

PROMOTING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE BY MEANS OF BLENDED LEARNING

Application of Forum Exercises in Beginners German Language Class in Jordan

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Abstract: With the help of electronic media certain conditions can be created in the teaching of foreign languages, which support a learner-oriented approach in the sense of a moderate constructivistic didactic. This paper aims to show, with the help of a practical example, how forum exercises implement a Western understanding of modern foreign language teaching in a country in the Middle East. Therefore a blended learning model was created, whose application was evaluated by the users. This paper exemplarily presents the application of forum exercises as an accompaniment to face-to-face classes and their potential for an intercultural language course. The term “culture” appears in this context on two levels: (a) as content, and (b) as a feature of the learner’s disposition. Additionally the results of the evaluation of this blended learning form will be presented.

1. Starting Point

Many teachers trained in Germany teach German language abroad. However, very few of these teachers are familiar with the culture of these countries and in most of the cases they don’t even speak the languages of the learners. But is that absolutely necessary in order to have a successful intercultural language course?

With the help of electronic media certain conditions can be created in the teaching of foreign languages, which support a learner-oriented approach in the sense of a moderate constructivistic didactic (cf. Schulmeister, 1997). This paper aims to show, with the help of a practical example, how forum exercises implement a Western understanding of modern foreign language teaching in a country in the Middle East. Therefore a blended learning model was created, whose application was evaluated by the users. The modern intercultural foreign language didactic, which takes into consideration the principles of moderate constructivism, has the ultimate aim of efficiently using the foreign perspective of the learner (cf. Roche, 2008, 225). Linguistic competence plays a key role in this process. As a teacher, in order to promote this competence, one has to create a language course that is learner and -task-oriented. This

further shows how important the teacher's role is as an organizer and a companion in the learning process. A combination of practice, an impartation of linguistic tools and active language application would facilitate an easier retention of the learnt subject matter (cf. Hölscher, 2007; Hölscher et. al., 2006, 2009). If these three principles are adequately applied in a media-assisted language course, even beginners can be in a position to tackle complex exercises.

2. Forum Exercises in an Intercultural Foreign Language Course for Beginners

As previously mentioned, the modern intercultural didactic considers the learner's perspective a starting point in the learning process. In order to introduce this point of view into the lesson one needs the relevant tools. As a cooperative asynchronous tool the forum is quite suitable for this. Apart from being an important means of presenting one's text, it also offers the following advantages:

- Content and task authenticity
- Action orientation (research, text composition and publishing)
- Use of learning tools (online dictionaries, lexica etc.)
- Individualization of the learning process (individual tempo, mode of operation is dependent on the learning style, culture specific preferences, interests etc.)
- Cooperative learning
- Assumption of responsibility, mutual exchange and mutual assistance (cf. Roche, 2008, 246-247; Wegele, 2006, 12-13.)

The independent processing of forum exercises can particularly act as a thematic compliment to the lessons by using the produced and published texts of learners as a starting point for subsequent exercises in face-to-face classes. Most especially culture specific aspects of a topic can be made clearer through this and can equally lead to the enrichment of both parties- the teacher and the learner. Forum texts are a means of initiating intercultural comparisons and by creating additional specific exercises intercultural sensitization can be promoted. There are numerous definitions as to what intercultural competence is. Eßer (2006) in particular was devoted to this. In regards to foreign language courses, the writer made a general distinction between the two levels: a) culture as a theme in the language course and b) culture as a characteristic of the learner's personality (cf. Eßer, 2006). In this presentation I will be using the approach that intercultural competence is process-oriented as a starting point (cf. Bolten, 2007, 756). In regards to a foreign language course one has the term thus:

At the peak of his intercultural competence a foreign language learner is able to communicate adequately and creatively in different variations (Roche, 2008, 233).

Therefore a foreign language course has the responsibility of creating "broader perspective, in which both the learner's own perspective as well as the foreign

perspective is taken into consideration” (Roche, 2008, 231). Particularly forum exercises can support this process. Even if the teacher isn’t familiar with the respective cultures of the learners he can draw on the learner’s foreknowledge and quite naturally involve the learner’s perspective in class activities. The forum captures the learner’s perspective and the published texts can later be used in a face-to-face course. A successful practical example is presented below.

3. Blended Learning in a Pilot class in Jordan

In the summer semester of 2010, within the frame of a German language class at the German-Jordanian University (GJU) in Amman, a pilot class (20 participants) was taught with the textbook “*Schritte international A1/I*” and with the online module of DUO¹ “*Basis Deutsch A1/I*”. The DUO module “*Basis-Deutsch*” for beginners serves as an accompaniment to the textbook. It is specifically meant to complement the face-to-face classes and to offer a subtle start into E-learning. German language learners without foreknowledge are presented with the innovative approach of learning the language in accompaniment of multimedia resources. The forms of application vary depending on the target groups and circumstances (cf. Paland, 2011, 7). At the GJU for example, the textbook “*Schritte international*” had already been used for some semesters. In a pilot class forum exercises from DUO modules were specifically employed after each chapter. In this way a Blended-learning form (cf. chapter 3.1) was created, which shouldn’t over-task the learners. A follow-up phase in the face-to-face class shouldn’t just improve the linguistic ability of the learners, but also promote intercultural competence and reflection, thereby effectively exploiting the foreign perspective of the learners.

3.1. THE BLENDED LEARNING MODEL

A foreign language course doesn’t just convey linguistic competence, but intercultural competence as well. This ought to occur in accordance with the recent understanding of the learning process (see chapter 1). It also has to be activity-oriented and take place in authentic situations. If didactically reasonably applied electronic media can help support this learning objective. Particularly blended learning formats are suitable for promoting intercultural competence due to variety of the methods. Blended learning is often regarded as a pragmatic alternative to E-learning. But there’s more to it. Just like Launer (2008, 9) observed, blended learning combines multimedia-supported self-learning phases and face-to-face phases in the class community by taking into consideration the learn groups and learning objectives. In this context one ought to think of ways of reasonably spreading the exercise within each phase and how one can optimally make use of the variety of methods. Relating to the German language course in Jordan the following didactic and methodic considerations were carried out:

¹ DUO (www.deutsch-uni.com) is an electronic learning platform, which offers general and technical language courses. DUO was created at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich.

Table 1. Blended learning phases.

Phases of each chapter:	Material:	Intercultural Learning objectives:
Face-to-face phase 1 (12 TU)	Coursebook	Knowing the foreign perspective (target culture)
Online phase (2 TU):	DUO forum	Expressing one's own perspective
Face-to-face phase 2 (2 TU):	Texts from the forum in class	Combining one's own perspective and the foreign perspective together and engage oneself intensively with it.

The course book particularly conveys the foreign perspective in the respective themes. The online and discussion phase always uses the learner's perspective (i.e. one's own perspective) as a starting point. By dealing with both perspectives one generates something new and draws consequences from intercultural exercises. The second face-to-face phase is responsible for this. Figure 1 depicts the functions of the different phases in this blended learning format.

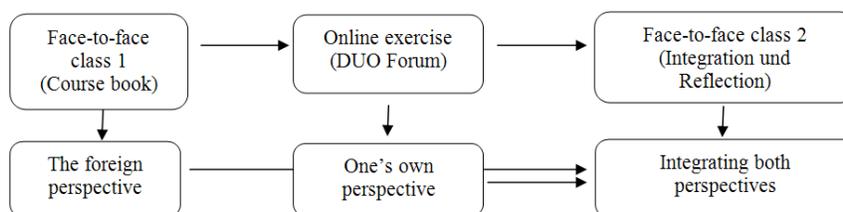


Figure 1. Blended learning model and intercultural learning.

4. Example of a Course Unit

As an example the processing of the fourth chapter “*Meine Wohnung*” (‘Housing’) will now be presented in individual steps. After intensively devoting themselves to the course book and learning much about German homes, the learners were then required to work on the forum exercises by writing about their own apartments. Specific categories were created from the individual forum texts, which contain culture-specific aspects. Every teacher can easily create a similar outline for his/her own course. Table 2 portrays a conclusion of the various categories.

The texts provide important culture-specific information on the topic “A Jordanian home”. On the whole a very positive self-image is presented. The learners love to present their apartments and are very proud of the furnishings. The home appears to be the centre of the large family. The size of the house, which is unusual from a European perspective, is due to the fact that the family is made of many members and they all live under the same roof. Important components of a Jordanian house are the garden, balcony and garage.

Table 2. Cultural aspects in the description of the home.

Categories:	Examples:	Comment:
<u>Size:</u>	250, 350, 400 and 485 square metre; numerous rooms each with its own bathroom and WC, usually with a balcony, garden and garage.	Large spaces are normal. Due to the landscape and distance a car in Jordan is a necessity.
<u>Family:</u>	Large families, many siblings	The family is very important. The families are very large and they all usually live under one roof.
<u>Furnishing:</u>	Ten sofas, large table, large bed	Having lots of furnitures and luxuriant furnishings is seen as a sign of taste and wealth.
<u>Colours:</u>	White, brown, blue, black, gold	Gold-coloured tones with patterns are considered traditional. But other colours were equally mentioned.
<u>Activities:</u>	TV (LCD). PS3, playing computer games.	Technology is very much appreciated – the latest models are very important

It is also noticeable that the house is associated with extracurricular activities – watching TV, playing computer games etc. this valuable information could serve as a starting point when creating more exercises for the third phase of the blended learning model. Below are three examples²:

1. In the first exercise the learners were asked to compare two pictures (a German and a Jordanian house). Different questions were asked regarding the pictures, which led to a group discussion.
2. In the second exercise the learners were required to do a sketch of their houses showing the different rooms. In this way the learned vocabulary is consolidated. This creative exercise had to be done independently.
3. Different texts from the forum were presented on slides and discussed in pairs. Thereafter each pair presented the result of their discussion to the rest of the class.

All three exercises were meant to lead to an analysis of both cultures. In this way the linguistic competence (vocabulary, structure, oral expression) of the learners were quite naturally expanded. By receiving a corrected version of their own texts the learners were also able to get an individual feedback, thereby helping them improve on their mistakes.

In conclusion one can say that the students were able to express themselves freely, share their experiences, but also reflect on their own culture in such a flexible learning environment. The teacher is expected to carry out an analysis of the forum texts and with it think up more topics for discussions. In the second phase the teacher acts as a

² Detailed description in Todorova (2012).

moderator leaving the main initiative to the learners. Through the class discussions the students were on cultural specifics in both Germany and Jordan. But differences could also be found even within their own culture. In this way they learned to argue and qualify their perspectives. In doing so, they make use of the foreign language as a means of communication. Considering the fact that the texts would be published, the students tried to be creative and accurate. Particularly the authenticity of the exercises and the practical character of the course were determinant in the follow-up phase (Face-to-face phase 2).

5. Results of the Evaluation

For learners whose previous learning experience has solely been based on the guidance of an external figure, composing texts and publishing these in the forum can be quite challenging especially for beginners. For the Jordanian students the learning process had always been one of memorizing the contents and reproducing exactly what has been memorized (Learning traditions and habits). This expectation however was not met in the German language class. Instead the students were expected to apply the language in communicative situations. With the help of the topics in the textbooks and different social forms, opportunities were created for the students to act and experiment with the language. The forum exercises played a significant role in this as they were able to capture the learners' perspectives. In the follow-up phase both perspectives – the foreign and the personal – were analyzed. The blended learning model in the pilot class was evaluated. The Learner's self-evaluation was central. At the end of the semester a survey was carried out in order to ascertain the learners' acceptance of this approach. The following aspects were assessed on a five-step Likert scale:

1. The blended learning form (Face-to-face 1 – Online – Face-to-face 2)
2. The independent writing and publishing of forum texts
3. The discussion of personal texts in the class
4. The involvement of personal and foreign perspective in the topic
5. Linguistic improvement (Self-evaluation)
6. The individual topics from the course book
7. Personal opinion on the course

The acceptance of the blended learning form was very high (Table 3.): 75% of the interviewees described it as “very good” and 25% as “good”. There were no negative assessments.

They all found the composition and publishing of forum texts very good (Table 4). 80% of the interviewees scored this aspect with “very good” and 20% with “good”.

Table 3. Acceptance of the blended learning form.

class arrangement

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Good	15	75,0	75,0	75,0
	Good	5	25,0	25,0	100,0
	Total	20	100,0	100,0	

Table 4. Acceptance of the forum exercises.

publish

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Good	16	80,0	80,0	80,0
	Good	4	20,0	20,0	100,0
	Total	20	100,0	100,0	

The discussions in the follow-up phase was evaluated thus (Table 5): 80% found it “very good”, 15% found it “good” and 5% found it “barely acceptable”.

Table 5. Acceptance of the discussions in the second phase.

discussions

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Good	16	80,0	80,0	80,0
	Good	3	15,0	15,0	95,0
	Barely Acceptable	1	5,0	5,0	100,0
	Total	20	100,0	100,0	

Table 5. Acceptance of the discussions in the second phase.

All the interviewees were pleased with the contrastive exercise in the second face-to-face class (Table 6). 80% found it “very good”, while 20% found it good.

Table 6. Contrastive exercise in the second face-to-face phase.

contrastive work

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Good	16	80,0	80,0	80,0
	Good	4	20,0	20,0	100,0
	Total	20	100,0	100,0	

All participants felt they had improved linguistically. The self-evaluation of their own performance was quite high (Table 7). 65% ticked the category “very good” and 35% ticked “good”.

Table 7. Self-evaluation of one’s own performance.

		improvement			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Good	13	65,0	65,0	65,0
	Good	7	35,0	35,0	100,0
	Total	20	100,0	100,0	

The participants were supposed to individually evaluate the seven topics that were covered during the semester. Table 8 shows the result:

Table 8. Evaluation of the individual topics.

	Hello	Family	Food	Housing	My day	Hobbies	Learning
	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count
Very Good	10	17	20	20	11	20	4
Good	10	3			6		13
Barely Acceptable					3		3

All topics were positively scored. Favorite topics were *Food*, *Housing* and *Hobbies*, followed by *Hello* and *Family*. And last of all *My day* and *Learning*.

In conclusion the students were asked to express themselves freely. There were very informative responses in regard to what they liked and didn’t like. There were both positive as well as negative aspects. It was quite noticeable that both intrinsic as well as extrinsic motivational factors played a role in this evaluation:

Intrinsic: *DUO makes learning German interesting. We had fun with it.*

Extrinsic: *The topics are important for us. But we have to be serious with our learning, because we need it for our stay in Germany.*

The following areas were positively evaluated:

a) The topics:

The topics in the course book are important for us.

I found the topics in the course book interesting and authentic.

Now I know more about Germany and the German culture.

We learned a lot about life in Germany. Certain things are done differently in our country.

We always spoke about Germany and Jordan. That is good.

b) Working method:

It was nice that we first of all did the forum exercises in pairs. Now I can do them alone.

With DUO we worked independently, in the classroom we could work with a partner and discuss together. That was new for us, but we had fun.

The teacher wanted us to speak in German. That was good.

We worked as a team.

c) The atmosphere:

We always had fun, even when we didn't understand the grammar anymore.

Learning German can also be fun.

I had to speak a lot in German, but I'm not scared even if I make mistakes.

The teacher was very nice.

d) One's own language skills:

We spoke in German from the first day on.

I don't speak so well, but I can.

Now I understand some IT terms in German.

We made use of our forum texts in the classroom and discussed more about it. Now I know that each one of us has a different opinion. That is interesting.

e) The online module:

DUO makes learning German interesting. We had fun with it.

The online module is modern and useful.

We could hear different accents in the programme. That is authentic.

The grammar was explained in a very simple manner, with animations. This makes it easier to understand them.

We wrote in the forum every week. I always wanted to be more creative and better than the others.

f) Media competence:

I can research in the internet in German, and I don't have to make use of Google translator.

For the first time I published something in German in the forum.

We were the first class at the university to learn German with the internet. That was great.

g) The learning tradition

We learned differently initially. We had to learn a lot of things by heart, sometimes without understanding. But in the German language class we were allowed to be creative and think up our own examples. And we know what to use in every situation.

The following negative aspects were much fewer than the positive aspects:

a) The German language

*The explanations were in German. It was difficult.
German is more difficult than English, especially the grammar.
Some structures were illogical, e.g. 'Ich habe keine Zeit' (I don't have time).*

b) Effort

*We had to write something in the forum every week. It was difficult.
We had to work hard. But we were allowed to make use of aids
such as online grammar and dictionaries. The teacher also helped us a lot.*

In conclusion one can deduce that the blended learning form was well received by the learners. Whether intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, all learners had fun in the course. They could reflect on their learning process and give an exact description of where and how they've made progress. The blended learning form and the communicative approach were very new to the participants, who were used to the approach the teacher controlling every aspect of the course. But they were very receptive and hard-working.

In general the acceptance of the use of the forum was quite high. Particularly the interesting and authentic contents, the creative composition in the forum and the intensive examination of their own texts in the follow-up phase have proven to be quite vital for the learning success. Despite the culture-bound learning habits and expectations (externally controlled learning), the learners were able to adapt to this new learning approach within a short period of time and discover the joy of an activity-oriented lesson. Hereby the blended learning approach has shown itself to be successful as far as the Jordanian students are concerned. Although cultural preferences regarding the learning form could be felt, they however didn't play a crucial role in the learning process or result. This recommended teaching model is flexible and can therefore be applied to all learners, both to homogenous as well as heterogeneous groups.

6. Conclusion

The model presented in this paper can be applied in a foreign language course either as exactly presented or slightly changed. One can work with "Schritte International" and the basis modules of DUO, but other learn platforms which provide forum features can also be used. It is important that the online and face-to-face phases are didactically in tune with each other. The individual steps (cf. chapter 4) can be carried out with any topic. The teacher should use the learner's perspective as a starting point and create grounds for intercultural discussions from it. The role of the teacher in the blended learning model is very important. He/she is a specialized competent individual, who doesn't just correct the learner's texts, but also motivates and urges them to independence. He shapes the course in such a way that there's room for the learners' initiative and creativity. In this way an action-based foreign language course can be realized, because language has to be applied in an authentic situation. Even learners, who are used to learning under the absolute control of the teacher, can also have fun in

an action-based course, thereby expanding their culture-bound understanding of learning. Electronic media act as work tools and support this complex process. Besides they make an important contribution to the realization of blended learning formats. This format supports the individualization of the learning process through its variety of methods. In this way everyone can find his/her own learning tempo and learning path.

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