

Examining and supporting online writing – a qualitative pre-study for an analytic learning environment

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Abstract. The authors present a project that aims at understanding the way language learners write in social media in their every day lives using the target language. How do our students proceed when writing a Social Network Site (SNS) post? What resources do they use for references on word, sentences and text level? By answering these and related questions through extensive collection of empirical data in an analytic learning environment, the design of which is the next step of this project, the authors aim at creating a comprehensive resource that supports different approaches to writing in social media. In the projects' first step, which the authors will lay out in this paper, writing processes of a small number of informants were closely analyzed using experiments, interviews and self-reports. The findings showed considerable differences of resource management between students with different backgrounds in formal learning and revealed a differentiation into 'public' and 'private' space of informal writing in social media, that influenced students' choices regarding the degree of formal elaboration (with respect to correctness) of their texts.

Keywords: writing process, informal learning, SNS, resource management.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, learning scenarios using social media have been explored from a multitude of angles (cf. Wang & Vasqu ez, 2012; Zourou, 2012 for an overview). Most of the research examines formal educational/learning contexts of use, whereas studies inquiring about the potential of social media in informal learning contexts often center on SNS spaces set-up as an addition to institutionally framed scenarios, either by the instructors (e.g. Peeters, 2015) or by learners themselves (e.g. Liaw & English, 2012). Little is known though about how learners use social media in a completely informal context, i.e. when they communicate with other learners or speakers of the target language by their own initiative in their free time. But informal learning opportunities on social media can be considered of high relevance for learners' competence development: especially in contexts where contact time with the target language is limited, as in the case of learners of German in Japan, informal learning through social media might have the potential to expand learning opportunities considerably.

The vast majority of learners of German in Japan start learning the language on entering university. Motivated learners normally reach a level of around B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) after about two years of learning. As it might be assumed, learners will only become more willing to use the target language in social media actively as their competence grows and they feel more self-assured about their production. Thus the authors of this paper have been researching how to provide writing support to encourage learners to use social media at an earlier stage, mainly by offering context-aware help linking informal learning opportunities to formal learning experiences through specially designed learning environments (Waragai et al., 2014).

In a new project, the authors set out to analyze learners' resource management for problem solving while writing on SNS by their own initiative – with the long term perspective to describe prerogatives of a resource that would support learners at earlier stages of learning more substantially. In order to gain a first insight into learners' writing processes in informal contexts, the authors took a close look at writing behaviors of a small group of students from two Japanese universities. The findings of this pre-study are presented here.

2. Method

The authors chose a multi-angular qualitative approach to understand learners' writing and problem solving behavior and their attitudes towards target language

use on SNS (e.g. concerning formal adequacy). We decided to focus on learners who already had a level between B1 and B2 (CEFR) and used German regularly on SNS. In order to include learners who were experiencing different learning environments in formal education, we selected eight participants from two universities, four from University X, which fosters learning activities online ('group X', with participants X1, X2, X3 and X4), and four from University Z, where the use of computers in language teaching is limited ('group Z', with participants Z1, Z2, Z3 and Z4). The following research questions were formulated: which online (online dictionaries, search engines, translating engines, reference sites etc.) and offline resources do learners use when encountering problems while writing? Which strategies do learners use to extract help from these resources? How much importance do learners attach to their texts being formally correct?

Data were collected in three ways to gain a comprehensive insight into the participants' writing behaviors on SNS: (1) *Writing experiment*: Participants were asked to write an SNS post on a PC the same way they usually did, using the same resources for help. They were asked to think aloud during the writing process. Screen data were captured with a screen capturing software, the utterances of the students were audiotaped. When participants used resources other than through PC (e.g. dictionaries or smartphones), their use of these devices was videotaped. (2) *Follow-up interviews*: Participants were interviewed about their writing experiences in (1) with a focus on problems they experienced when writing. Apart from these retrospective elements they were asked about their habitual writing behavior in German on SNS. (3) *Self reports*: Participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire about problems experienced when writing immediately after having written an SNS post during their free time (3-5 times over a month). The data of (2) were transcribed and coded. Observations made in (1) and participants' utterances in (2) and (3) were grouped into categories describing tendencies of writing behavior.

3. Findings and discussion

One tendency observed was that the use of resources of participants from group X was very diversified, whereas that of students from group Z tended to be more uniform. While participants X1, X2, X3 and X4 used resources as different as online dictionaries, search engine search by explicit questions (How do you say '...' in German?), search engine search for chunks, Q&A-sites, translation engines – X4 English-German, X1 German-Japanese – and direct help from friends (via Facebook messages), participants Z1, Z2, and Z4 mainly used their portable

electronic dictionaries; Z3 referred to a dictionary on her smartphone. Only Z1 and Z2 made use of a web browser on one occasion each, using a search engine to confirm a chunk. An unexpected resource identified during the interviews was the recourse to community help: help of an anonymous community such as on an SNS for language learning (Z1), help from individuals such as native speakers amongst their friends (X1, X2), or from advanced peers (Z2).

Concerning the extraction of information from resources, all participants of group Z skillfully handled their dictionaries, using different approaches to one problem (trying out different Japanese words, counter-checking by entering a German word they had found, shifting the resource) and skimming through translations of example phrases to decide which finding was the most appropriate in a context. Group X showed less unified results with resource use. Overall participants of group X tended to move on with writing more readily, even if they were not quite sure to have found appropriate results or even if their search did not bring any results (Z3 sometimes showed the same tendency to give up on her search).

Inquired about the importance attached to formal correctness, all participants stated that they took care to write as adequately as possible as long as writing for a multitude of readers (i.e. when publishing texts in ‘timeline’ on Facebook). To the contrary, when using instant messaging (on Facebook or on line) in one-to-one communication, they tended to care less about formal adequacy and to focus on content. Thus, it seems, all participants made a clear distinction between ‘public’ spaces of writing (‘timeline’ on Facebook or blogs) and ‘private’ spaces. Participants gave diverse reasons for this: X1 stated that she, being a teaching assistant for German, had the responsibility to write correctly; others, like for example Z1, expressed that they would feel awkward if they ‘made public’ a text with many mistakes. Therefore Z1 tends to first publish texts on an SNS for language learning (in her case: Lang-8), where she uses a profile that does not give her clear name, to have it checked by native speakers, before publishing it on Facebook. X2 directly asks a native speaker among her friends to have her writings corrected before publishing them on her ‘timeline’. Furthermore, some participants from group Z (Z1, Z2) uttered that they tended to write about topics they felt they could handle easily, using familiar words and structures.

As far as the engagement with publishing on SNS in the target language is concerned, participants reported very different degrees of activity. Especially X1 and X3 said that they posted in ‘timeline’ regularly, while most of the others said that their main target language activity was reading other posts and that they only

sporadically wrote posts themselves. Furthermore many participants identified a stay in a German speaking country as a point of departure for communicating on SNS in German – even though with many of them the activity tapered out after a few months.

4. Conclusions

It might be assumed that the differences observed between group X and Z in choice and usage of resources might be a result of the different formal learning environments that the participants learn in. Further research about these probably environment fostered preferences could address the question if both groups could maybe benefit from an expansion of their strategies for resource management: group Z might benefit from expanding their resource repertory, accessing more online resources (e.g. translation engines, chunk searches, ‘social’ resources), while for group X training about how to handle resources systematically and effectively might be helpful.

Another outcome of this study is the insight into the division into perceived ‘public’ and ‘private’ spaces of writing in social media. Whereas participants reported to have extensive exchange in the target language over instant messages in ‘private’ (and thus probably a considerable surplus of contact time and opportunity for output), their production in the ‘public’ space of SNS seems – due to their concerns about formal adequacy – much more limited. Further studies with Japanese learners about social media use in informal contexts should take this aspect into consideration and get a deeper insight in to the ‘private’ spaces as well.

Finally, looking at the (im)balance between input and output on SNS observed with most participants in this study, further research should take a look at SNS as a space not only for writing, but maybe even more as a reading space. At the same time, though, students who extensively publish on SNS might be interesting subjects for a closer examination in case studies too.

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