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"What I think works well...": Learners' evaluation and actual usage of online tools

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Key words: *Language Learning, Virtual Learning Environment*

Abstract:

This paper will describe and analyse data gathered during a pilot language course run fully online and based on a Moodle VLE. The new online tools, whether as part of an integrated VLE or separately, lend themselves to reflective learning (e.g. blogs) or collaborative group activities (e.g. wikis). This case study of two learners is based on the project "CyberDeutsch" at the Department of Languages of the Open University, a five week, intensive German course offered to self-selected intermediate level students.

1 Introduction

Online language learning can provide an arena for authentic language production and an opportunity for language practice. Frequently, research on CMC use for second language learning focuses on learners' subjective impressions of tool use and their evaluation of their own progress (for an overview of research see Liu et al. 2002; Hassan et al. 2005; Jung 2005). Other research uses observation techniques, following learners' activities while working online or on the computer (see e.g. Gánem Gutiérrez 2006).

As every teacher knows, learners' expressed preferences do not always match their actual behaviour, and learners' recollection of their tool or task use do not necessarily match what we can see that they have done. On the other hand, observational data does not give us insight into students' preferences and attitudes. Therefore, a combination of data collection methods seems most promising for providing a full picture of language learning in an online environment (see e.g. Thorne 2003).

Virtual Learning Environments have the advantage of automatically gathering information about important features of language learning: users' production of the target language and the time they spend using the various tools. This information can easily be examined by researchers. By comparing learners' subjective views (as expressed in questionnaire responses, feedback forms, interviews, focus groups, etc.) with their actual tool use (as evidenced by time spent online and produced outcome in the target language), we can find out whether subjective preferences influence the learning process and how realistic learners' evaluation of their tool use and learning activities is.

In conducting our project – a German course trialling various VLE tools – we wanted to find answers to the following questions:

How does the use of different tools correspond with

- students' self-evaluation as CMC users,
- students' evaluation of the tools, and
- students self-reports on tool use, activities and progress.

The challenges for the virtual German course CyberDeutsch were multiple:

- introducing intermediate level learners of German to a range of new tools for language learning,
- integrating synchronous and asynchronous work and different modes of learning, and
- encouraging distance learners to work collaboratively as a group rather than independently or in co-operation (i.e. division of labour) as they are used to.

Learners' feedback, collected through questionnaires, interviews and a focus group, shows which tools they liked and disliked, where they thought they learned most and least and what the particular technological challenges were. The analysis of data collected through usage figures in the VLE and scrutiny of their actual language production can contrast and compare students' subjective view with actual use, showing where students produced most target language utterances.

This combination of qualitative and quantitative data analysis, of subjective evaluation and objective usage data will highlight the difficulties designers of distance or online language courses face and allow us to optimise the provision of tools for our future language courses.

The next section of the paper describes the project in detail and give some background about the tools, materials and learners.

Section 3 introduces the cases studied and establish a profile of two learners based on their contributions to the project, and compare two different approaches to language learning online. The final section presents some preliminary conclusions about students' tool preference and usage.

2 The project

2.1 Project description

The Open University (OU) is a distance teaching institution and has been teaching languages at a distance for 10 years. Increasingly, online elements are integrated into our courses.

Recently, the OU has chosen Moodle as the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (https://intranet-gw.open.ac.uk/ouvle/) for all courses and thus made a commitment to an open source project that – by its very nature – is developing constantly. With its introduction a range of new tools for communication and collaboration between students and between students and tutors are available for teaching and learning. In order to evaluate Moodle's present and future features for the purpose of language teaching, we decided to carry out a pilot project – an intensive German course run fully online. The target audience were intermediate level students who had completed one of our distance learning courses and wanted a free, non-credit-bearing course to bridge the gap before their next course.

The project aimed at trying out and evaluating a number of the new communication and collaboration tools that either have already become available for teaching and learning to students or that are likely to be integrated in the OU platform in the near future. These tools have the potential to improve students' learning in their particular subject area as well as contribute to their more general experience of studying in a distance education setting.

In addition to the uses other subjects make of these new virtual teaching and learning tools, language students need special consideration if their use of tools is to be successful and beneficial for their learning. Because of the nature of language learning where the medium of learning is often also the content (i.e. language), interaction that goes beyond interaction with materials is an integral part of the language learning process.

In order to trial as many tools as possible in a realistic fashion, a five-week intensive German course was designed to run entirely online with a combination of various tools for computer-

mediated communication (CMC). The course ran between November 2006 and January 2007 with self-selected, intermediate level students using a task-based approach, with individual and collaborative activities.

Throughout the course, data was captured automatically through Moodle and FlashMeeting. In addition, the researchers used the following tools to collect data and evaluation: one pre-course questionnaire, one post-course questionnaire (each consisting of three parts: the Spitzberg (2006) CMC questionnaire, a section of open-ended questions, and a C-Test); Moodle feedback forms that invited students to send in their impressions at three stages throughout the course; interviews with individual students after the end of the course; focus groups with tutors, research assistant and project team and with students after the end of the course.

2.2 Course participants

At the end of October 2006, 472 students who had completed intermediate German courses at the Open University were invited to participate in the free virtual German course. 66 students responded by email to log their interest. After further details about the course and evaluation tasks were sent out to interested parties, a total number of 25 decided to enrol in the course. These were divided into three groups. Because the project plan had only contained two tutor-led groups, one group was originally formed as an “independent study” group, responsible for their own social tasks and their own synchronous video-conferencing meetings. When the independent group showed general inactivity at this early stage, students were quickly re-allocated to the two tutor-led groups, forming groups of 13 and 12 students, respectively.

20 of those students reached week five and completed the course.

2.3 Course description

The syllabus for the intensive German course, CyberDeutsch CD101 was designed by the two authors in June 2006. With the help of a consultant, the project team produced a five-week course outline, collated material, created worksheets and tutor instruction sheets and then populated the Moodle course website. The first week, Week 0, was planned as an introductory week, when students less familiar with ICT tools or Moodle could try out the new environment. Materials for this week consisted of instructions for tools, written in English.

The following five weeks were structured in a recurrent fashion with six worksheets each week, guiding students through the online tasks, plus a final quiz in Moodle. All the materials were written in German. The course focused on learning German online, and the medium became the message: each week a new online tool or feature (WWW, forums, blogs, wikis, surveys) was introduced and tasks were offered around these tools.

Each week was structured in the following way:

- Activity 1 consisted of a synchronous FlashMeeting (video-conferencing) session which students were able to prepare for with the help of a worksheet.
- In activity 2 students worked individually with FlashMeeting recordings.
- A third activity was designed for information and opinion exchange through the Moodle forum.
- Three further worksheets detailed different activities around learning German online with the help of a particular tool (individual and collaborative work).

- And a final activity consisted of a Moodle quiz, which revised work done over the week.

2.4 The tools: overview

Moodle itself is based on constructivist principles (Dougiamas, 1998; Robb, 2004) and the design of the course was informed by a constructivist view of learning which sees learning as an active, creative, and socially interactive process (Rüschoff & Ritter 2001: 221). This allows students to build on their previous experience and create knowledge actively rather than rely on a transmission approach, with the teacher passing on what needs to be learned. It also emphasized the process of learning over the product.

This links in with sociocultural theories that see "human mental functioning [as] inherently situated in social interactional, cultural, institutional, and historical context" (Wertsch 1991: 86) and understand learning as mediated by a number of tools such as language, social interaction with others as well as technology. In agreement with constructivist and sociocultural ideas the course also emphasized collaboration.

The VLE offers the opportunity to integrate different tools and link them from one course website. CyberDeutsch was designed around the central spine of a Calendar on the Moodle website, with worksheets and activities stored on the website linked to each week of the course. In some cases, external links were necessary, as at the time of course start the Moodle VLE did not offer all tools that were deemed necessary by the project team.

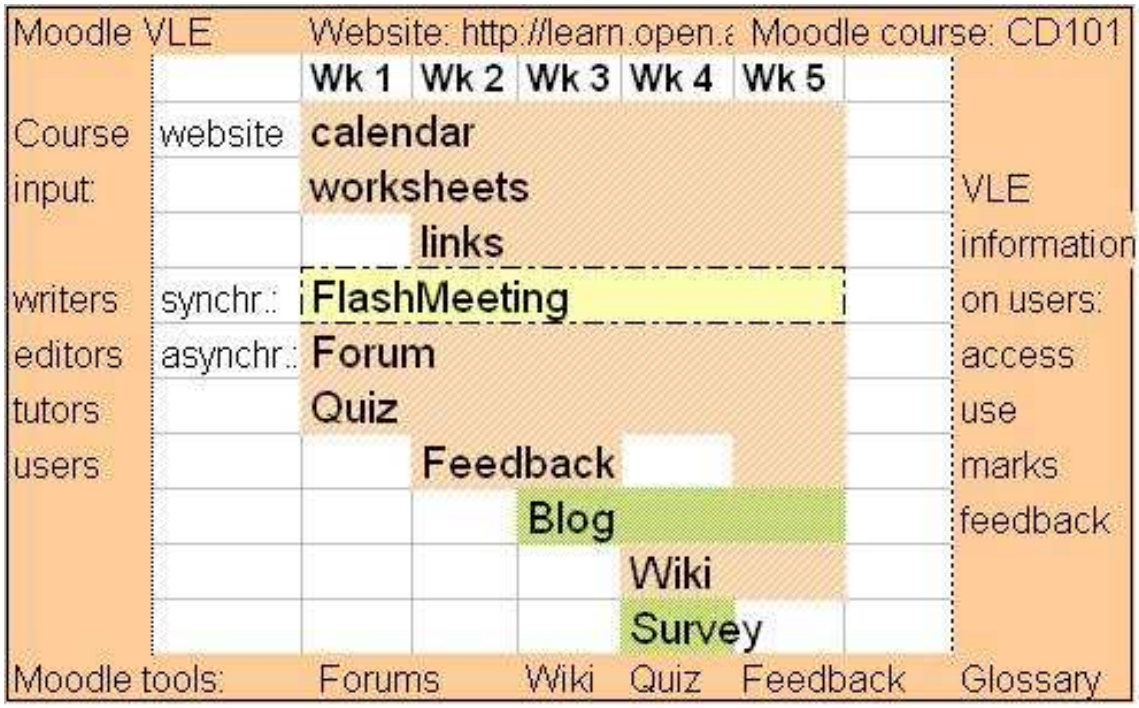


Illustration 1: Overview of CyberDeutsch course

The course built up in complexity, using fewer tools at the beginning to allow students to familiarise themselves with the learning environment (see illustration 1). With technical support the project team built the original structure and content of the website for the course. Content was added throughout the course, not only by the project team but also by tutors and

learners. In addition, tutors had editing rights for the website itself, but did not make use of them.

2.5 The tools used

Several Moodle forums were created on the course website, namely a news forum and group forums. The news forum was used by the project team to pass on information to the students. The group forums were used for discussion within each group and were moderated by the tutor. The discussions in the forums had a dual purpose: they had a social focus allowing students to start their own discussion strands and were related to the course content with discussion topics suggested through the prepared worksheets.

FlashMeeting is a desktop videoconferencing tool developed by the Knowledge Media Institute (for details see: Naeve et al. 2006). The tool was used for weekly synchronous group sessions with the tutor. Worksheets guided students in preparing for the meeting and helped them to carry out a reflective task after the meeting. Because FlashMeeting sessions are automatically recorded, students could go back to a previous session and listen to their contributions. The benefits and disadvantages of video-conferencing for language learning have been scrutinized recently by Wang and Chen (2007) – the results remain inconclusive. While the lack in lip-synchronisation can be a drawback, especially at beginners' level, the participants' video images add a personal touch to the synchronous language tutorials and can enhance the social network building of a language class. They can foster the sense of online "presence" of the participants and give some personal background even without the person speaking. In contrast to the software Wang describes (Wang 2004; Wang & Chen 2007), FlashMeeting was originally designed as a business meeting tool and was adapted for distance language learning during this project. However, the benefits and drawbacks remain essentially the same.

For CyberDeutsch, FlashMeeting was integrated as the only synchronous tool, providing a fixed point in time every week for all course participants to meet online.

Quizzes were available for students every week to assess their own progress. They took the form of simple multiple choice or true/false questions in German on the topic of the week. In addition, one c-test was set at the beginning and one at the end of the course, also using the Moodle quiz format.

The project team decided not to make use of the OU's Moodle-based blogging tool as at the time of course start it still lacked a functionality that was considered central to this course, namely the commenting function. So students used the freely available "blogger.com" (http://www.blogger.com/start) instead. Each individual student was asked to create a blog and post messages about themselves and the course, and share their blog with the other students in the group. Students were also encouraged through different activities to read what their colleagues had written and comment on the postings. Because they used the blogs to present themselves as well as to reflect on the course – which was a joint undertaking – it was hoped that the blogs would create connections between the learners and contribute to the development of social presence and group cohesion.

Blogs have become a favourite of language teachers worldwide (see Ward 2004). They are a type of website that allow for the publication of text, images and sound files and are often used as online journals, the name being derived from "web + log". Blood (2002: 12) defined a blog as "a website that is up-dated frequently, with new material posted at the top of the page". Although research into blogs is still in its infancy, the potential of blogs for language learning has already become clear – as a tutor blog, a learner blog or a class blog. Teachers

increasingly see the potential of blogs for creating a collaborative learning environment, providing learners with a platform to exchange with peers and to reflect on their work, and to foster learner autonomy and learning strategies (Batardière & Jeanneau 2006, n.p.). Blogs also have the potential to foster learner empowerment and learner autonomy.

Students were provided with a playground wiki to familiarize themselves with this tool. They were guided by a general introduction to using wikis and a number of activities. The group wikis were envisaged as collaborative spaces where students were able to jointly write about learning German online, bring together their knowledge gathered throughout the course, and – in the process of writing and discussing what had been written – develop their knowledge further. Like the individual blogs, the group wikis were one of the tangible outcomes of the course. Although wikis are becoming increasingly popular for language teaching (see e.g. McDonald 2007), there is as yet little research on their use in classrooms and independent study.

An external tool was used to encourage students to create surveys: SurveyMonkey (http://www.surveymonkey.com/home.asp). The task was to write questions in a small group and survey the rest of the tutor group. This task was, again, envisaged to create group cohesion, as one part of the group would jointly write questions to survey they other half. In autonomous learning or the virtual classroom, surveys can be used to collect feedback from participants, compensating for the absence of visual or aural clues for students' attention and enjoyment (Andrade 2007). However, surveys can also be integrated as tasks for students, allowing them to create their own, individual or collective, questionnaires and "surveying" other participants (Krauss 2005).

Moodle and the other tools used in this course are potentially democratic tools which give learners a comparatively high level of control over the learning environment. At the same time, students were supported by tutors who guided them through the course, led the synchronous sessions, and gave feedback. The combination of tools offered learners a range of approaches to learning and, although all tools were integrated into the syllabus, it was hoped that one or several would fit in with individual students' preferred learning style (see illustration 2).

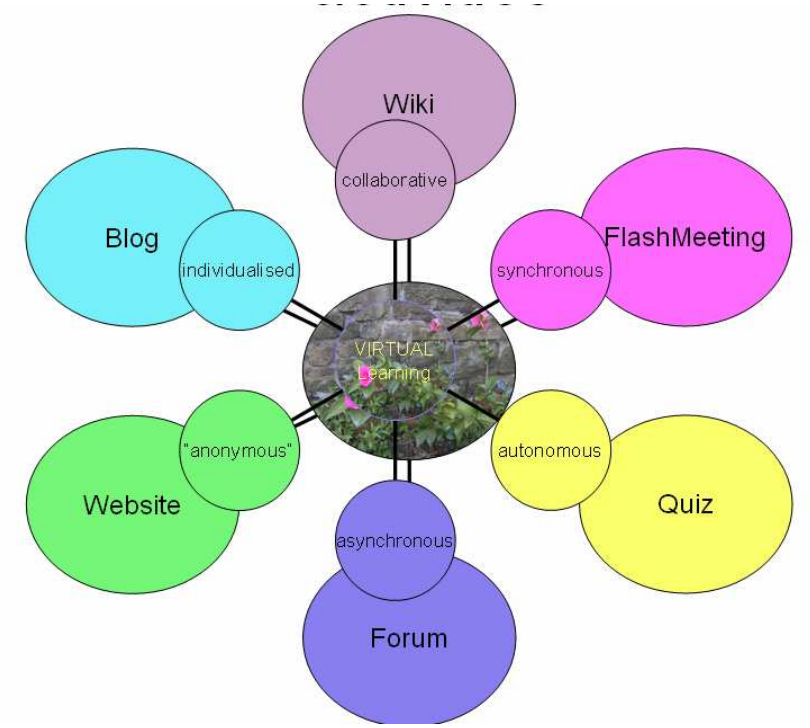


Illustration 2: Combination of tools and approaches to learning

3 The case study

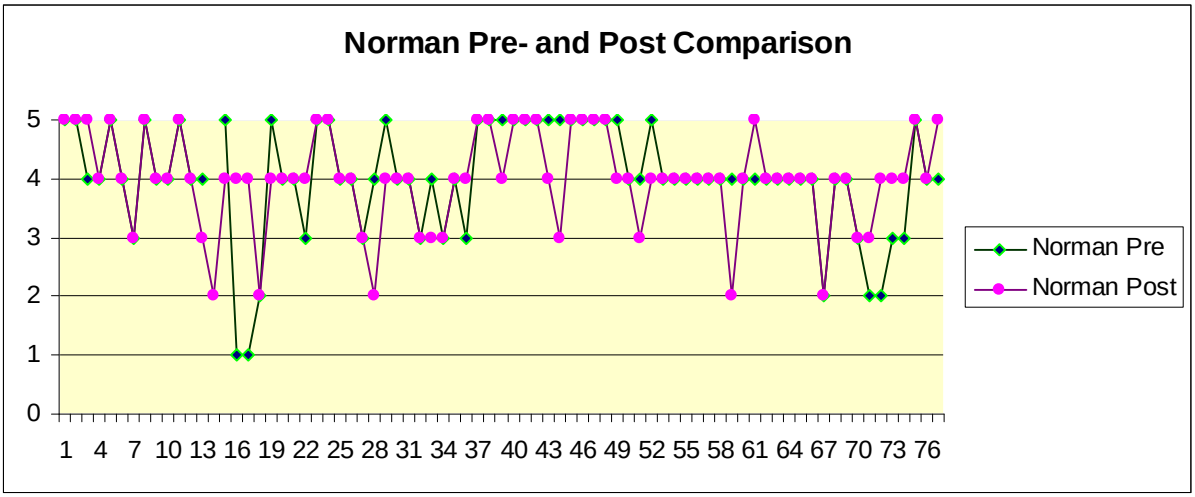
In this section, we investigate the tool use and target language production of two learners, Frida and Norman (names have been changed), during the intensive online German course CyberDeutsch. Both were members of Sylvia's tutorial group and both completed the course successfully.

3.1 Norman

Norman is a primary school teacher in the North of England who described himself as a confident and competent CMC user in the pre-course questionnaire. His level of German was at the upper end of the scale in comparison with the student cohort participating in this project. He felt comfortable using German in written CMC, as this allowed him more time to think about the language before the actual communication act. His only concerns before course start were about the videoconferencing element of the project which, he felt, might be slow and less "spontaneous" than real-life meetings. This also meant that he had less positive expectations about group work in the online "class", feeling that it might make cooperation "somewhat more difficult". Overall, Norman did not think that virtual learning could replace a face-to-face classroom for language learning.
Norman used all the tools available apart from the survey. He contributed to forum discussions and opened his own discussion thread, he participated in all FlashMeeting tutorials, he created his own blog and commented in other people's, he read and edited the wiki, and attempted all the quizzes set. He also gave full feedback on the course, by filling in the questionnaires, using the Moodle feedback forms provided on the course website, and finally participating in a student focus group after the end of the course.
In other words, Norman was a model student in all respects. His experiences and his feedback will be valuable as that of a highly motivated, highly competent student. However, it needs to be kept in mind that this is the ideal and not all online courses will consist of such students. Even in our cohort of self-selected students, not all were in the same category: several of our participants had technical problems, or problems with operating the technology, approximately half of the students had a level of language competence that made it difficult for them to follow all the course materials in the time given, and five of 25 students lost motivation during the course and did not finish the five weeks.

To gain insight into our learners' self-estimated CMC competence and confidence, we used Spitzberg's CMC questionnaire as part of our pre- and post-questionnaire. Spitzberg (2006) asks 76 questions in 15 clusters about users' motivation, knowledge and efficacy when using CMC, about their skills (co-ordination, appropriateness, effectiveness and clarity), and their gain (satisfaction, attractiveness, efficiency) and general usage of CMC. Applying the same questionnaire twice can give information on any significant changes that occurred during the course.

Comparing Norman's pre-and post-questionnaire responses about CMC competence and confidence, we can see hardly any difference:



There were only 5 items where any significant change occurs:

- two questions on efficacy:
  "I quickly figure out how to use new CMC technologies." and "I know I can learn to use new CMC technologies when they come out." On both these items, Norman raised his self-evaluation from A "Not at all true of me" to D "Mostly true of me".[1]
- one question of expressiveness: "I use a lot of the expressive symbols [e.g., ☺ for 'smile'] in my CMC messages" and one on clarity "My messages are rarely misunderstood", where Norman's estimate was reduced by two points (from D to B "Mostly not true of me"),
- and finally, on a question of efficiency „CMC technologies are tremendous time-savers for my work", Norman raised his evaluation from B to D.

These changes might indicate that Norman has more confidence in his ability to quickly figure out the use of CMC technology after successfully managing the challenges of the course, and that, in turn, has increased his appreciation of CMC as time-saving measures. On the other hand, using CMC to communicate in a foreign language might well have undermined Norman's confidence in being easily understood or "rarely misunderstood". Responses to the cluster of questions about expressiveness in Norman's post-course questionnaire have fallen by 0.75 points from an average of 4 in the pre-course questionnaire to an average of 3.25. However, this is still considerably higher than the course average of 2.75 at course start (rising to 2.825 in the post-questionnaire). This sector was the one exception in the generally very high confidence (average of all items: 3.8 on a 5 point scale) of our students: most seemed to think that they were not very expressive in their messages. Norman's drop in self-evaluation in this question cluster might just express his adaptation to the general norm.

FlashMeeting

Norman participated in all five of the scheduled online videoconferencing sessions, starting in week 1 of the course with a topic of introductions and getting to know each other and finishing with a final tutorial in week 5 where the emphasis was on evaluating the tools and the learning that had taken place over the previous weeks. He was an active and competent speaker, contributing mostly in German in the spoken interactions; he only used English very rarely when he was tired or by code-switching when he was searching for vocabulary.

[1] All possible answers on the 5-point scale are: A = NOT AT ALL TRUE OF ME; B = MOSTLY NOT TRUE OF ME; C = NEITHER TRUE NOR UNTRUE OF ME; UNDECIDED; D = MOSTLY TRUE OF ME; E = VERY TRUE OF ME.

Quote from Tutorial 2:

> N: Ich, ich habe oh, I can't speak German tonight. I'm sorry. Excuse me a second. I noticed that not everybody is logging into the Forums every day or quite regularly. Really. So it's difficult to stay with everybody. I'll try German next time. Sorry.

His textchat messages during the FlashMeetings were exclusively kept in German. This confirms Norman's original assumption that he would find it easy to use German in written CMC.

Blog

Norman's familiarity with CMC conventions and use can easily be seen in his contribution to various tools, e.g. the forum and blogs. Especially for the blogs, Norman contributed significantly to his tutor group: he quickly created his own blog (week 0 of the course), he was the first one to publish other people's blog addresses on the forum, he frequently left comments on other people's blogs and he asked permission to link them to his own blog. Although he wrote some of his entries and some of the comments at the beginning in English

> ("Welcome
> Welcome to my blog!
> This is where I'll be doing something or other with the Open University over the next five or six weeks.
> Sooner or later I plan to start doing it in German."),

he achieved a relatively high number of words written in German (966). 15% of the entries in his own blog, and 19% of comments in other people's blogs were in English rather than the target language.

„N said...

> Lovely picture of Charlottenburg, Ralph. Can I add your link to my CyberDeutsch page ..."

And sometimes with good reason: Norman was the only student who found and contacted bloggers from the other tutorial group (e.g. Ralph) and, probably since he did not know them at all approached them initially in English.

Still, the Blog provided Norman with an opportunity to practise his written German, to express some personal feelings and preferences (e.g. pictures from his favourite places in German speaking countries) and he used blogging to establish links with other students on the course. Overall, Norman left 13 comments in 7 different blogs, thus creating a mini-web of blogs and supporting a community-feeling within the CyberDeutsch course.

Quizzes

Norman attempted all the quizzes on the Moodle website including the pre- and post-course C-Tests but did not submit the final version of the last test. He achieved an average grade of 69% overall (excluding the aborted final C-Test). This is the second highest score in his tutor group.

Forum

Norman started contributing to the group forum right from course start. His first viewing of the forum is recorded for 27th of November (week 0 of the course) and his first entry, a response to the tutor's request to introduce oneself, if placed on the forum on the 28th. He briefly introduces himself and adds his motivation for the course: "Ich habe mich entschieden am CyberDeutsch-Kurs teilzunehmen um mein Deutsch zu verbessern und weil ich mich für neue Technologie interessiere." („I decided to participate in the CyberDeutsch course to

improve my German and also because I'm interested in new technology."). All Norman's forum entries are in German only.
Overall, Norman added 9 posts to the forum and started three own discussion strands. He also updated one of his contributions, a fact he recalls accurately in his post-course questionnaire. Norman regularly read the forum discussions between 27 November and 3 February (141 viewings overall) and even more frequently checked the forum for new entries (306 viewings altogether). He even checked back after the course had finished; his last viewing of the course website is recorded for 4 March.
Looking at the entries in detail, however, reveals that three out of his 12 forum entries were simple messages to gain access to other people's responses. ("Im Moment habe ich noch keine Antwort aber ich Möchte die anderen Antworte lesen. N." – For the moment I don't have an answer but I wanted to view the other answers. N."). This was caused by a setting of the Moodle forums that allows viewing of responses only to those users who had already entered their own response. While this setting would be beneficial for an assessed forum as element of a course, in this case it was purely accidental and caused by the project team's unfamiliarity with the medium. However, Norman proved with his standard-phrase entry that he could deal with the vagaries of technology in a pragmatic and resourceful way without wasting too much time.

Wiki
The wiki was originally planned as a collaborative final task for all the students in one tutor group. That it was not so successful in this respect is due to a number of factors. The wiki task started relatively late in the course and students were already quite overwhelmed with the different features of the course, the difficult language and the demands on their time. Furthermore, distance students are not used to collaborative learning as much as face-to-face groups often are. The course itself underestimated the need to build up collaborative learning skills gradually and expected students to be able to collaborate virtually with fellow students they did not know all that well in a medium they were unfamiliar with. Possibly the task itself, asking students to describe and comment on online learning of German, i.e. the experience from their course, was not so stimulating at the end of the course, either.
Norman was the only student who explicitly reported any real sense of collaboration with respect to the wiki task:

> "My experience of collaborating on the SpielWiki has been a little mixed. Because of browser issues, I've found it easier to write into a word processor and export the text as html before pasting it into the wiki. Maybe using my WP software also lets me work in a familiar editing environment. But this is really a minor issue - shared editing works well and there is a real sense of collaboration." (Norman feedback form, 7 December)

However, even his final evaluation of the wiki after course end is less than positive:

> "Ich habe zum SpielWiki geschrieben und die Texte aufbereiten. Das hat, ich glaube, gute Möglichkeiten. Aber wir haben, als eine Gruppe, die Wikis nich t gut benutzt - vielleicht wenn es mehr Zeit gebt?" (Norman feedback form, 14 January)
> (Translation: "I wrote to the SpielWiki and edited the texts. This has, I believe, possibilities. But as a group we did not use the wiki very well – maybe if there were more time?")

Norman created a page on Internet-searches on the wiki:

> "Vielleicht können wir unsere Internet-Recherche links von Woche 1 hier posten? Was meinen Sie?" (translation: „Maybe we could post our internet search links from week 1 here? What do you think?")

He used three edits for this and twice added links to the wiki. The low number of edits is not surprising in the light of what he tells us: he had been "preparing" the wiki entries in a word-document and then copied them into the wiki.
Overall, Norman viewed the wiki on the course 89 times, the last time on the 11 January. Obviously he was interested in his fellow students' contributions and up-dates, as his last edit had been completed on the 5 December.

In the post-course questionnaire, Norman identifies FlashMeeting as his favourite tool and blogs as his second favourite, but he has something positive to say about all the tools apart from the survey that he did not use:

Q10. What benefits did you identify from using the different tools?
Please give details

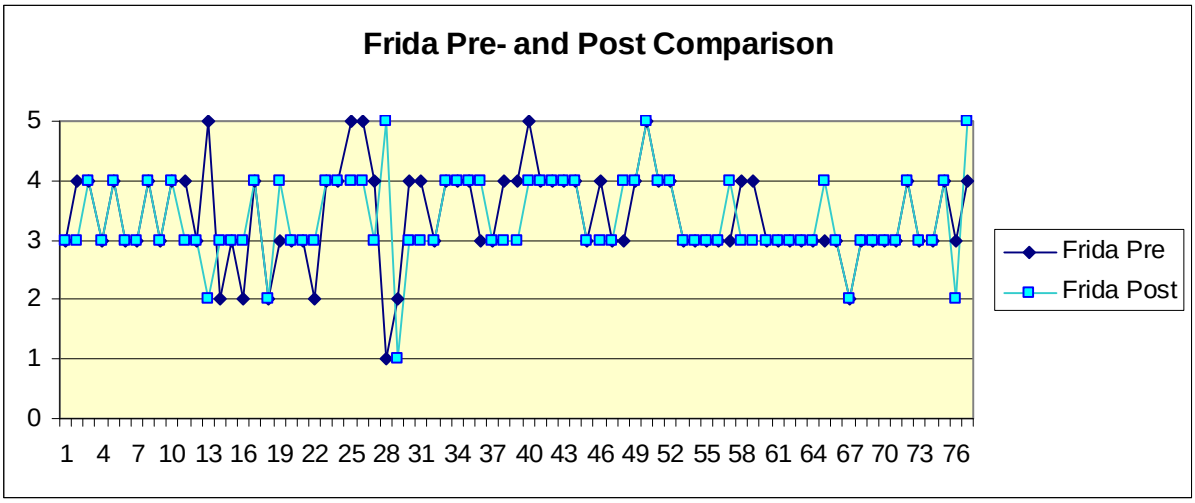
Forums	Communication with fellow students/tutor
Blogs	The chance to be creative and experiment with written German.
Wikis	Sharing ideas, practising written German.
Surveys	
Quizzes	Assessment
FlashMeeting	Practice of spoken German and a sense of contact with students/tutor.

His general comment is very positive, he clearly seems to have enjoyed the course and gained from it.:

> "I was impressed by the new tools, and would enjoy using them as part of a full course. I don't think 5 weeks was enough time to get to grips with them fully but I appreciate that time was limited!"

3.2 Frida

Frida was another student in Sylvia's group, a classmate of Norman. A language teacher herself she was interested not only in improving her German but also in finding out how language learning works in a purely online course. Initially, she had some problems with the technology and contacted the course team for help. Once her questions had been answered, she participated fully in the course. She was one of the few students who used almost all the tools, the one exception being the online survey.
From her original questionnaire, we know that Frida evaluated her own CMC skills slightly lower than the average on the course (3.4 average on a scale of 5, whereas Norman's average of 4 was slightly above the 3.8 overall average). And her evaluation of her CMC competence did not change significantly over the duration of a five-week intensive course.



The only two items that change more than one point up or down relate to a question of efficacy, “I am confident I will learn how to use any new CMCs that are due to come out” and one of expressiveness, “I use a lot of the expressive symbols [e.g., ☺ for 'smile'] in my CMC messages”. Surprisingly, Frida feels a lot less confident at the end of the course that she will be able to manage new CMC technology (a drop of 3 points from E to B), but more able to use expressive symbols (a rise from A to E).
The demands of the course may have been overwhelming for Frida, who was at a lower language level than Norman to start with, and might have shattered her initial confidence in her ability to cope with new things “on the fly”. Whereas Norman’s self-evaluation has stayed the same on average, Frida’s has dropped slightly from 3.5 to 3.4 post-course. This is more in line with the rest of the group, where the average dropped from 3,87 to 3,78 (only counting those students who had filled in both, the pre- and the post-course questionnaire).

FlashMeeting
Frida participated in only three of the five FlashMeeting sessions. However, she later reported that she had viewed the recording of one of the sessions she had missed. When she was present, Frida contributed fully, in speaking and in writing and kept her contributions to 95% in German. Interestingly, when she used textchat, 21% of her utterances are in English. She is using this language, which is not her first language, to communicate technical problems
(“03:44: frida: no, i didn't hear you Mary
04:32: frida: still no sound kerry”)
or ask for vocabulary help (“37:54: f: Wie sagt man peer-reviewed?”).

Blog
Frida’s blog was extensive, its content more topical than personal. Although it lacks the visual highlights of Norman’s it contains a wealth of information on different topics that interest Frida (an artist, a campaign against advertising, etc.) and links to other sites. In contrast to Norman (and many of her other colleagues), Frida stuck rigorously to using German as her language on the blogs. Only the profile section of her blog is completed in English, although she had followed the instructions to use the German version of blogger.com and the categories are displayed in German. (“**Geschlecht:** Female”) All her comments in other blogs are in German despite her obvious struggles with the complex language:

> „Leider kann ich nicht deinen Fehlern korrigieren! Aber ich wollte sagen, dass ich finde deinen sehr persönlichen Post interessant, und dir ein paar Fragen stellen, weil ich neugierig bin: ...“

> (translation: "I'm afraid I cannot correct your mistakes. But I wanted to say that I find your very personal message interesting, and wanted to ask you some questions because I'm curious…")

Following the suggestions in the worksheets that aimed at encouraging communication through the blogs, she left six comments in three other blogs created by colleagues from her tutor group. Although she phrased three of those as questions, one of her comments remained unanswered and none sparked off longer exchanges.

Quizzes

Frida attempted four of the quizzes on the Moodle website, including the pre-course C-Test, but she finalised ("submitted") only two. This might be caused by her unfamiliarity of the moodle quiz set-up; there are different options when finishing a quiz: "submit" to enter an answer and "submit and finalise" to record your quiz results. Due to this error or oversight, Frida only achieved an average grade of 17%.

Forum

Frida started her Forum contributions relatively late. Her first recorded action is for 6th December, one week after course start. However, this was not caused by a delay in her actual contributions but by a technical problem. Frida is a tutor at the Open University and as such had access to the staff website where the original CyberDeutsch material was stored. For some reason she did not use the advertised website address for the active course but searched through the Open University web as a whole and came across the pre-built website where she placed her original forum contributions from 28 November onwards. Only after email enquiries to the course team could this problem be sorted out and Frida copied and pasted her messages to the active course website for CyberDeutsch where her fellow students and tutor could respond.

> „Bis Heute war ich an der kurswebsite für die Tutorinnen (technishes probleme), deshalb könnte ich keine Antwort zu meinen Fragen kekommen. Ich fülte mich einsam!"
>
> (translation: „Up until today I was on the course website for tutors (a technical problem), therefore I could not receive any answers to my questions. I felt lonely.")

Luckily, Frida was not put off by the original lack of response to her messages but found an alternative way (email) to resolve the issue.

Frida contributed 10 posts to the forums and opened 4 new discussions. Only one of her entries is a technical query (but also written mainly in German), the rest are content specific, some technical help to fellow students with the use of Umlaute, and a long piece of evaluation of the course, responding to the tutor's questions.

> "Die beide – Forum und Blog – passen, denke ich. Das Forum für zusammenarbeit und Dinge die jemand interessiert sich für und der Blog für mehr persönlichen Themen/Interesse/Kommentare" („Both fit, I believe, forum and blog. The forum more for collaboration and things of general interest, the blog more for personal topics, interests, comments")

In contrast to Norman, Frida quickly lost interest in the course after it had finished. Her last viewing of the forum was on 15 January, and the last recorded viewing of the course website was on 31 January. This might, of course, be influenced by Frida's schedule, she started teaching again in February.

Wiki

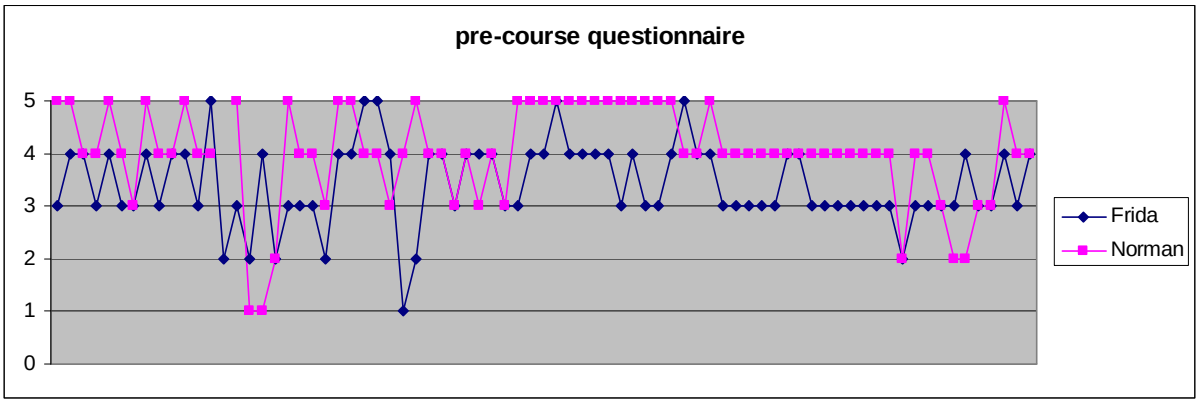
Frida contributed a page on "blogs" to the group's wiki.

> "Ein Blog ist eine Webseite, die kurze, häufig aktualisierte Inhalte enthält, die chronologisch publiziert werden.
> Wie in einem traditionellen und deshalb privaten Tagesbuch kann der Autor oder die Autorin diese Seite benutzen zu sich sein alltägliches Leben überlegen.
> Normalerweise wird der Blog aber benützt um Kontakte mit anderen Leute zu erbauen, und Erfahrungen, Gendanken und eine Selektion von Informationen und Nachrichten zu austauch. ..." (Frida Wiki entry)
> (translation: „A blog is a webpage with short, frequently up-dated content, published chronologically.
> Like in a traditional, private diary, the author can use these pages to reflect on daily life. However, a blog is normally used to establish contact with other people, to share experiences, thoughts and a selection of information and news.")

She viewed the wiki 48 times overall between 6 December and 25 January. Her own edits started on 7 January, considerably later than Norman's. She also used a very low number of edits (two overall), which leads to the conclusion that she might have prepared the information elsewhere and copied it into the wiki. This seems to be the general trend in the CyberDeutsch course. The second tutor group ("Eva's group") even held the main discussion about wiki-contributions via email and sent attached word documents to each other to edit and up-date their planned wiki entries. Since the intended use for the wiki was exactly this type of joint editing and collaborative writing, and the functionality of the Moodle wiki allows for this, the strategy of falling back on other technologies must be triggered by different causes. Maybe students reacted to the "technology overload" by using familiar tools (email, word processing), as well as simplifying the procedure. They then prepared a "wiki" as a final result and end-product rather than seeing is as a process of achieving a collaborative task.
Sylvia's tutor group never progressed to a group wiki due to technical problems with the moodle page. Nevertheless, students used the "playground wiki" for their purposes and published their entries as new pages within it.

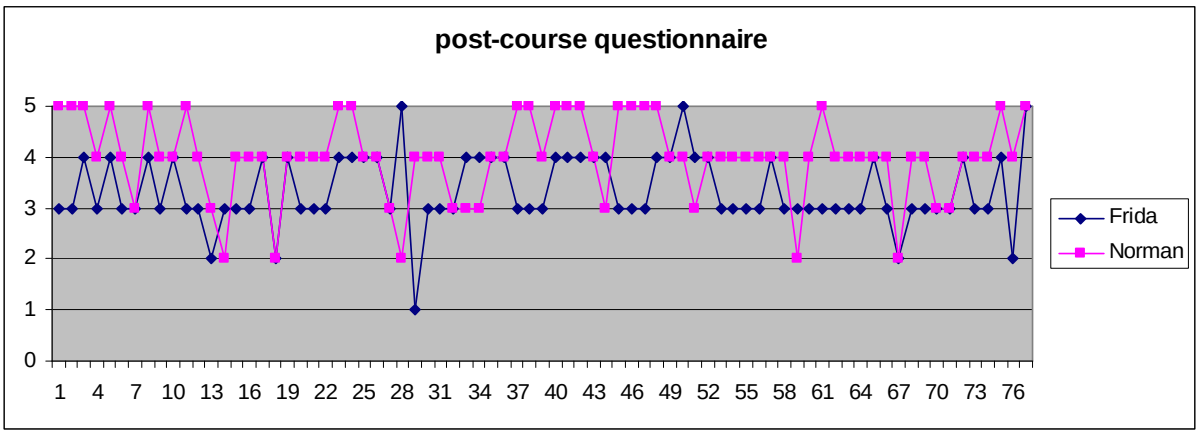
3.3 Comparing the cases

Of the two learners, Norman is clearly the more confident and competent CMC user at the beginning of the course:



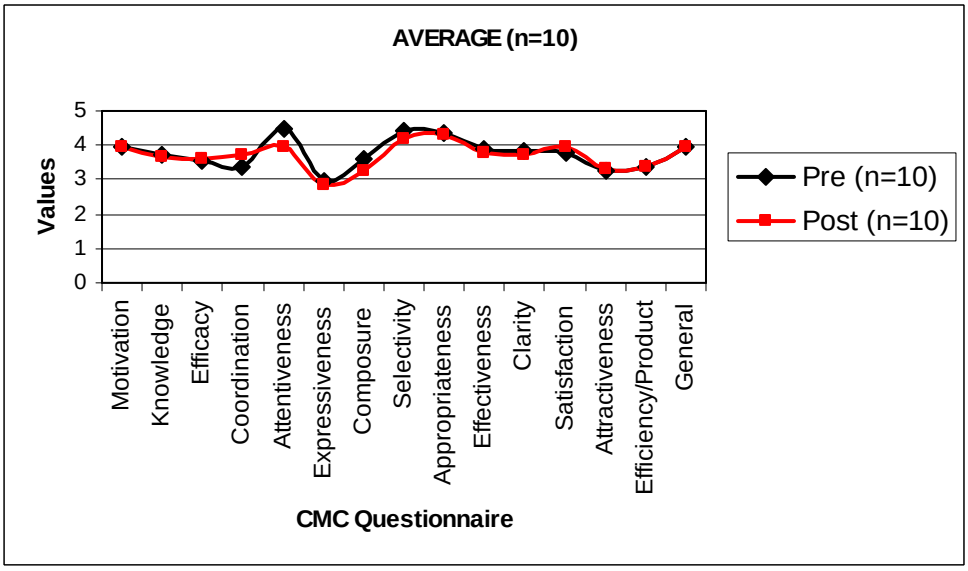
Comparing Frida's and Norman's pre-course Spitzberg-questionnaire answers

Since Norman's confidence overall does not decrease but Frida's is lowered by approximately 0.1%, the difference is even more pronounced after the course:



Comparing Frida's and Norman's post-course Spitzberg-questionnaire answers

Norman's items of lowest confidence (two questions of efficacy) were raised to level out the graph, whereas Frida's lowest point - in the question cluster of expressiveness - is still noticeable.
Seen in the context of all students who filled in both questionnaires, Frida's case is not exceptional: the average confidence dropped by 0.1% but there is only one area of significant change noticeable:

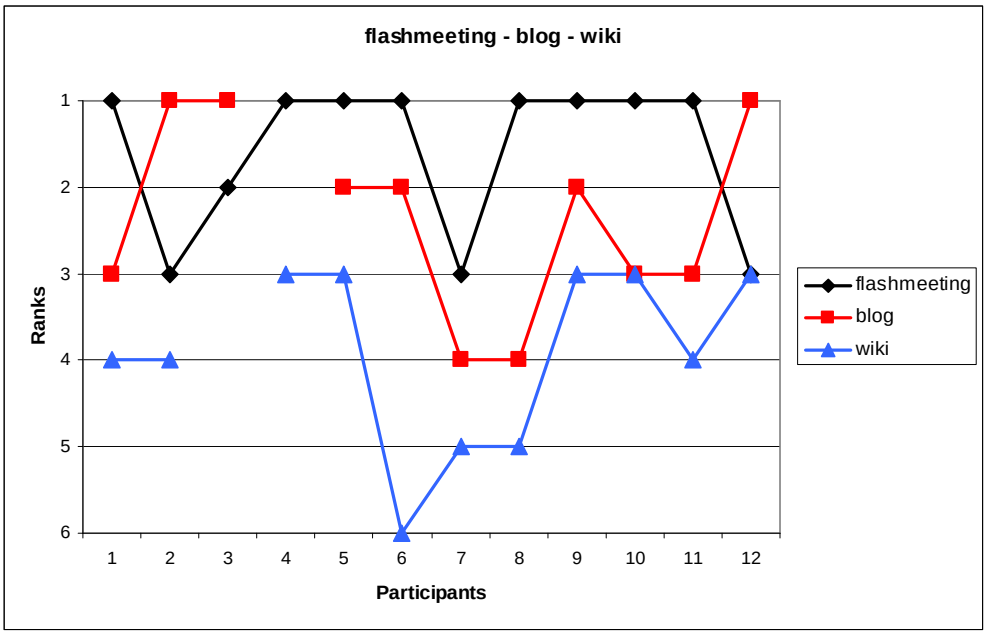


Average change between pre- and post-course Spitzberg-questionnaire answers

Attentiveness, students evaluation of their reaction to others when using CMC is the only value that was significantly lower at the end of the course, it sank from 4.5 to 3.9 (on a 5-point scale).
Questions relating to attentiveness were, "I ask questions of the other person in my CMC", "I show concern for and interest in the person I'm conversing with in CMC", "I can show compassion and empathy through the way I write emails", "I take time to make sure my emails to others are uniquely adapted to the particular receiver I'm sending it to." Speculating why this value should have gone down, one possibility comes to mind: it could be that being engaged in intensive and extensive CMC use over a period of time has shown students the limitation of the medium and made them feel that they could have paid more attention to the frequent messages from others, been more empathic in their responses, or still had some more to learn in showing concern and interest in another person in an environment that is twice mediated: by computer use and by using the foreign language.

Comparing Norman's and Frida's actual work on the CyberDeutsch course, Frida has the numerical advantage: despite her lower level of German, she produced 3795 German words in total in the documents examined. Only 104 words (or 3% of all her utterances) were in English. These consisted mainly of a few English phrases interspersed in her forum messages, some technical issues discussed in textchat on FlashMeeting and requests for vocabulary help or translation in various media.
In contrast, Norman's overall production consists of 2830 words in German and 441 in English. This amounts to a first language use of approximately 13%. Norman used English sparsely in the spoken medium (FlashMeeting, 70 words) but quite frequently when writing. One of his feedback forms was filled in almost completely in English (189 words), the other entirely in German (122 words); his comments in blogs and entries in his own blog did have English words.
The blog provides an interesting comparison in itself: Frida's blogging seems to be partly a language practice activity, whereas Norman's blogging clearly is a social activity. Where Frida sticks rigorously to German and comments less frequently on other people's blogs, Norman uses English to introduce his blog to other people and comments more frequently, even going beyond his own tutor group and the "safety" of known fellow students. Frida's own blog contains 902 words in total (only 2 of which are English), Norman's blog is almost the same length (901 words) but 134 words are in English. Frida's comments amount to 188 words compared to Norman's 247 (48 in English). Norman is also the one to list all the blog addresses in the forum and opens a new discussion strand for this purpose.

The favourite tool of most students was definitely FlashMeeting: the synchronous video-conferencing sessions were appreciated as opportunities to practise speaking ("a good opportunity to talk and listen") but also as meetings with fellow students.



Students' preferred tools: ranked from 1 – 6

Blogs came second and wikis third. Norman fits this pattern almost perfectly, as he, as well chose FlashMeeting as his rank 1 and blogs as second favourite. He did not appreciate the wikis, but not because of the tool's inherent features, rather due to a lack of time:

> "Unfortunately, I found there wasn't enough time to make best use of this tool – I think it potoential [sic] to be as useful as FlashMeeting." (Norman, post-course questionnaire)

Frida, against the trend of the group, chose blogs and forums over the FlashMeeting as her favourites. She criticised FlashMeeting strongly, not liking some of its features:

> Very inflexible because can't log in before time to make contact/have a chat and more importantly cuts off at the closing time → do not like a technology that dictates and constraint interaction so much
> - MAIN PROBLEM: not possible to have a document open within the Flashmeeting window. … ONLY SUITABLE FOR ALREADY FAIRLY ADVANCED/FLUENT LEARNERS" (Frida, post-course questionnaire)

She re-emphasised this criticism during the focus group discussion after the end of the course.

> "50.48 F: Er…it might shock everybody, but I really, really hated FlashMeetings. Erm…I'm…I…I think I know why…I didn't understand why at first but I think I know why. It's because, generally, the course…er…felt to me not just like a…a pleasant challenge, but rather a…a painful challenge, because it was…it was…er…just a little bit too difficult. So I would enjoy the challenge, but it was so difficult that I got quite depressed…not depressed, but quite…er…negative about what I was able to do and FlashMeeting kind of magnified that…erm…I just…I just really, really struggled to speak. I just was so nervous…erm…to the effect that I…I mean I can be honest, I did not attend the last one because of that. I just couldn't…I felt so awful after the…the number 4 I just couldn't bring myself to attend it. I think" (Frida, student focus group, transcript)

Frida was concerned with her language accuracy, and probably felt insecure in comparison with other students who had a higher level of German. Objectively, however, this did not stop her from producing more spoken German on average in those tutorials that she attended than Norman. In particular, Tutorial 4 that she viewed so negatively shows that Frida used 426 words in German (400 spoken, 20 in the textchat), whereas Norman in the same time only made utterances of 164 words in German.

As a language tutor at the Open University, Frida has experience of a different synchronous tool for teaching: Lyceum (see Buckingham Shum et al. 2001). She compares this very favourably to FlashMeeting which was not designed as a teaching tool and had not been used for the purpose of language learning and teaching prior to this project. She did, however, concede that the recordings of tutorials in FlashMeeting were useful and that her "ideal would be…er…the best features of Flash…FlashMeeting applied to Lyceum…er…but I don't know if it's possible." (Frida, student focus group, transcript)

For Norman, his subjective choice of favourite tool tallies with the language production that occurred there: he used most German words (1398 overall) during the FlashMeeting sessions, blogs came second with 966 words in German. Our decision to choose a blog that had a commenting function was confirmed by students' reflection in the focus group; both, Norman and Frida appreciated the comments as a way to keep in touch or even as a "social" or "emotional" function of the tool.

Overall, the course can be seen as a success for the two learners in our case study. Even Frida who had expressed negative feelings about the level of the course, the time it took to work through the tasks, and certain features of various tools, ended her questionnaire on a very positive note:

> "Having said that, I think it is a wonderful new format for a language course and would be very effective after necessary improvements are made. I'd be keen to be involved as a student in German or as a tutor in French … " (Frida, post-course questionnaire)

4 Conclusions

Online language learning can provide an arena for authentic language production and an opportunity for language practice. Our two cases exemplify this potential and show that an online language course can work for different approaches: using language communicatively as well as in language practice focusing on form.. For Frida, the learner who wants to focus on form and language practice, the asynchronous elements of the course seemed to be easier to deal with and more enjoyable. That did not mean, however, that she has not contributed just as much (or more proportionally) in the synchronous, slightly more challenging element. For Norman, the "technophile" who uses the course as a means for realistic and authentic communication in the target language, the social elements of commenting, questioning, responding seem to be central, a fact that is reflected clearly in his post-course feedback. One might assume that – similar to his fellow student Mary – he might have forgotten from time to time that he was engaged in a language learning activity.

> "… I'm very interested in the way that people learn language and this is the first course I've ever seen where you get really involved in the work to the point that you forget that you are learning a language. And I think that's something, it's the way to learn and it's very clever." (Mary, post-course interview)

Overall we can conclude that task-based language learning that focuses on content and communication rather than on form might not be the ideal or preferred learning option for everyone but the combination of online tools and learning aspects allows different learners to choose tools and activities that suit their learning style and objectives.

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