

The Language Link Project – German as a communication medium between language learners from Taiwan and Japan

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【摘要】

本計畫係由位於台灣台北市的中國文化大學與日本名古屋市的南山（Nanzan）大學在 2015 年，由雙方的德國語文學系共同籌劃執行，該計畫係以現今已相當普及的網路視訊媒體為其基礎。參與本計畫的學習者，德語能力介於中級至高級程度，他們定期性地以網路視訊會議方式進行廣泛地交談與對話，從無主題式的閒談，到針對雙方共同選定主題，進行討論。本計畫將雙方大學之德語系學生的德語學習方式，從一般語言習得框架，從一種存在於師生或台生與外師之間不固有不平衡之關係中抽離出來。

此種以網路媒體作為基礎，以完全沉浸於德語的溝通模式，即德語成為學習者之間唯一溝通媒介的學習方式。如此不但為參與其間的語言學習者創造出一種有別於傳統德語教學，即較偏重於德語系國家系統思考作法之學習氛圍，或許更能加強語言學習者在語言學習的過程中，對於相關學習內容之思辨、互動應用與練習的自覺性。

【關鍵詞】

視訊會議、多媒體、語言學習、網際網路

【Abstract】

In 2015, the German Departments of the Chinese Culture University in Taipei and of Nanzan University in Nagoya (Japan) established the Language Link Project, an internet based teleconferencing project where Taiwanese and Japanese groups of German language learners (medium to advanced level)

meet regularly online in a variety of communicative situations, from informal talks to structured discussions. This project disengages the students from the customary language learning framework with its inherent imbalances between student and teacher or language learner and native speaker. It creates a communicative environment which takes the participants beyond the intrinsic focus on the German speaking countries that habitually marks most German language learning settings, and aims at strengthening learners' autonomy in the sense of a "learning process of reflection, interaction, and experimentation".

【Keywords】

teleconference, media, language learning, internet

1. Project introduction

Internet-based social media and digital learning software offer many kinds of applications for interactive language learning: students can learn by themselves or in communicative exchange with a group, a teacher or friends in chat rooms. In a recently conducted Nielsen survey, 76% of respondents said they enjoy the freedom of being connected anywhere, anytime; with home preference of mobile phones for video viewing being higher in the Asia-Pacific area than in Europe and North America (Nielsen 2015). In addition, 65% of the global respondents said they use electronic devices to connect with family and friends. With the fast growth rates in connectivity worldwide, a wide range of learning environments now focus on new communicative forms of learning (Thomas 2015: 1-5). Some of these projects are large scale endeavours, such as the European Union's CAMELOT project which combines animation video production with language learning, fostering personalized fit-for-purpose learning environments (CAMELOT, EU 2013-2015). The extant literature on using multimedia applications in the foreign language classroom highlights many of its obvious advantages¹:

¹ Legutke, Michael / Rösler, Dietmar (Hrsg.) (2003), „Fremdsprachenlernen mit digitalen Medien: Beiträge des Gießener Forschungskolloquiums". Narr, Tübingen, Deutschland; Schwienhorst, Klaus (2008), "Learner Autonomy and CALL Environments." Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, New York, U.S.A.; Chapelle, Carol A. (2002), "Computer-assisted language learning". In R. Kaplan, (Ed.). Handbook of applied linguistics, (pp. 499-505). Oxford

interactive digital media allow foreign language students to creatively produce and exchange information in multidimensional settings like chatrooms, forums, wikis, blogs etc., by using a range of communication tools, such as text writing, audio and video files, pictures and graphics, conversation and music. Moreover, social media networks and virtual communities like Facebook, Linked-In, Snapchat, Instagram, Google+, Twitter, WeChat, Youtube and WhatsApp provide meeting points where students from all countries around the world can meet and learn about each other's daily lives, interests and cultures. Network-based language teaching (NBLT), Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) have found their ways into classrooms via WebQuests, Moodles, blog writing, skype chats and teleconferences².

In Asia, too, such ventures enjoy a growing popularity, and one such project is the Language Link Project that was initiated in February 2015 between the German Departments of the Chinese Culture University (PCCU), Taipei (Taiwan), and Nanzan University in Nagoya (Japan). During the spring semester of 2015, German learners from both universities have met three times online to perform internet-based teleconferences. The project has offered them a variety of communicative situations: from informal talks to structured discussions, encouraging them to talk about themselves, their lives, and their mutual interests. This project builds on previous experiences made at Nanzan University with partners in Germany and Mongolia³.

University Press, UK; Liou, Hsien-Chin / Peng, Zhong-Yan (2009), "Training effects on computer-mediated peer review." *System*, Volume: 37, Issue 3, September (514-525).

² Kao, Huey-Shya (2016), „Deutsch lernen mit Neuen Medien zwischen Fremd- und Selbststeuerung anhand des Beipfels Blog schreiben im DaF-Unterricht“. *Deutsch-Taiwanische Hefte*, Heft 24, (S. 24-47), New Taipei City, Taiwan; Sologub, Olga / Naydina, Tatiana, (2015): "Online communication in Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language", *Proceedings of the 6th International Symposium on European Languages in East Asia*, National Taiwan University, November 06-07, 2015 (page 141-152); Raindl, Marco: „Video-Tandems im DaF-Unterricht“, *Deutschunterricht in Japan* 11 (2006), 53-62.

³ Riessland, Andreas (March 2015), „Die internetgestützte Videokonferenz als didaktisches Werkzeug zur Förderung autonomen Lern- und Arbeitsverhaltens“, 単著, :ドイツ語教育 *Deutschunterricht in Japan*, No. 19, 日本独文学会ドイツ語教育部会, pp. 110-119 (10 p.), Japan

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The Language Link Project brings together two groups of foreign language students communicating with each other in the same foreign language, with none of them speaking in their own mother tongue. The setting is outside the normal classroom atmosphere, and the teleconference serves as a medium to create encounters of almost real-life experience. Participants are all about the same age group and share common interests. The teleconference setting allows them to communicate about their daily life experiences, their similarities and differences. It reaches out into what matters to them, encouraging the students to actively apply what they have learned according to what they really want to say, and thus leaving the usual focus on German speaking countries culture and classroom frameworks behind. The Language Link Project is also different from earlier projects in that it focuses on this new instruction method for teaching German, meaning that the use of English as lingua franca is not an option here. To our knowledge, no comparable projects have been conducted in Taiwan so far.

2. Project purpose

The central objective of the Language Link Project is to stimulate the students' self-organizational skills in acquiring the language requirements needed for communicating with their partners in a third language (in this case, in German). It follows methods of modern teaching based on content and on self-guided, autonomous learning⁴. Being a CALL environment, the teleconference makes use of the advantages of a learning space that offers "authenticity, meaningful experience, and a shared mental environment". It aims at strengthening learners' autonomy by initiating a "learning process of reflection, interaction, and experimentation" ⁵. This approach sees the language learner situated in a natural domain, where communication is more than words, including "signals, gaze follow, emulation and ritualization, coordination, facilitation, and tools" ⁶. This task-based language teaching

⁴ Schart, Michael / Legutke, Michael (2012) „Lehrkompetenz und Unterrichtsgestaltung – Einheit 1“, Goethe Institut e.V., Langenscheidt, München, Germany, chapter 1

⁵ Schwienhorst, p. 8

⁶ Tomasello, Michael (1999), "The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition": Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., p. 210

approach understands tasks ("Aufgaben") as "activities to induce communication, where language application will appear naturally, usefully, or necessarily"⁷. It is based on, and arranged along, guidelines developed from previous experiences made at Nanzan University, Japan⁸.

The idea at the core of the Language Link Project is learner autonomy: All organizational matters around the teleconferences are in the hands of the participants. This leads to a number of notable results: 9

The participants become disengaged from the customary language learning framework with its inherent imbalances between student and teacher or language learner and native speaker.

The teleconference creates a communicative environment which takes the participants beyond the intrinsic focus on the German speaking countries that habitually marks most German language learning settings.

It takes the learners out of the regular classroom setting, enabling them to reflect and communicate about their own cultural backgrounds and to learn about those of their counterparts.

Also, it confronts them with a challenging communicative situation where they have to act much like in any real-life encounter, actively using their foreign language skills.

In the conferences between Nanzan and CCU, the personal characteristics of

⁷ Rotter, Daniela (2012), „Focus on Form als Lehr- und Lernstrategie im DaF- und DaZ-Unterricht“, in: Evelyn Roettger/Kerstin Zimmermann (Ed.), „Entwicklungstendenzen in Deutsch als Fremd- und Zweitsprache“: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, Frankfurt/Main, Germany, p. 22, translation: S. Schick

⁸ Riessland (2015)

⁹ Similar observations concerning the efficiency of internet-based teleconferences can be found in many other publications on this topic: Friebe, Martin et al.: „,Siehst Du mich?‘ – ,Hörst Du mich?‘ – Videokonferenzen als Gegenstand kommunikationswissenschaftlicher Forschung“, *kommunikation@gesellschaft*, Jg. 4 (2003), 1-23; Hoshii, Makiko und Niederhaus, Constanze (2008), „Deutsch lernen und lehren per Videokonferenz“, Vortragsmanuskript für die 36. Jahrestagung Deutsch als Fremdsprache des FaDaF; Hoshii, Makiko und Schumacher, Nicole (2010), „Videokonferenz als interaktive Lernumgebung - am Beispiel eines Kooperationsprojekts zwischen japanischen Deutschlernenden und deutschen DaF-Studierenden“, *German as a Foreign Language* 1 (2010), 71-91.

the participants on both sides and the particular circumstances of their encounters greatly facilitated the above mentioned goals: The participants were of similar age and often with a comparable personal background. When talking to each other, they quickly discovered the many personal and intellectual interests that they both share. Yet at the same time, they also realized that in spite of their geographical and intellectual closeness, they actually know relatively little about each other. The ensuing curiosity about their close yet unfamiliar neighbours, along with the realization of the many similarities they share, fostered a very lively and engaged exchange on both sides, and this exchange was conducted with the only means of communication that the participants share, the German language. In its teaching material for the education of instructors, the German Goethe Institute stresses a similar point¹⁰:

“If two classes from Athens and Moscow exchange themselves about their living environments in an email-project then it appears most natural to do this in German.”

3. Project description

3.1 General Characteristics

Given the particulars of the involved departments, the framework around the conferences varied greatly at the two locations. At CCU, the conferences were embedded in one of the advanced level courses at the Department of German: Following a survey among students asking their preference of course topics and content, the department planned a media-related course for the study year 2015. The course "German language used in the Media" ("Deutsch im Medienbereich") was then shaped in collaboration with Nanzan

¹⁰ Scharf /Legutke, „Lehrkompetenz und Unterrichtsgestaltung – Einheit 1“, chapter 2.4, p. 111: (Das Klassenzimmer als Kommunikationszentrum), citation: „Zugleich wissen wir aber auch, dass der Unterricht Möglichkeiten für eine realitätsnahe Kommunikation bieten muss, wenn es zu seinen Zielen gehört, genau diese Kompetenz zu fördern (...) Sie können beispielsweise Situationen schaffen, in denen es verwunderlich wäre, Deutsch nicht zu benutzen. Wenn sich zwei Schulklassen aus Athen und Moskau in einem email-Projekt über ihre unterschiedlichen Lebenswelten austauschen, dann erscheint es als natürlich, dies auf Deutsch zu tun.“ Translation: Susanne Schick

University. Due to the differing semester time frames, the course at CCU was arranged in two parts:

a) Following a general introduction on modern media, their purpose and practical impact, part 1 of the media course focused on German media contributions and media politics; training students in their understanding of media related news reporting, news structures and communication in public. This concept follows the idea of establishing Blended-Learning instruction methods by working on three levels: The first part of the course introduces a meta-level of general understanding of modern media and media-related issues. The second part aims at teaching practical skills by creating media-related information, strengthening students' awareness of how to act in the media world, and the third part requires them to apply their newly trained knowledge and skills in the near-natural environment during the teleconference encounters.

b) Part 2 of the media course included three internet-based teleconference sessions. After an initial conference held to help the students getting to know each other, the participants then faced the task of preparing and conducting the next two teleconferences largely on their own. In this paper, only this second part of the media course will be presented.

At Nanzan, the course format was markedly different from that at CCU. Here, the teleconferences are part of a seminar open to both 3rd and 4th year students. The students attend this seminar for an altogether two years, so alongside the 3rd year newcomers, the student body always contains a number of 4th year participants who are familiar with organizing and running teleconferences. These experienced seniors usually take on the task of coaching the junior participants. The teleconferences are part of a wider programme that focuses mainly on the students' individual research projects. Participation in the teleconference part of the seminar is voluntary, it is not a part of the course requirement, and the conferences usually take place after the regular seminar hours, in the students' private time.

Due to the late start of the Japanese academic term, the Nanzan students

stepped into the teleconference project with considerably less preparation time than their Taiwanese partners, but the presence of the experienced seniors made up for the lack of preparation time.

Based on experiences from earlier projects at Nanzan University, the conference format included preparation sessions before and follow-up sessions after each teleconference. Students were given free choice of the prospective topics of discussion. The suggestion was made that the participants establish a common online media platform for regular exchange with their partners, for which they chose LINE as the operating system. Through LINE communication, the students discussed and prepared topics and vocabulary they would need during each teleconference performance.

The course instructors kept to the background as much as possible. Generally, they stuck to an observer's role, giving advice only when it was explicitly demanded by the student participants. They accompanied the communication process from a perspective that permitted them to interfere only if the communication process stalled irrevocably or if technical problems arose. During the teleconference sessions, a second communication channel allowed them to stay in touch with each other while watching the students' discussions. For this second line of communication, a Skype chatline was employed.

3.2 Time frame

In Taiwan, the spring semester starts in February. In 2015, it began on February 24th and finished on June 18th. In Japan, on the other hand, the spring semester begins six weeks later, lasting from early April until the end of July. As most of the participating students in Taiwan were in their fourth year, their courses ended already on May 31st. The six weeks' delay between the two academic calendars allowed only for a rather narrow time window, with three teleconferences conducted on the following dates: April 7th, April 21st, and May 19th, 2015.

3.3. Participants

At CCU, 18 students of mostly 4th grade attended the course: 16 female, 2 male, aged 20-22. Some of them, not all, had spent one year in Germany as exchange students. At Nanzan, the number of conference participants fluctuated between 5 and 8, with the exception of one student all female, and also aged between 20 and 22. The greater part of them had spent a year at a university in Germany.

3.4 Location and technical equipment

CCU has a 2002 Polycom commercial internet-based videoconference system in a rectangular conference hall. This Polycom system does not offer Zoom or swivel-type camera. Two large screens are placed on both sides of the camera, facing the long side of the tiers. The transferred video information was displayed via a monitor. Every seat was equipped with a desk microphone. Four loudspeakers hang in all four corners of the room. An extra laptop supplied the instructors' communication channel during the conferences.

The Nanzan students used one of the university's conference rooms equipped with a teleconference system with a mobile camera. The video image is projected onto a single screen, the camera is placed in front of this screen so that the participants, when facing the screen, also face the camera at a proper angle. The comparatively small number of participants allows the use of a single omni-directional flat microphone for speech transmission.



Photo 1: Internet-based teleconference with Polycom system in PCCU conference hall, Da-En building.

4. Project conduct

Preceding the collaboration, a test run for system compatibility had been conducted in the end of November 2014. The main obstacles found were due to the different generations of technical equipment: while Nanzan University uses a new version of the Polycom system, PCCU has a less modern one. Zoom-in and swivel-type camera moves could not be performed, leaving the image resolution at a degree that hampered the transmission of non-verbal communicative elements such as gestures or facial expressions. Time lag of conversation was negligible, though, and audio signal was within an acceptable range. At CCU, a trained assistant was in charge of running the system, with a Standard Operation Procedure manual at hand. At Nanzan, a technical manager was on standby throughout the conferences. As the Taiwanese students outnumbered the Japanese students, they organized themselves in four groups with three or four members, each group working on a separate topic.

4.1 First teleconference April 7th, 2015

The objective of the first teleconference was getting to know each other. Instruction had therefore been focused on reminding the students of how they had been trained in media conversation issues before. For example: expressing their thoughts in a situation that went beyond the familiar perception of a private talk, giving a personal opinion, defending this opinion with sound arguments, reconfirming that their conversation partners had understood their ideas correctly, not shying away from asking questions, etc. Content was based on personal introductions: name, age, German proficiency, hobbies, and also, suggestions of topics to be discussed during the next teleconference.

In summary, this first teleconference was hit by some trouble but the students managed to cope well with the challenging situation: In spite of the successful test run and the presence of the assistant and the manual, technical problems in establishing the internet connection led to a delay of one hour. Here, the instructors' additional communication channel proved crucial. It

allowed the instructors to keep each other and their students informed about the state of affairs. This was an important help to avoid frustration among the student participants and to keep up their motivation. After the connection was finally established, the students were excited to start the conversation. During the personal introduction round, each student had the opportunity to speak at least once. This first meeting was marked by the participants' mix of shyness and curiosity. The four student groups in Taiwan presented their Japanese counterparts with a choice of four topics for this term's conferences: "Wind Energy", "Freedom of Speech in Saudi-Arabia", "Tourism between Taiwan and Japan", and "Campus life". For the next conference, the Japanese students settled on "Campus life".

4.2 Second teleconference April 21, 2015

The objective of the second teleconference was the discussion of campus life at both universities. Due to the narrow time scale, instruction had focused on preparations for this second round during the follow-up session already. Students were advised in using the mind-mapping method to work out their topics and decide on the necessary vocabulary. Also, it was suggested to work out a time frame. The four groups quickly decided to single out separate aspects of campus life and started to organize the assumed language content involved. A LINE-group was installed where students started to share their thoughts.

Content included a lively exchange of both the Japanese and the Taiwanese students by using the App-software platform LINE. Here is a brief excerpt from the group discussion there (Translation: S. Schick):

So, Fumie Hanazawa and I have called each other on LINE. Results:

A: Taiwanese students and Japanese students discuss 4 aspects of both universities:

1. Cafeteria
2. University festivals
3. Where do you live?

4. Where is your university located?

B: Four groups of the Taiwanese students will introduce their topics. There will also be discussion. The following issues will also be discussed during that time:

1. Club
2. Majors
3. How long does (the ride) take to the university?
4. Side job
5. Vacation

In summary, a positive climate marked the conference right from the beginning. This time, the technicians had made sure that the internet connection was established on time. Group by group, the students introduced their thoughts about campus life. Throughout the whole two hours of the teleconference, it was noticeable that the students stayed very focused, eager to keep the flow of the discussion going. Naturally, they were challenged by a few unforeseen situations but they managed to find creative solutions: if their partners failed to catch the meaning of what they said, the students had to think about how to express their thoughts or describe their ideas in other words, and they had to do this without the help of their smartphones or dictionaries. Sometimes, the more proficient German speakers would assist. The students not only talked directly with their overseas partners but also among themselves, in order to improve the communication. No support was needed by the instructors, and the students rarely looked towards the teacher's desk for help.

4.3 Third teleconference May 19th, 2015

The objectives of this last teleconference were discussions of Japanese dialects and manners, as well as of women's rights in Japan and Taiwan. Instruction at the follow-up session on May 1st had focused on the Taiwanese students' difficulties that they had experienced in a discussion during the

second teleconference. Among these, delayed response, the possibility of misunderstandings, and the participants' continuing shyness were highlighted. Therefore, students have first discussed strategies on how to overcome these points which they saw as a potential cause of problems. They then tried to develop strategies for solving the situations they perceived as being difficult, for improving the flow of conversation, and for encouraging each other. So May 8th and 15th served to prepare for the third and last teleconference. By then, the Taiwanese students had received suggestions from Japan for discussion topics, and they opted for "Japanese dialects and manners", and "Women's rights in Japan and Taiwan". Via LINE, both sides worked out the time frame, vocabulary, and other additional details. On May 15th, the Taiwanese students took charge of the class by themselves: One of the male students took on the instructor's role as a coach, leading the discussion on women's lives, and looking at potential difficulties as well as at prospective questions to be asked during the upcoming teleconference. The students also had a trial run of a debate between two camps, one camp adopting a feminist viewpoint, the other arguing from a conservative point of view. Arguments were collected and opinions exchanged in a lively debate. Regarding the content, parts of the preparation of the third teleconference included a detailed exchange led on LINE (Translation: S. Schick):

Time frame:

Our presentation on dialect (5 minutes)

Discussion (25 minutes)

Our presentation on etiquettes (5 minutes)

Discussion (25 minutes)

Our presentation on women's rights (5 minutes)

Your presentation on women's rights (5 minutes)

Discussion (20 minutes)

Hello :) This is the vocabulary list on women's rights:
part time job

parental leave
full-time housewife
housewife
parental allowance
part-time job
career woman
nursery
babysitter

Questions from your vocabulary list (so that you can prepare):

1. How much is the salary of a Babysitter in Japan?
2. Is it easy to find a good Babysitter?
3. Can a father apply for parental leave?
4. Is there any parental leave in Japan at all?
5. Is there any extended parental leave in Japan?
6. Is there any parental allowance in Japan at all?
7. Should a woman be wholly dependent on her husband? (This is a problem for full-time housewives)

In summary, the atmosphere during the third teleconference was visibly influenced by the good experiences of the previous ones: Students acted with less inhibition and displayed a more active and more self-assured attitude. Whenever the flow of communication threatened to stall due to a lack of vocabulary or a potential misunderstanding, the group leaders took on the role of moderators. When certain concepts proved difficult to explain, such as the proper degree of bowing within a particular situation, the students turned to acting out the situation. In the discussion on dialects, the two sides discovered common terms in the two languages which were remnants of the Japanese colonial rule over Taiwan between 1895 and 1945. From the beginning of this project, it was clear that at some stage in time, the conversation might touch on sensitive issues such as resentment stemming from the colonial past, or that it might affect personal sensitivities as it did

during the debate on women's rights, when one female participant did not want to give the reasons behind her decision never to get married. Still, it was obvious that the students managed to conduct this teleconference in a most amicable and professional manner: Their conversation evolved in the relaxed and informal manner of a face-to-face talk, and although the virtual quality of the conversation setting was obvious to anyone involved, it seemed to have no influence on the participants' conversational behaviour.

5. Students' opinions and instructors' observations

5.1 The participants' opinions

At CCU, the last day in class was conducted on May 29th, as most of the students were in their fourth year and had to take their final exams. A concluding discussion was held, comparing the LINE conversations and the teleconference setting, representing two different modes of modern digital communication. The students found that communication through LINE was shorter, easier, and could also transmit emotions by using emoticons, but at times it could lead to misunderstanding or would not clearly reflect feelings and moods. Also, there could also be time delay and type errors, but at the same time, there was less pressure for immediate response.

Their critical analysis of the teleconference setting delivered the following insights: It took note that students had lost their shyness and had become more familiar with each other. Also, they had become more active during the different stages of the course, which in turn led to a relaxed conversational atmosphere and improvements in the time frame. The usefulness of the vocabulary lists was highlighted, and the students expressed their hope for an even better understanding of their conversation partners. It was also noted, though, that the conduct of the conference would benefit from a warm-up phase guided by a native speaker.

5.2 The instructors' observations

Looking back at the first season of the Language Link Project, one obvious fact was the students' very positive response to this new approach. They

eagerly took to the challenge of applying their language proficiency in an unaccustomed setting that confronted them with a number of unexpected challenges. Regarding their performance over the course of the three teleconference sessions, the analysis of the conference recordings showed an improvement in both language proficiency and conversational style. It also was evident that the participants were more likely to contribute to the conferences

if their level of proficiency was higher than the other participants' level,
if they had already experienced life in a German-speaking country, and
if they were generally of a more outgoing character.

So, did the students who lacked these characteristics benefit less from the teleconference setting? Obviously, this was not the case. Of course, the more accomplished and more outgoing participants tended to take the lead in the discussions, but they also actively invited contributions from their less accomplished peers, and they assisted the weaker group members whenever they felt that their support was needed to maintain comprehension. At the present stage of our investigation, the reason, or reasons behind this behaviour are not yet clear. It might be due to the intrinsic value system that the participants have been brought up with, it might be the particular setting of the teleconference project, with its emphasis on group cooperation, or a completely different, as of yet unnoticed factor might play into this. Here, further investigation is clearly needed.

6. Summary and Outlook

In this article, we have outlined the main features of the Language Link Project. We have given an overview of its general setup, of the organizational framework behind the conferences, and of the communicative processes both within and between the two groups. Our findings show that in general, the participants displayed a positive and pro-active attitude towards the challenges that they faced, and that they approached the perceived conflicts in the conversational processes with competence and creativity. On the

whole, we can say that the teleconference environment has proved its value in language learning. It let us establish a conversation setting that is close to a face-to-face encounter, and it allowed us to bring together groups of language learners who, in spite of their different cultural backgrounds, are of comparable age, from a similar social environment, and with shared interests. With this, the Language Link Project goes beyond being a mere language training tool¹¹. It supplies room for cultural issues that can become the focus of interest, and it stimulates learning about what is perceived as familiar or unfamiliar. In addition, it enables a first contact across the cultures which, over time, might develop into long-lasting friendships. The teleconference offers a learning space marked by authenticity, meaningful experiences, and a shared mental environment¹². It helps strengthening the learners' autonomy regarding reflection, interaction, and experimentation, and it places the language learner in a communicative environment where communication includes signals, gaze follow, emulation and ritualization, coordination, facilitation, and tools¹³. This task-based language teaching approach proves that language application will appear naturally, usefully, or necessarily within the context of a clearly defined task. It links intercultural issues with metacognitive training, thus strengthening both language-based and content-based skills.

There are, however, some limitations to this project format, and certain preconditions have to be met:

The number of teleconferences: This project showed that a certain number of conference sessions is needed before the conversation can flow without inhibitions and without stalling.

Coaching by the instructor: As long as the students do not have sufficient experience of the teleconference setting, they will need basic guidance through the process, such as preparation and follow-up classes.

¹¹ This is one of the basic strengths of working with this format. For similar experiences, see Bahlo, Nils et al.: „Videokonferenzen im DaF-Bereich?“, *Info DaF* 1 (2014), 55-69.

¹² Schwienhorst, p. 8 ff

¹³ Tomasello, p. 210 ff

Additional multimedia-channels: Apart from the video channel used during the conferences, the participants should have access to an additional line of communication for preparation and follow-up sessions. Also, the supervisors depend on an additional communication channel throughout the conferences, to keep potential interruptions to an absolute minimum.

Technical conditions: to maintain a smooth and productive communication process, the reliability of the equipment and the competence of the technical staff in solving problems quickly and efficiently is of utmost importance.

The individual level of language proficiency appears to be a less crucial factor for the success of the teleconferences. Weaker students tend to be supported by more proficient ones; they also benefit from just listening in and following the conversation. What is more, the new and unaccustomed experience of a live chat with peers from a different cultural background may well be a strong stimulant for the less outgoing students, too. It may help them overcome their shyness and their fear of making mistakes which kept them from joining conversations. In the teleconference, improvisation becomes the most important skill in leading a successful conversation, much more so than any correct mode of expression.

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<http://line.me/en/>

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<http://www.skype.com/en/>

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