at <http://us-election.explorarium.de> with a guest access to an exemplary e-classroom and additional project materials.

2 See <http://us-election.explorarium.de/mod/assign/view.php?id=2630> (see footnote 2 for instructions).

3 See <http://us-election.explorarium.de/mod/assign/view.php?id=2590> (the task will appear after clicking on "Login as a guest").

4 An overview of the predicted election result can be found at <http://us-election.explorarium.de>.

5 A detailed description of the research methodology applied in this project as well as the construct of learner perceptions of Web 2.0 tasks will be published in Fäcke et al. (forthcoming).

6 Excerpt from a retrospective learner interview:

Interviewer: Würdet ihr da gern mal in den Urlaub fahren? Wen würde es interessieren, das auch wirklich mal zu sehen?

Jonas: Na ja, so Oklahoma jetzt nicht so unbedingt. Also USA generell ja. Also da hatte ich noch nicht so (unverständlich), aber Oklahoma jetzt nicht so richtig.
(...)

Nils: Und wenn ich dann schon diese Riesenreise in die USA auf mich nehmen würde, dann würde ich wirklich eher richtig an die Ostküste, also Washington D.C. oder New York oder halt an die Westküste nach Los Angeles oder San Francisco, San Jose oder so. Das wär' richtig geil.

7 Excerpt from a retrospective learner interview:

Jonas: Also ich denke, ich würde wahrscheinlich Obama wählen, was einfach daran liegt, dass ich natürlich nicht die ganze Background-Information habe und er von der Sympathie mir einfach deutlich besser gefällt. Es heißt jetzt nicht unbedingt, dass das wahr ist, was er sagt oder dass er das verwirklichen kann, aber jetzt nur so vom Eindruck und wie es von den Medien vermittelt wird, macht Obama, finde ich, einen sympathischen und auch besseren Eindruck als Mitt Romney. (...)

Philipp: Also ich sehe das ähnlich. Ich müsste mich, um wirklich sagen zu können: „Ja, ich habe die richtige Wahl getroffen“, erstmal mit dem Wahlprogramm auseinandersetzen. Aber, ich z.B. würde keinen Präsidenten wählen, der die Hälfte seines Volkes als Schmarotzer und Opfer bezeichnet.

8 All participant names have been changed in accordance with ethical and research practices.

9 These learner diaries and interviews were composed/conducted in German; the excerpts in this article are English translations.

10 The outcome of this task, i.e. the role play performance of the students presented in this subchapter, is not part of this analysis. It can be viewed at <http://youtu.be/y0te3PLR-a4>.

11 See <http://us-election.explorarium.de/course/view.php?id=6> (The task will appear after clicking on “Login as a guest;” scroll down to section “More Resources for State X”).

12 See <http://us-election.explorarium.de> (click on “Prediction of our schools”). All U.S. states except Virginia and Michigan were predicted accurately by the project participants.

13 16 submissions consisted of the predictions only; three submissions listed above included more than one medium and thus were counted twice.

14 Available at <http://www.goanimate.com>.

15 Barack Obama's speech in Fairfax, VA from October 19, 2012, can be watched at: <http://youtu.be/OEXyZA78z2k>, esp. after 11:53.

16 Mitt Romney's secretly recorded statement can be viewed at http://youtu.be/UjhL8_8Vcj0, esp. after 16:46.

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