

Developing Intercultural Competence Through Online Portfolios

Nicola Schmerbeck PhD

Department of Modern Languages and Classics
at Ball State University, Indiana, USA

Abstract

Skills that used to be associated with communicative competence no longer suffice in addressing our learners' needs. Instead, the foreign language classroom has to adapt to the rapid changes of communication technologies in order to introduce learners to language skills that foster autonomous language learning and address the constant emergence of new social media.

Based on the pedagogy of multiliteracies (Paesani, Allen, and Dupuy, 2016), this article demonstrates how online portfolio projects can be used to foster learners' development of autonomous learning strategies. The goal is to present new insights into how online portfolios can function as multimodal tools to scaffold the intercultural competence of language learners.

To this end, an exploratory case study conducted at a Midwestern university in 2014, investigated the learner autonomy of third-year German students developing intercultural competence. In addition to a traditional pre- and post-test that evaluated learner's intercultural competence, the participants of a three hundred level culture class created multimodal projects for online portfolios that addressed different aspects of intercultural competence.

An analysis of the projects, which were based on learning objectives for portfolios set out by Schultz (2007), reveals in how far a multimodal approach can help learners become autonomous language learners who are able to reflect on their own culture.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, Intercultural Competence, Multiliteracies.

Introduction

Over the past decades, the advances of new communication technologies and rise of social media challenged the language skills taught in the foreign language classroom. Since learners are exposed to an increasing number of social and cultural contexts even without travelling to the target culture, their needs in our globalized world are not sufficiently addressed by

communicative competence alone. Instead, intercultural competence and multiliteracy skills in addition to traditional communication skills have become necessary elements to ensure successful communication (New London Group, 1996; Kern, 2000; Schulz, 2007).

This exploratory case study demonstrates how intermediate learners of German can develop intercultural competence and learner autonomy by using online portfolios as formative assessment tools. Backed up by an overview of research in the fields of intercultural competence and learner autonomy, this study explores the use of online portfolios to foster autonomous learning skills and intercultural competence in learners of German.

I. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Previous research addressed the development of intercultural competence through study abroad or service learning opportunities where learners are directly exposed or even immersed in the target culture (Wang, 2011). However, with tuition constantly rising and putting financial strains on students, many have no or too few resources to immerse themselves fully in a target culture through study abroad programs. Even though it does not present an equal alternative to studying abroad, the rise of social media and communication technology provides an opportunity for many students to get in contact with the target culture and develop intercultural competence.

II.1 Defining Intercultural Competence

The definitions of intercultural competence, even though widely discussed in the literature, vary by discipline and are influenced by scholars' approach to the subject matter. A general consensus describes intercultural competence not just as appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural contexts (Deardorff, 2006). Other scholars follow similar but slightly different definitions.

Fantini (2009) defines intercultural competence as "the ability for successful communication with people of other cultures" and further explains that "the bases for a successful intercultural communication are emotional competence, together with intercultural sensitivity." However, emotional competence might be hard to measure objectively and be dependent on the culture itself, since different cultures might follow different norms for the display or handling of emotions.

Sercu (2002) points out that "becoming an interculturally competent user of a foreign language not only involves the acquisition of communicative competence in that language, it also involves the acquisition of particular skills, attitudes, values, knowledge items and ways of looking upon the world" (Sercu, 2002, p. 63). This definition implies that with

intercultural competence learners develop a new level of thinking. While Fantini (2009) stressed the emotional side of intercultural competence, Sercu (2002) focused more on the cognitive side.

O'Dowd (2003) maintains that there is a general agreement among scholars to the underlying goals in regard to language instruction and argues that a positive attitude towards the target culture is an essential prerequisite for developing intercultural competence. Learners need to evaluate their own beliefs and behaviors in order to develop their own social identity and be able to negotiate messages between people with different cultural backgrounds. O'Dowd (2003) therefore takes it a step further than Sercu (2002), when he points out that this new level of thinking through intercultural competence also influences the speaker's identity.

Williams (2009) and Bennett (2009) focus on the three dimensions of intercultural competence, which include cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills as appropriately used by interculturally competent speakers in different cultural contexts. This means that intercultural competence refers to speakers possessing the knowledge about cultural issues, values, norms, customs etc. (cognitive dimension) as well as the disposition and motivation to interact with people from other cultures (affective dimension). The flexibility to adapt to cultural aspects that differ from one's own, respect and empathy for other cultures as well as open-mindedness also falls under the affective dimension as an important component of intercultural competence. Moreover, the necessary skills and abilities to behave culturally appropriate in different contexts (behavioral dimension) include not just problem-solving skills, but also critical thinking and analytical skills, social skills and resourcefulness (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994, Kelley & Meyers, 1995, Deardorff 2004, Jackson 2005).

Byram (1997) focuses on creating a curriculum that includes clear objectives for becoming intercultural speakers. To this end, he stresses the importance of (a) attitudes, (b) knowledge, (c) skills of discovery and interaction, (d) skills of interpreting and relating, and (e) critical awareness or an evaluative orientation. Learners do not only have to display the attitude to be open to accepting different values and beliefs other than their own, but also possess the knowledge of the products, processes and perspectives of other cultures in contrast to one's own culture. Furthermore, they need to own the necessary skills and abilities of an autonomous learner, who cannot only gain new cultural knowledge when necessary, but also apply that knowledge in an appropriate way during real-life interactions. Besides these skills of discovery and interaction, Byram (1997) calls for learners to be able to successfully and correctly interpret artifacts and events from other cultures and relate them to the learners' own culture.

Based on these definitions and models, this study will focus on cultural meta-knowledge, which in this context does not only relate to learners' knowledge about the target culture, but more importantly to learners' knowledge of culture-related theoretical concepts as for example the concept of stereotypes, how they are developed, how they can be identified as such, how one might argue against them, etc. This kind of meta-knowledge about social and cultural concepts is necessary to understand, interpret and interact competently in different cultures and therefore display intercultural competence.

At the same time, this study will focus on the necessary skills for intercultural competence, particularly the ability for autonomous learning. Since cultures and their customs and norms are constantly developing and changing, intercultural competence also requires being flexible and to frequently reevaluate one's understanding of the culture. In short, it requires learners to be able to autonomously acquire, evaluate, process and apply information about the target cultures. Therefore, critical thinking skills and learner autonomy are integral skills without which intercultural competence would not be possible.

Intercultural competence be defined as

- (a) possessing the (meta-) knowledge to understand how cultures are structured and function (including the meaning and relationship of cultural products, practices and perspectives),
- (b) the ability to work autonomously and scientifically to acquire and evaluate cultural knowledge through critical thinking, and
- (c) the skill to appropriately apply cultural knowledge in real-world situations beyond the classroom.

II.2 Portfolios Based on the Multiliteracies Approach

A pedagogical framework is needed that reflects its objectives as Deardorff (2006) pointed out. When teaching intercultural competence, the pedagogical approach used in class should present an alternative, be similar to immersion in the target culture and help learners develop the necessary skills. This study utilized online portfolios based on the multiliteracies framework (Kern, 2000; New London Group, 1996; Paesani, Allen, & Dupuy, 2016). This approach emphasizes different aspects of meaning associated with linguistic forms, just like intercultural competence also requires learners to understand different aspects of meaning behind linguistic forms. Paesani, Allen, & Dupuy (2016) point out the importance of cultural contexts for understanding meaning and regard literacy as social practice. The aim of this study is to find out how far online portfolios based on the multiliteracies approach could help learners develop skills necessary for intercultural competence.

Schulz (2007) also makes a case for using portfolios to teach culture in the foreign language classroom, since they offer learners opportunities to develop critical thinking skills necessary for intercultural competence, to interact and collaborate with others, and to grow as autonomous learners by providing a space for reflection and incorporation of personal goals. No longer just a summative assessment tool, portfolio projects can also operate as formative assessment tools to guide learners during their development of intercultural competence. Along those lines, numerous studies focused on how portfolios can be used to assess not only learners' knowledge but also their skills (Cole, Ryan, and Kick (1995) Pearson, 2004; Ke and Hoadley, 2009; Cummins and Davesne, 2009).

According to Yancey (2001), the "key portfolio piece" (p. 17) in the portfolio writing process is reflection. Students have to reflect on the choices they make during the portfolio process while they engage in self-assessment as well as peer-review (Murphy, 1994). These interactions, though no substitute for immersing oneself in the target culture, become a crucial part in gaining intercultural competence. The multimodal nature of online portfolios help learners reflect - in collaboration with their classmates and by themselves - on the cultural meaning of different modes of communication (pictures, text design, layout etc.) and therefore fosters critical thinking skills during the learning process. To this end, the focus lies on critical awareness, reflection and autonomous planning of the online portfolios. As students get a chance to act autonomously and decide on their own what, how much and in which format to publish their portfolio works, online portfolios hold the potential to foster learner autonomy.

II.3 Defining Learner Autonomy

While the concept of learner autonomy has been the focus of research over the last few decades (Benson, 2003; Hurd & Murphy, 2005; Little, 2001), there is no generally accepted definition of the concept within the field of foreign language learning. However, there is a consensus of certain characteristics or skills that define autonomous language learners such as the tendency to take initiative to set learning goals, reflecting and monitoring the learning progress, and assessing learning outcomes (Benson & Voller, 1997).

As one goal of the student-centered classroom is to help learners develop skills to gradually become autonomous language learners, some researchers emphasize the roles of self-motivation (Ushioda 2006), self-regulation (Dörnyei, 2005) and learning strategies (Oxford, 2003) for learning autonomy. Dam (1995) and Little (1996) have stressed the active involvement of learners in the learning process by engaging in goal-setting, in implementing strategies to reach goals, and by reflecting back as well as reviewing the progress they made towards their goals. Little (2001) pinpoints

that autonomy necessitates not just decision-making and critical reflection, but also social interaction with course mates or speech partners from the target culture. While some scholars define learner autonomy as the ability to learn independently and gain ownership of one's own choices within the learning process (Little, 1990, Benson 2007), the ability and willingness to collaborate is also regarded as part of learner autonomy. Even though being an autonomous language learner includes the ability to work independently, it does not mean that autonomy requires isolation from a learning community or target culture.

Kohonen (1992) emphasizes the roles that interdependent as well as independent learning play in learner autonomy (see also Little 1994). Little (1996) maintains the existence of a mutual relationship between social interactions with others and critical reflection. According to the social constructivist view, it is this relationship that fosters the development of autonomy. Furthermore, Little (2000, p. 69) stresses "the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection and independent action" are requisites of autonomy in the field of language learning.

In the same context, Benson (2003) highlights that critical thinking skills are developed during social interaction and communication through observation, analysis and evaluation. Therefore, autonomous language learning is often regarded as an active process that contains a social dimension and includes collaborative processes (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000).

The definition of learner autonomy used in this study was developed from multiple existing definitions and theories discussed above, including Benson (2001), Dam (1995), Little (2001) and Littlewood (1999) and incorporated for example the social constructivist view as well as Dörnyei's (2005) theory of learners' self-regulation. Within this study, autonomous learners be defined as learners who take over responsibility for their learning

- (a) by being actively involved in selecting the topics and content as well as designing their learning projects,
- (b) by setting goals and collaborating with peers to determine evaluation criteria, and
- (c) by regularly reflecting on their own work as well as reviewing the work of their peers.

Hence, autonomous learners do not only display content knowledge but also the competence to evaluate their own work. They facilitate productive peer collaboration and they utilize self-regulatory strategies to independently create and design with language.

III. Methodology

A group of nineteen students from the same section of a third-year course about *German Civilization and Culture* at a medium-sized

Midwestern university participated in this study during the fall semester 2014. Participation was completely voluntary and no incentives were offered. Neither ethnic background nor gender played a role in the selection of any of the participants. The only criterion necessary for participation in this study was the participants' enrollment in the course about German culture and civilization. Since some students place out of high school directly into third-year classes, many enter the course with different instructional backgrounds as well as various degrees of intercultural competence and learner autonomy.

III.1 Participants' Background

Participants reflected the traditional college age with a range from 18 to 22 years and an average age of just over 20 years. Almost half of the participants ($x=9$ of $n=19$) were female and about half of them were male ($x=10$ of $n=19$). Six participants declared a German major while the majors of the other participants varied widely. Twelve of the nineteen participants had previously studied German for five or more years; the remaining seven participants had taken German on average for about five semesters or $2\frac{1}{2}$ years. Only two participants indicated to have taken a German culture class before.

All participants grew up in the US and shared English as their first language. However, two of the participants grew up speaking another language as well. One of them was bilingual in German and English.

About half of the participants ($x=9$ out of $n=19$) reported to have no contact with anyone in or from a German-speaking culture. Five participants had contact once a month or less and four participants were in contact with people from a German-speaking country more than once a week. One participant abstained. Growing up, three participants had regular contact with at least one relative that had grown up in a German-speaking country.

When asked about German-related activities that the participants engaged in outside of class, three participants indicated to not engage in any German-related activities, while one participant engaged in more than eight different kinds of activities. On average, the participants engaged in at least two kinds of German-related activities on a regular basis. Activities that were passive and did not require live interaction with people from German-speaking countries were more popular among about half of the participants ($x=9$ out of $n=19$). Nine participants reported watching German movies or TV and eight participants indicated watching or reading German news, reading German books or following Germans online (e.g. on twitter, youtube, snapchat etc.), respectively. Activities that required live interactions with people from German-speaking countries, such as having a tandem partner ($x=1$ out of $n=19$), attending coffee hour or German Club events ($x=1$

out of n=19), or hanging out with exchange students (x=3 out of n=19) were not as popular.

Nine out of the nineteen participants had never been to a German-speaking country, while one student had lived in a German-speaking country for more than two years. The total time that the remaining nine students had spent abroad ranged between a week to over a year. When asked about their longest stay in a German-speaking country, these nine participants reported on average a stay of one to two months as it is the case with the university-led study-abroad program during the summer semester.

III.2 Research Instruments and Procedure

Multiple methods of data collection (pre- and posttest questionnaires, online portfolios) were employed to explore the concept of intercultural competence from different angles. This multi-method design sought to paint a more detailed picture in order to do justice to the complexity of the concept of intercultural competence.

In this study, online portfolios based on the pedagogy of multiliteracies (Paesani, Allen, and Dupuy, 2016), functioned as a tool to assess students' development of learner autonomy as part of their intercultural competence. During the course of the fall semester 2014, nineteen intermediate learners of German at a Midwestern university completed an online portfolio consisting of five projects focusing on intercultural competence in addition to a traditional pre- and posttest that evaluated learners' meta-knowledge of key terms related to intercultural competence. A colleague of the researcher administered the pre- and posttests as well as the demographic background questionnaires and kept them in her office until the end of the semester, so that the investigator did not know which students consented to their participation in this study until after the final grades were submitted.

The pre- and posttests consisted of eleven open-ended questions, which asked for learners to define cultural concepts (e.g. stereotypes, cultural misunderstandings, products, practices, and perspectives, etc.) as well as their causes and/ or relationships. The portfolio project tasks were adopted with only slight changes (mostly in wording) from the example given in Schulz' (2007) article "The Challenge of Assessing Cultural Understanding in the Context of Foreign Language Instruction" and addressed (i) the impact of a culture's demographic on its products and practices, (ii) stereotypes and generalizations, (iii) cultural images and connotations, (iv) the relationship of cultural products to a culture's practices and perspectives, and (v) cultural misunderstandings and their causes. Learners mostly developed their understanding of these cultural concepts through portfolio projects and the

accompanying class discussions. There was no formal instruction about these concepts and the strategies needed through the instructor of the course.

Each portfolio project required the students to select and research a new topic of their choice, to design a text through multiple modes of communication (e.g. text, visuals, audio-visual elements etc.), and to collaborate with peers to set project goals. By following a circular, process-oriented approach to designing portfolio projects, learners not only included multiple drafts of each of their projects, but also reflected on their work through peer and instructor feedback as well as their own self-evaluations.

Upon completion of the semester, learners' online portfolios were used to assess their development of intercultural competence and learner autonomy. While general project goals and evaluation criteria were developed through class discussions, the online portfolios were analyzed in regard to the following criteria:

- (a) topic choices, content and their multimodal presentations,
- (b) learners' development of independent research techniques,
- (c) peer feedback provided in form of online comments as well as learners' constructive use of criticism in their own project development, and
- (d) learners' self-reflection on goals they set for their portfolios, their development of intercultural competence as well as learner autonomy.

IV. Results

After the end of the semester, the qualitative data was gathered and analyzed with special focus on the development of intercultural skills and competence. The results of the portfolio projects and learner reflections were then compared with the pre- and posttest data. The aim of the study was to explore in how far online portfolio projects can help intermediate learners of German develop intercultural competence, which had been defined as

- (a) possessing the (meta-) knowledge to understand how cultures are structured and function (including the meaning and relationship of cultural products, practices and perspectives),
- (b) the ability to work autonomously and scientifically (learner autonomy) to acquire and evaluate cultural knowledge through critical thinking, and
- (c) the skill to appropriately apply cultural knowledge in real-world situations beyond the classroom.

IV.1 Pre- and Post-Test Results: Learners' possession of cultural (meta-) knowledge

At the beginning of the semester, all participants answered eleven culture-related questions on a pretest questionnaire. Upon completion of the final portfolio project, the participants completed a posttest which contained the same questions as the pretest. The questions on the pre- and post-test fell

into five categories which were related to the five portfolio projects the students completed during the semester: (a) general knowledge about the concept of culture, (b) the definition of intercultural competence (c) stereotypes, prejudices, and cultural misunderstanding, (d) causes for stereotypes, and (e) cultural misunderstandings and their causes.

When asked to define culture, all subjects were able to phrase a definition that incorporated some aspects of culture. During the pre-test, all subjects mentioned either a product, practice or perspective as an example for culture. Most subjects ($x=12$ of $n=19$) were able to mention two of these three aspects. Only one subject mentioned all three aspects. In contrast to the pretest, half of all subjects were able to name a cultural product, practice, and perspective as an example for their definition of culture during the posttest.

Explaining what the concept of intercultural competence referred to, half of the subjects ($x=10$ of $n=19$) that completed the pretest believed that intercultural competence is a passive concept, related to knowledge or awareness. About a quarter of all participants ($x=5$ of $n=19$) mentioned one active aspect.

During the post-test, the results changed. About a quarter of all subjects ($x=5$ of $n=19$) believed it was only a passive concept, and about a half ($x=9$ of $n=19$) of all subjects mentioned active aspects.

When asked to define the concepts of stereotypes, prejudices and cultural misunderstandings, half of the subjects ($x=9$ of $n=19$) were unable to differentiate between these three concepts. However, during the post-test, three quarters ($x=15$ of $n=19$) were able to differentiate between the three concepts. Two subjects chose to opt out of answering this question.

During the pre-test, half ($x=9$ of $n=19$) of the subjects claimed contact with people from other cultures as the cause for stereotypes. Only one participant believed that it is actually a lack of contact with people from other cultures that causes stereotypes. A little less than a quarter of all participants ($x=4$ of $n=19$) noted that some people have stereotypes because they have a bad character.

These opinions changed throughout the semester so that during the post-test, half of the participants ($x=10$ of $n=19$) noted that it is actually a lack of contact with people from a different culture that causes stereotypes to develop. Two participants claimed that past experiences with people from other cultures might cause stereotypes.

Only three participants identified a relationship between language or communication and cultural misunderstandings as part of cultural misunderstandings. During the post-test, half of all subjects ($x=10$ of $n=19$) specifically mentioned language, misinterpretations based on language, and communication as related to cultural misunderstanding. Some of these pre- and posttest results were also reflected in the participants' portfolio projects.

IV.2 Portfolio Projects Results

The participants in this study completed five portfolio projects throughout the semester. Upon submission of the final grades, the portfolio projects were evaluated. The data analysis is a content analysis focusing on participants' development of learner autonomy (IV.2.1 and IV.2.2) and their application (IV.2.3 and IV.3) of cultural knowledge in real-world situations beyond the classroom (see section (b) and (c) of the definition of cultural competence in II.1). After the end of the semester, the results of the pre- and post-test questionnaires were collected and the data was evaluated. During the evaluation, learners' use of cultural key terms and their circumscription in their projects, in peer-comments and in self-evaluations were counted to see in how far learners developed an objective understanding of culture in contrast to personal anecdotal knowledge.

IV.2.1 Learner autonomy and the development of scientific work strategies

Over the course of the semester, the participants not only learned about cultural topics covered in class, but they also developed research techniques. While only two students used any sources at all to back up their arguments during the first draft of the first portfolio project, the number and kind of sources used by the students in the class gradually increased. For example, student O used only one online website for the completion of the first task. However, for the following tasks she then used up to 23 sources. Some students encouraged their course mates through comments to develop better research techniques as the following extract shows:

Extract 1: Student B's comment on student K's research sources and student K's response

Student B: I noticed that one of your sources was from Wikipedia and I'm not entirely sure if

it is reliable. There are sources in Wikipedia at the bottom, like footnotes, that

may tell you where they got their information (...)

Student K: Thank you B.! (...) My perspectives were a bit off, but now they are backed up with research and statistics and make a large amount of sense.

Among the autonomous learning strategies analyzed in this project, the development of scientific research skills seemed to be most closely related to the gain of meta-knowledge. Learners who developed the skills to find and use reliable sources for their projects, were also able to define and explain key terminology related to intercultural competence. Learners, who

generally used little or no sources in their portfolio projects were also not able to define key concepts during the pre- and posttest.

IV.2.2 Discussions and evaluations of cultural meta-knowledge

As the students developed more strategies and knowledge about how to work scientifically, the comments they left on their course mates' portfolio projects started to contain increasingly more meta-knowledge as well. They started commenting and questioning their classmates' definitions of certain concepts as well as their course mates' argument structure. These comments were often perceived as positive, constructive criticism and participants generally changed their portfolio drafts based on their course mates' comments. The following excerpts show such an exchange.

Extract 2: Student Y's comment on a course mate's portfolio project and student I's response

Student Y: (...) I think you should add a bit more to your perspectives section as well.

Remember that a perspective is supposed to be something about why do these

people use these practices and/or products in their culture? Why do these practices

and/or products exist? (...)

Student I: (...) I will definitely look back into everything you've said and try to fix up my portfolio more (...). Thanks so much for taking the time to read my portfolio and giving such constructive criticism.

At the end of the semester, student I reflected back on her struggles with understanding the relationships among products, practices, and perspectives. She acknowledged how she was able to gain a better intercultural understanding as the following extract shows:

Extract 3: Student I's final portfolio reflection addressing her cultural meta-knowledge again

(...) With the help of class and the help of (lots) of research, (...) I see myself as having a keener understanding of critically analyzing certain parts of these cultures, and being able to identify what the heck a cultural product is. (...)

Furthermore, the results showed a relationship between learners' feedback and the development of meta-knowledge. Learners who got more engaged in the feedback process and gave more differentiated and critically reflective feedback (e.g. commenting on specific cultural concepts instead of just praising the general overall projects of their classmates) also showed an improvement in their meta-knowledge.

IV.2.3 Personal Investment

Throughout the semester, students were given the opportunity to get personally invested in the project through choices related to topics, content, and multimodal designs. They chose topics with which they have some first-hand experience, that are personally important to them, and topic areas that they can relate to other aspects of their lives (see extract 4).

Extract 4: Student T on incorporating his interests in the portfolio project
It was particularly interesting to learn about German history for me as I am a History major myself. I tried to incorporate this in some of my later projects and found that it helped to tie in interests of my own to whatever I was working on.

The portfolio projects also allowed students to make multimodal design choices to convey messages beyond the written word. They chose personal photographs, page layout, (open-source) pictures from the internet etc. in their projects. For example, student K chose to use some personal photographs to convey his impression of the German-speaking cultures in Germany and Austria and commented on his choice:

Extract 5: Student K's design choice as expressed in the final reflection

(...) These photos were all taken by myself and my father during our family's most recent journey to the Fatherland in the summer of '14. I think that the bare natural beauty and stability of the German and Austrian Alps are a metaphor for Germany itself: a stable entity that is both beautiful and strong, and capable of taking care of itself and its people. (...)

In contrast to other autonomous learning strategies, learners' personal investment in the project did not show a relationship to the improvement of meta-knowledge for two students. In those cases, learners invested in the projects via the choice of topics based on experiences and the portfolio design, but not in the form of personal interest, learners did not show an improvement in meta-knowledge, neither in the portfolio projects themselves nor in the posttest.

IV.3 Expanding the learning experience beyond the classroom

At the beginning of the semester, students were assigned specific course mates and projects to comment on during the five different portfolio projects, giving each student a chance to observe how their classmates approached the task. During each of the five projects, learners were supposed to comment on two of their classmates' projects. Since the assigned pairing of course mates continually changed with each portfolio project, they were given the opportunity to not receive feedback from the same students, but from a variety of their course mates and at the same time, they each read different portfolios as well.

While students remained focused on their own assigned projects at the beginning of the semester, towards the end of the semester, they started to venture out and read as well as comment on more projects from their classmates than just the two that had been mandatorily assigned to them. Some projects also received comments from parents and friends who were not course participants but in some cases even lived in the target culture.

In addition, learners wrote reflections about their own learning goals and content as well as design choices throughout the semester. As the following extract demonstrates, student J realized in his final portfolio reflection how his learner autonomy is part of his intercultural competence.

Extract 6: Student J's final reflection on the goals he reached through the portfolio project

One of the greatest treasures of information that I will carry with me after this class is the importance of reflecting personally on who I am because of the places I've been, my beliefs, the people around me, and the goals and plans I have. This self-evaluation is essential to looking beyond myself and discovering more about the amazing opportunities that are outside of my own perception and experience.

V. Analysis and Discussion

These results revealed that there was a general increase of meta-knowledge about culture and culture-related concepts among the group of participants after the use of portfolios. At the beginning of the semester, most learners had a vague understanding of culture mostly based on subjective opinions and their own experiences with other cultures, e.g. through a student exchange. As they learned how to conduct research about the topic, how to find reliable sources, and that personal and anecdotal evidence is not enough for a strong argument in their portfolios, they started to gain theoretical background knowledge, or meta-knowledge, and score higher on the posttest. As William (2009) and Bennett (2009) pointed out, intercultural competence has a cognitive dimension that focuses on cultural knowledge which is just as important as affective and behavioral skills.

Furthermore, the online portfolio projects gave learners the opportunity to develop into autonomous learners. During the portfolio projects, learners demonstrated autonomy not just through the development of scientific work strategies (e.g. finding reliable, independent sources for their projects) but also through discussions with classmates that reflected their critical thinking and personal investments in the project (see IV.2.1-3). This falls in line with research done by Little (1994) and Kohonen (1992) that emphasized the roles of independent and interdependent learning as well as Benson (2003) and Pavlenko & Lantolf (2000) who stressed the role of interaction in developing learner autonomy. The relationship between more

detailed feedback and a better understanding of cultural meta-knowledge, showed that reflection and critical thinking is important to gain intercultural competence. By providing a space for learners to reflect and think critically, the use of online portfolios can be used as a tool to gain intercultural competence.

Through opportunities for personal investment, portfolios can be used to gain cultural competence (see IV.2.3). However, the results also showed that different kinds of personal investment can relate differently to intercultural competence. Personal investment in design choices or topic selection that do not reflect a true interest in the subject matter itself are not necessarily congruent with the acquisition of cultural knowledge. The investment has to be made with the goal to gain intercultural competence to be effective.

Portfolios provide an opportunity for learners to engage with a target culture beyond the classroom (see IV.3). Interaction between different cultures is an important part of intercultural competence, but in a foreign language class, the interaction with the target culture is often hard to accomplish. Portfolio projects enable learners not just to reach out to members of the target culture and solicit comments from them, but they also help them to reflect back on their own culture. As the results have shown, some learners took advantage of these opportunities and gained a new understanding of culture from it as they demonstrated in their portfolio projects. Portfolio projects therefore addressed Byram's (1997) call for learners to relate other cultures to their own as part of intercultural competence.

The analysis of the study's results showed that portfolios hold the potential to help learners (a) gain meta knowledge about culture, (b) become autonomous learners, (c) expand their knowledge beyond the classroom. Therefore, portfolios can be used as a tool to help learners gain intercultural competence.

VI. Conclusion, Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The analysis of the results revealed that portfolios can be a supportive tool to develop intercultural competence, even when students cannot leave the country.

Teaching and assessing intercultural competence outside of the target culture presents a general challenge for foreign language instructors. On the one hand, it seems impossible to prepare learners for every intercultural situation they may ever encounter, but on the other hand, assessing learners' competence without being able to observe them in actual, real-life situations can be difficult. Therefore, the focus should not be on teaching learners correct behavior in specific situations, but to help learners gain skills and

foster strategies that can be implemented in numerous situations and that are beneficial for learners' development of intercultural competence.

In conclusion, the study showed how portfolio projects based on the multiliteracies approach (Paesani, Allen and Dupuy, 2016) provided a learning space that fostered the development of autonomous learning skills and helped learners' in their development of intercultural competence. However, there were also some limitations to this study.

The biggest limitation is the number of participants. Due to its small sample size the quantitative results could neither be statistically analyzed nor generalized. Instead, the study focused at overall tendencies and can possibly be regarded as an exploratory case study.

Another limitation in the study design is the fact that additional variables could not be excluded to show a direct cause and effect relationship between online portfolios and the gain of intercultural competence. Due to the nature of intercultural competence, which is not a fixed skill and can take various forms in various situations, it is questionable whether one will ever be able to control all variables that can potentially influence the intercultural competence of language learners.

The true asset of this study is twofold. On the one hand, the study points towards some areas that can be further explored in future research, and on the other hand, a study like this might provide ideas for teaching. For example, future research is needed to explore the role of personal investment in online portfolios for the development of intercultural competence. Educators might find it beneficial to encourage learners to consciously focus on cultural areas that they are personally interested in when completing online portfolios.

In addition, the study has shown that educators should provide ample opportunities for students to discuss and reflect on their cultural findings in order to develop their critical thinking in relation to cultural topics. Future research could explore specific autonomous learning and teaching strategies to foster critical thinking during portfolio work, especially with the learner aim to develop intercultural competence.

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