Learning and teaching languages in technology-mediated contexts: The relevance of social presence, co-presence, participatory literacy and multimodal competence

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Introduction

Kern (2014, 340) reminds us that technology-mediated environments provide today’s language learners with “new kinds of social encounters, new kinds of communities, and new prospects for learning.” Such environments also pose new challenges, though, as learning and teaching is by default mediated twice—by the technology and by the target language—and communication and collaboration are becoming increasingly multimodal, that is, allowing users to draw on a repertoire of meaning-making resources (visual, spoken, gestural, written, three-dimensional, and any combination of these). As a result, language educators find themselves in quest of pedagogical approaches which allow them to make adequate use of CMC-based collaboration for learning and teaching purposes. While this requirement has been widely accepted (see, for example, Hubbard and Levy 2006; Farr and Murray 2016), a hierarchical and prescriptive use of technologies often still prevails in computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) settings accompanied by a tendency to reproduce power structures known from more traditional face-to-face classrooms. Hence the prerequisite need for teachers “to appreciate the value of social constructivism and related approaches in preparing their students to participate, as employees and citizens, in digitally mediated societies” (Pegrum 2009, 49).
Unsurprisingly, there is an increased focus on teacher preparation for “next generation education” (Lin, Zhang, and Zheng 2016). Yet, as Pegrum reminds us, such preparation must address more than the apparent technological and pedagogical dimensions of the task at hand. “Educators,” he posits, “need a clear sense of the social, sociopolitical and ecological embeddedness of technology” (Pegrum 2009, 53). We suggest that educators also need to know how to “embed” themselves and their teaching into technology to model meaningful CMC-based interaction and collaboration for learners.

Hauck and Warnecke (2012) have argued that such modelling is dependent on educators’ social presence and their participatory literacy skills in digitally mediated learning and teaching spaces. Hauck, Galley, and Warnecke (2016) have further demonstrated the close interrelationship between both. Participatory literacy (PL) has been described by Giger (2006) as the ability to create and share knowledge and content collectively through the use of online tools and the completion of collaborative tasks in online environments and (in a slightly more metacognitive approach) by Pegrum (2011, 9) as an appreciation of “how you can contribute to collective intelligence through your use of tools like blogs, wikis, folksonomies or virtual worlds.” Social presence (SP) relates to the ability of individuals to demonstrate their availability for and willingness to participate in interaction (Kehrwald 2008). For Kehrwald (2010, 41), SP is a subjective quality that translates into “subjective projections of self […] into technology mediated environments, subjective assessments of others’ presence and assessments of the subject’s relations with others.” Yet, projection of self and identification and assessment of projection of others as well as contribution to collective intelligence in online contexts, requires, as Hauck (2010) highlights, multimodal competence, defined by Kress (2003, 21) as the mastery of a wide range of representational systems or modes including “words, spoken or written; image, still and moving; musical […] 3D models […].” Thus, the challenge faced by educators in technology-mediated
environments presents itself as being threefold: Becoming multimodally aware and competent in order to establish their social presence (first challenge) so that they can successfully participate in the collaborative creation and sharing of knowledge (second challenge) and are well equipped to model such competence and participatory skills for their students (third challenge). To meet these challenges, we implemented a training module for pre- and in-service language teacher trainees in an EFL course in the Foreign Language Education Department (FLED) at Boğaziçi University: Tutoring with Web 2.0 tools – Designing for Social Presence.¹

The next section provides a more detailed introduction to the notion of presence—both SP and co-presence—and its inter-relationship with PL and multimodality. This is followed by a summary of the methodological approach chosen for our study, including the design principles underpinning the aforementioned training program, its content and information about the participants. Subsequently, we present our case study analysis, discuss our findings, and conclude with some of the insights gained in relation to our initial hypotheses.

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togetherness in technology mediated, imaginary and parasocial interactions. For example, according to Biocca, Harms, and Burgoon (2003), the concept of co-presence in online communication comprises two interconnected phenomena: telepresence and social presence (SP). Telepresence is “the phenomenal sense of being there,” (i.e., the perception of online interlocutors of being at a remote location rather than in each other’s immediate environment); whereas social presence (SP) is the sense of “being together with another” (ibid., 459) and involves psychological engagement between the interlocutors. Bulu (2012), drawing on Biocca, Harms, and Burgoon (2003) as well as Nowak and Biocca (2003), reiterates that co-presence involves psychological interaction between online interlocutors. She further argues that there is no clear theoretical distinction between co-presence and SP, and the terms tend to be used interchangeably. This is the position we will take in this chapter and elaborate further on SP.

SP and its role in mediated interactions including CMC has been a topic of investigation since the early 1970s. Initially, the term ‘social presence’ was coined in order to distinguish between mediated interactions (e.g., by telephone) and non-mediated (face-to-face) interactions. Therefore, SP was defined as “the degree of salience of the other person in a mediated interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal interaction” (Short, Williams, and Christie 1976, 65). Thus, it was a characteristic of the affordances of the media,² where the “capacity to transmit information about facial expression, direction of looking, posture, dress and non-verbal vocal cues, all contribute to the SP of a communications medium” (ibid.).

² See Chapter 10 in this volume for the ways in which affordances of different mediums of communication interact with impression formation, roles and relationships, and addressivity.
Subsequently, SP was used to theorize communications media and became closely related to media richness theory (Daft and Lengel 1986). From this perspective, text based CMC was conceived of as a “lean” medium in comparison to face-to-face interaction (Spears, Lea, and Postmes 2001, 605). However, the human capacity to adapt to lean media and to develop strategies to compensate for reduced cues was foregrounded by later theories of communications media. Gunawardena (1995), for example, argued that although text-based CMC offered only low social contextual cues, participants’ perception of the medium was primarily based on their sense of community, and consequently interactions among participants using lean media could be social, active and interactive. As a result, SP began to be increasingly understood in terms of the quality of the communication among participants, rather than the technology used (Gunawardena 1995). In this sense, our work draws on Kehrwald’s (2008) understanding of social presence as “an individual’s ability to demonstrate his/her state of being in a virtual environment and to signal his/her availability for interpersonal transactions” (p. 94).

Already over two decades ago, Bacon (1995) argued that sustained interaction among learners is central to successful online learning. This highlights the importance of Kehrwald’s conceptualization of SP as both availability for participation and willingness to participate, i.e., as encompassing two interdependent factors. Pegrum (2011, 9-10) takes this notion further, asserting that participation “is not optional: Those who lack appropriate literacies barely exist in digital culture and are doomed to hover on the fringes of digital societies and digital economies.” He sees participatory literacy as part of a set of key skills—personal, network, participatory, cultural and intercultural literacy—with a focus on the ability to connect. His observation reinforces Jenkins’s et al. (2009) understanding of “participatory cultures” as membership in social networking sites, production of creative forms such as
mash-ups, formal and informal teamwork that occurs in wiki spaces, and their potential exploitation in education including CSCL.

Hauck (2010) underscores the need to be multimodally competent for successful involvement in participatory cultures. Drawing on Kress (2003), she argues that learners who are able “to choose, not merely with full competence within one mode […] but with full awareness of the affordances of many modes and of the media and their sites of appearance” (Hauck 2010, 49) will get more out of CSCL than those who are less aware. Kress and others see language not as the only or main representational resource, but as a complex system made up of written, spoken and visual modalities, each with its own modes and affordances. Written language, for example, makes use of devices such as graphology, lexis, word-order or syntax (and we would add font type, size, and color), while the meaning-making potential of spoken language is reflected in pace, pitch-variation, rhythmic variations, tone of voice, and temporal sequential ordering. And finally, the visual is governed by simultaneity and spatiality (Kress 2000). Similarly, Bezemer and Kress (2015, 115) observe that “modes have different affordances, so that different multimodal ensembles produce different potentials for communication and learning. Writing and image,” they conclude, “demand different semiotic work from the learner.”

Digital literacy in general and participatory literacy in particular, are therefore also reflected in language learners’ ability to comfortably alternate in their roles as semiotic responders and semiotic initiators, i.e., the degree to which they can make informed use of a variety of semiotic resources (Kurek and Hauck 2014). In the same vein, Kern (2014, 341) asserts that “[t]raditional distinctions between the forms and functions of writing and speech … are rendered problematic by an unprecedented degree of overlap in many online environments” and that “multimodal texts that incorporate sound, graphics, animation, or
video demand more symbolic sophistication and more critical thinking than ever if students are to resist being lulled into passive reception.”

In sum: Being multimodally competent and, consequently, a skilled semiotic initiator able to establish SP and participate online, emerges as a pre-condition for CSCL of languages and cultures. It is also likely to be best developed through online participation (see section on ‘Design principles for the training program’). We further hypothesize that the following skills and competences are interrelated, if not interdependent: online learners’ ability to establish and display SP as defined by Kehrwald (2010), and to develop PL as defined by Pegrum (2009) and their multimodal competence as defined by Kress (2003).

<A> Methodology

In what follows, we address the rationale underpinning our decision for case study research, the design principles behind the training program, and our approach to data collection and analysis. Sociocultural theory provided the overarching epistemological framework for investigating our hypotheses.

<B> Case study

We designed this study using the principles of case study research. The case study method allowed us to use multiple types of data (Gillham 2000) and to collect “multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and to report a case description” (Creswell 2007, 73).

Case study research can involve a small number of participants while still yielding significant understanding of the phenomenon that is specific to the particular context (McDonough and McDonough 1997). It is also well suited to develop contextual understanding, as contexts matter (Burgess, Sieminski, and Arthur 2006). Yin (1994, 14) recommends using a case study method especially when “boundaries between phenomenon
and context are not clearly evident.” Given our understanding of the phenomena under investigation, i.e., social presence as subjective projections of self (Kehrwald 2010) and multimodal competence as perceived affordances (Lee 2007) of the semiotic resources (see below), our online context is intricately linked with the phenomena under scrutiny.

In this study, the context is an online course in which participants work collaboratively towards completing set tasks. Our “case” is a student whom we call Aylin. Aylin was selected as an instrumental case through purposeful sampling in order to gain insights into the interrelationship between SP, PL, and multimodality. Her contributions offered rich evidence for theory development and her participation was representative of other students who displayed similar SP and PL skills.

**Design principles for the training program**

According to Pegrum (2010), the best way to develop PL is by actually participating in Web 2.0 technologies, which resonates with Kehrwald’s (2010) understanding of how the ability to send and read SP cues is best developed, namely “through seeing and experiencing how others project themselves into the environment, how others interact with one another and how others react to their personal efforts to cultivate a social presence” (47).

Accepting Pegrum’s and Kehrwald’s reasoning allows us to construct the following circular argument where online collaboration represents both the means and the end in relation to the aforementioned challenge educators find themselves confronted with: It is through online participation and collaboration that multimodal competence reflected in the use of various semiotic resources, and the ability to send and receive SP cues and thus PL and CSCL skills are being developed (see Figure 6.1).

[insert Figure 6.1 here]
We developed a training program based on Hoven’s (2007) “experiential modeling” where teachers as learners experience the tools and processes they are expected to use in their teaching and to model for their students. The module was also informed by Hampel and Hauck (2006), who urge educators to fundamentally reconsider learner and teacher preparation as well as task design for online environments. In their view, teachers need to raise learners’ awareness of the communication modes and semiotic resources available in a given online context and of their respective affordances. In line with Stein’s (2000) call for “multimodal pedagogies” and in contrast to the instructivist approach that still dominates many formal educational settings, they advocate the kind of literacy development that supports (language) learners and teachers in using the new online spaces with multimodal competence. “Only then,” Hampel and Hauck (2006, 15) conclude, “can they contribute to shared knowledge creation, become authors and disseminate their own productions” and, consequently, be successfully involved in participatory cultures—a reasoning that holds as true today as it did over a decade ago when it was first put forward.

In consonance with Lee (2007), our understanding of affordances is slightly broader than that of Hampel and Hauck, who—inspired by the work of Kress and colleagues—conceive of an affordance as possibilities and constraints of modes, such as images, sounds, and words and their co-occurrence, i.e., “multimodality” (Kress, and van Leeuwen 2001). Lee (2007), however, points to Norman’s (1990) conceptualization of affordances as “perceived affordances,” which takes human beings’ perceptions and experiences into consideration. This view fits well with the original framing of SP by Short et al., which includes a participant’s perception of the medium and its affordances as being “shaped by how people perceive what various representational resources can or cannot do for them” (Lee 2007, 227).
while also aligning with Kehrwald’s definition of SP as subjective projections of self into online environments, and subjective assessments of how others project themselves.

**<B> The training program: Content and participants**

**<C> Content**

Beyond following the principles of experiential modeling, the program was also a combination of pedagogical and technical training as recommended by Hubbard and Levy (2006) and others (e.g., Hampel 2009). While familiarizing themselves with different tools and ways to participate online (with a focus on how their participation was shaped by modes and their affordances), the trainees also experienced the use of the tools and approaches for language teaching and learning purposes.

The five-week module had originally been designed in Moodle (Hauck and Warnecke 2012), but was transferred to Canvas (canvas.instructure.com) as it offers both asynchronous and synchronous communication channels. The participants engaged in weekly reflections in discussion forums on the teaching and learning, meaning making and communication processes they were involved in and the modes and semiotic resources they were drawing on to do so. They created audio-visual introductions using the recording facility embedded into the Canvas discussion forum, took part in regular synchronous meetings via BigBlueButton (integrated into Canvas), as well as using external tools such as screenr (screenr.com; retired in November 2015) for screencasts, Glogster (glogster.com) for multimedia poster creation, and PowerPoint and Prezi (prezi.com) for the preparation of online presentations.³

**<C> Participants**

³ For a detailed outline see Hauck and Warnecke 2012.
The participants were 36 pre-service English teachers (31 females and 5 males) between 20-22 years of age and enrolled at the English Language Teaching Department at Boğaziçi University in Turkey. All were in their final (fourth) year of studies and, apart from being involved in regular school experience and teaching practice, they met once a week for a two-hour seminar. Generally speaking, they were high-achieving (within the top 1% in terms of their university entrance examination results), highly motivated, and strongly goal-oriented learners.

Replies to the pre-intervention questionnaire revealed that 63% of these students perceived themselves as regular users of social media, with Facebook being mentioned most often. They posted a few times a week in Facebook and read their friends’ posts on a daily basis. They reported regular use of online learning materials, with the website of the British Council being the most popular example. They used the British Council’s ELT materials in their school’s practicum, i.e., in face-to-face classroom settings. At the time of the training, the majority (57%) had never contributed to a blog or sent a tweet. A similar percentage volunteered that they had not yet engaged in professional networks such as LinkedIn.

The majority thought that online learning and teaching were not effectively used in the Turkish education system and emphasized the need for pedagogical and technological training of future and existing English teachers. The ability to connect with their students outside the classroom and track their progress was what attracted most of them to finding out about online teaching. Yet 41% expressed a preference for face-to-face interaction with their students, considering it to be more useful and effective for language teaching.

The objectives of the online training module (introduced in week 4 and embedded into their regular course) were presented as follows:

- Immersion in an online learning context and experiencing online teaching from a student’s point of view;
• Exploring the nature and role of SP in online learning and teaching contexts;
• Finding out about meaning making, communication, and participation in online learning and teaching contexts.

Four teachers were involved: two from the UK Open University who were responsible for the online training only, and two from Boğaziçi University, with one being responsible for the face-to-face component only and one involved in both parts.

<B> Data collection and analysis

Informed consent from all participants and ethical approval from Boğaziçi University were gained prior to data collection, which included a pre-questionnaire (soliciting information about the participants’ use of technology-mediated environments in general, and for learning and teaching purposes in particular), written and/or multimodal forum postings, multimodal contributions in response to the tasks, and four journal entries per participant. The latter served to capture learners’ ongoing reflections on the processes they were involved in, in addition to the reflective exchanges with their peers in the forums.

In our analysis, we looked for instances of awareness of meaning making (via different modes and the impact of the modes on meaning making), establishment of SP, and display of PL skills. Our analysis of text-only forum posts was guided by principles of qualitative content analysis, which aims for systematic “analysis of texts within their context of communication” (Mayring 2000, n.p.). As the context for this study was online communication, our analysis was also informed by computer-mediated discourse analysis, utilizing linguistic units of analysis as described by Herring (2001, 2004): structure, meaning, interaction, social behavior, and interaction patterns. For the forum postings, we employed multimodal analysis, considering how participants employed and orchestrated various
meaning-making resources in specific social situations and practices (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Norris 2004; van Leeuwen 2004).

Four colleagues participated as teacher-researchers in the collection and interpretation of the data. In addition, a third-year undergraduate from the same department at Boğaziçi University contributed as a research assistant to our analysis. His interpretations and comments brought us closer to students’ perceptions and understandings. By using multiple data sources and by including several researchers we aimed to increase the validity and reliability of our analysis (Yin 1994). We also continually searched for contradictory evidence when choosing and analyzing data for our case study, and drew on comparisons with other cases where appropriate (see our analysis of Nermin’s participation as an example).

**<A> Findings and discussion**

We start with some general observation regarding the participants’ multimodal competence at the outset of the training program, as reflected in their contributions to the introductory forum, before turning to our case study of Aylin.

**<B> Introductions**

In the first activity, participants were asked to post introductions using text, audio and/or video. These were exemplified by the teachers: one teacher posted a video introduction, another posted a video and text introduction, while a third one posted an audio introduction and a Glogster poster. Out of 35 students, three posted audio, one posted video, while 31 of them posted text introductions. The typographical style of these text introductions was similar, as most students preferred to use the website’s default font and structured the introduction in a single paragraph. However, several students structured the introduction like an email, using bullet points or bold typeface. As part of the activity, participants were
invited to reflect on their perception of the different modes used in the introductions (i.e., text, audio, and video). A content analysis of the participants’ accounts shows that the majority preferred to submit text introductions, as they were perceived to be easier to plan, revise, and edit. Potential reasons for this were either the lack of requisite technological skills for an audiovisual introduction or a perceived lack of verbal skills (in L1 or L2), or a combination of both. Two students’ forum posts represent this perspective, with Harika’s comments also revealing some awareness of modes and affordances.

Aynur (Nov. 6):

*I like written introductions more because you can easily edit and explain your thoughts in detail. In video or audio recordings, people may forget what they are planning to say or there may be problems with the language that can make them feel nervous afterwards. I chose written introduction, because I think I can express myself better in writing.*

Harika (Nov. 7):

*I mostly like the written introductions. As we have the chance to edit things while writing, we can feel more secure and express ourselves better. This was the reason why I chose to make a written introduction. However, reading long introductions is somehow boring. Maybe we could have some more criteria for the introductions so that there could be a balance among them in terms of length. Some of our friends used different font sizes and types while writing, those introductions were more appealing.*

Another participant felt that the affordances of video make for a more *sincere* introduction while creating a positive presence:

Hatice (Nov. 4):

*I think a video introduction is more sincere compared to a written one. We can see the gestures, hear the tone of voice, etc ... I wrote my intro, but actually I wanted to*
record it. However, if I had recorded it, I’m sure there would be lots of pauses, slips of the tongue or mistakes, and I would need to re-record it, or edit it in movie maker.

Although most participants posted text introductions, their reflections express some dissatisfaction, if not outright boredom, with this format from their standpoint as semiotic consumers of their peers’ contributions. Overall, their reflections regarding the different modes used point to a lack of multimodal competence, leading to limitations in the way they can establish their SP and demonstrate PL. In other words, they can at best be characterized as semiotic responders rather than semiotic initiators.

<B> Aylin’s journey

Our tracing of Aylin’s journey through the training program (based on her profile page, her forum entries in response to tasks, and an online multimodal poster she created) allows us to illustrate how she cultivated SP and advanced her PL skills.

<C> Profile page

Figure 6.2 is a screenshot of Aylin’s profile page on Canvas. The hyperlinks in this figure are not visible, as there is no underlining; they only become visible when the reader hovers over them with a mouse. The sections of the text with hyperlinks were the names of Aylin’s university, her practicum school, and the institution where she worked as a volunteer.

[insert Figure 6.2 here]

Participants were given total freedom as to what information to include in their bio and how to present themselves. Aylin used her real name to sign up for the module and chose a photo of herself in what could be called an informal space: a house or a café. She smiles, sits up relatively straight and her gaze meets the spectator’s eye at an angle. Although the setting
seems informal, it is fair to say that she projects a professional look. Thus, her way of portraying herself is in line with the fact that she associates herself with the university where she is studying and the practicum school where she observes classes (one of the best private secondary schools in Istanbul). The use of hyperlinks for the institution names emphasizes this association. She also presents herself as a volunteer teacher interested in charity work and continuous professional development. Her final line “I believe Canvas platform will be a good start for all of us to share our ideas on online teaching/learning” is a positive statement on the module and is focused on professional development. Noteworthy is the phrase “all of us to share our ideas” with the use of inclusive pronouns “all of us” and “our” and the word “share,” implying her availability and willingness to participate, one of the defining elements of SP (Kehrwald 2010) and, as we have shown, a precondition for CSCL.

While the layout of the bio page was fixed, the participants could upload a photo and use affordances such as font type, size, and color. Yet Aylin did not include any such multimodal elements in her profile. She presented three straightforward pieces of information in written format, each statement starting with “I,” which, in the context of a personal profile page, is hardly surprising and would seem to reinforce her intention to position herself as a professional participant rather than as a student. Despite her bimodal presentation—photo plus text—it would be premature to judge her abilities as a semiotic initiator or responder.

<C> Introductory positioning

The first activity asked participants to introduce themselves and then listen to or watch other participants’ introductions and share their first impressions. They were also asked to write about their use of Web 2.0 tools and their favorite city. This is Aylin’s week 1 activity 1 forum entry:

Hello everyone,
I am Aylin. 3 Web 2.0 tools I use a lot are Facebook, Twitter and Youtube apart from Email. Here is what I do everyday as my ritual: ...Finally I go online on Facebook and Twitter after reading and answering my emails. I use Facebook to follow my friends; where they are, what they do, what they are up to. It... gives me the chance to post something and discuss it with my friends. ...I use Youtube and Slideshare most as learning contexts.... I love Istanbul very much.... There are lots of social activities like seminars, conferences, concerts, festivals, matches in this city. It is always lively.

Aylin opts for written mode only. The Web 2.0 applications she mentions are social networking sites. In addition to identifying the sites, she discloses details of her daily life (“my ritual”). Aylin highlights her interest in other people and her readiness to participate online (“follow my friends”). Her ability to do so “gives me the chance to post something and discuss it with my friends.” She expresses her fondness of Istanbul as it offers easy access to a wide variety of social and professional activities. She thus positions herself as a professional person, adding the facet of being socially active, both on- and off-screen. In this way, her introductory forum entry both supports and complements the presence she has started to establish in her profile page.

<C> Awareness of modes and meaning making
As a follow-up activity, we asked participants to reflect on their perception of how different modes (text/audio/video) had been used for the introductions and which mode(s) they would encourage their future students to use. Aylin responded as follows:

I like video introductions best, because, you can see and hear the person, it is more sincere than writing. However, recording a video is demanding and problematic. If you write something, you can read and correct it; but, you cannot correct the video, you have to record a new one. You may have trouble in uploading and watching the
video due to its size or slow internet connection, etc as I have in my dormitory right now. I chose to write my introduction, because it takes less time. I would present them the ways they can do their introductions and leave the choice to them so that they can feel secure and feel free about which one to use.

Aylin’s comment on the effect of video introductions, that they are “more sincere than writing,” echoes Hatice’s assessment (see “Introductions” above). Her own decision to use the written mode seems to have been purely pragmatic. She explains the different ways in which video is “demanding and problematic,” with no possibility to edit, and difficulties with downloading and watching due to low bandwidth. Her main reason for choosing the written mode is time constraints (“it takes less time”). However, when talking about her future approach as a teacher, she feels that offering her students a choice is important: “leave the choice to them so that they can feel secure and feel free about which one to use.” The idea of “feeling secure and free” also implies the relevance of confidence in relation to communication and meaning-making modes available online. Her entry indicates that she is aware of the various effects and challenges of different modes and how they contribute to creating presence and positioning, which makes her gradually emerge as an informed semiotic responder.

<C> Adventurous Aylin in action

In the second week, participants had to come up with an online ice-breaker activity. One participant suggested asking learners to spell their names using a noun or an adjective for each letter (acrostic poem) in a forum posting. Aylin replied as follows:

This is really a good idea, but finding a noun or adjective for each of the letter in our names could be hard as you say. Therefore, we may find an adjective or noun starting
with the first letter of our names. For example, I can introduce myself Adventurous Aylin and it would be easier both to find a word and to remember that person with only one word.

Aylin begins by acknowledging and praising her colleague’s idea before building on the suggestion in a collaborative way, explaining what could be improved and why (“could be hard”). She then provides an example of how the idea could be simplified, using her own name: Adventurous Aylin. The choice of this adjective is not coincidental, as shown in a subsequent posting addressed directly to one of the module facilitators in week 2:

To increase motivation, the moderator could start with shorter discussions related to students’ interest. ... If discussions start with shorter ones and continue with longer ones step by step, I believe student motivation won’t decrease. Also, the discussion topic should be carefully chosen so that all students could participate. ... Therefore, moderators should pay attention to students’ interests and load of discussion.

In this forum entry, Aylin challenges the teachers, pointing to the participant workload. Like most other trainees, she finds contributing to the forum time consuming, mainly because of the way she approaches the discussion: wanting to read all previous posts before contributing herself (see her Nov. 25 entry below). Another challenge was the idea of online teaching, which was new to most trainees. Aylin makes suggestions as to how the approach could be improved by modifying the content and length of the tasks. She phrases her posting very carefully through hedging (“could,” “I believe,” “should”) and uses generalizations such as “the moderator,” which potentially could be herself as a future online teacher. Her tone gets slightly stronger towards the end of her message, with the use of “Therefore, moderators should,” thus positioning herself as knowledgeable in the matter without criticizing anyone directly. Teacher 1 replied the following (week 2, Nov. 18):
Point taken, Aylin! “If discussions seem long and heavily loaded to the students, they may be confused which questions to answer or which topics to comment on or frustrated due to lots of expected discussion.” ... I do believe in scaffolding activities - including online discussions - and am happy for any suggestion for improvement. To a certain degree we are making this module on “social presence” up as we go along together. So, any suggestions are really very, very welcome. We can and should all learn from each other.

In this response, Tutor 1 positions herself as an equal in line with the principles of “experiential modelling,” also drawing on her PL skills, and especially her willingness to participate. This is particularly evident in the somewhat exaggerated self-disclosure “we’re making this module up as we go along,” which can be interpreted as an open invitation to collaborate. However, the teacher stays clear of generalizations. To the contrary, having assessed Aylin’s way of projecting herself, she quotes Aylin to express her agreement with the criticism and carries on using the same verb with added emphasis “I do believe” signaling that it is all right to have your personal view with regard to online pedagogy. She emphatically reassures Aylin that her ideas are welcome and her use of “we” and “together” explicitly asks for her and all other participants’ input and collaboration. This reply generates a positive response from Aylin (week 3, Nov. 25):

... I think you are doing a very good job, thank you for that :)

This platform is excellent in that it is a different way of interacting with students. It attracts their attention towards use of technology in a controlled and safe way. It will be a good tool for me in the future. Therefore, I am happy to be a part of it.

You know it takes some time for people to get used to different things and Canvas is one of these different things in people’s lives. Naturally, I am getting used to visit Canvas regularly day by day. I would be very happy if there were fewer tasks. This is
because it is really hard to catch up with it. I want to read all of the comments, make new comments on what my friends think; because ... . I also know you have time limitations, because you have a schedule. So, I am not sure whether what I suggest is applicable or not.

I am not sure whether what I recommend is improvement or adaptation. I think it is more like an adaptation. I don’t think the instructions should be re-arranged, they are very clear and understandable, no problem with them. The thing is there are 3 tasks every week. Even two tasks would be very helpful so that we can spend less time in our busy school lives. If it is possible?

Aylin’s post starts with an appreciation of the online experience. She sets a positive tone by making a compliment followed by a smiley, thus using a visual resource to underpin her written statement. She then adds further positive observations and ends by projecting herself as a member of the community: “I am happy to be a part of this platform.” Next, having picked up the teacher’s cues in terms of everybody being on a level playing field in the training program, she restates her suggestion, this time in a much clearer way: “I would be very happy if....” While still making use of hedging (“would”), she seems to feel sufficiently confident to make a personalized statement using “I,” “me,” and “my.” She also addresses the teacher directly: “You know....” In the following sentences, “I want to read all of the comments... I also know you have time limitations...” she communicates her eagerness to be a better participant and—indirectly—her view of good PL skills in CSCL: “read and engage with all the posts fully.”

In subsequent exchanges, the teacher uses this comment to draw the trainees’ attention to the fact that being too keen (i.e., displaying too much availability and willingness to participate) can make the online experience stressful and, as a result, counterproductive,
and that engagement with a careful selection of a few contributions is a PL skill that the participants could learn and practice during the remainder of the module.

Aylin’s approach to making contributions is similar in both postings (Nov. 18 and Nov. 25) and in her replies to her peers: acknowledgement and compliment followed by justification and finally a concrete suggestion for improvement. The one significant difference is the hedging in her replies to the teachers, which is absent in her engagement with peers. She seems to feel a need to make sure that she does not position herself as an authority or a demanding student. Despite efforts from the teacher’s side to model equality, Aylin signals that she perceives the teacher as the most powerful person in the online environment. Taking into account the dominant learning culture in most Turkish face-to-face classrooms, however, this is hardly surprising.

By considering the teachers’ schedules and adding “I am not sure whether what I suggest is applicable or not,” Aylin continues to project uncertainty and to position herself as someone who lacks the necessary experience to make the right decision. Her final “If it is possible?” reinforces this impression. That this is not quite the case, though, becomes apparent in her contribution to a later activity in the training program, as described in the next section.

<C> Patterns of Participation

As part of the activities in Week 3, the trainees had to reflect on their participation in the module, drawing on Salmon’s (2002) metaphors for participation patterns: nine different animals and their “characteristic” online behaviors. They had to identify with at least one of the animals and comment on the associated behavioral patterns, as well as come up with ways of dealing with students’ behaviors. Salmon’s “patterns of participation” are represented by
nine animals overall, and come with recipe type recommendations for e-moderators as to how they should handle each “animal.” Figure 6.3 gives an example:

[insert Figure 6.3 here]

This activity triggered a high volume of reflective exchanges on the very topic of participation and online presence and turned out to be a real catalyst in terms of trainees’ emerging SP and PL skills. Aylin posted the following (Nov. 18):

… The important thing here is whether I participate in forums for educational or personal reasons. If I am expected to be involved in the discussion seriously as we do in Canvas for educational reasons, I will share my ideas about the topic regularly as much as possible. However, if I participate in forums for personal reasons, I participate whenever I have free time.

I may be the mouse or the wolf as I still don’t get used to using Canvas platform. I still explore what I can do and how I can do those things in Canvas.

Here, Aylin realizes that her participation patterns vary depending on the purpose of the forum and what she perceives as being expected of her, with formal educational contexts identified as a motivator for regular contributions. She then continues her emerging theme of justifying her insufficient participation. This time though, she does not hold the number of activities responsible, but the fact that she considers herself a novice to the platform and an explorer of opportunities. She self-identifies as the mouse (who “visits once a week, reads and contributes little”) or the wolf (who “visits once a week, lots of activity, then disappears again until next week, or even the week after!”). She indicates that she is aware of the transient nature of her SP and online participation. This suggests that participant projections
of the self into technology-mediated environments are a fluid phenomenon leading to shifting roles and identities unlikely to be “treatable” with formulaic recommendations.

The online poster (Figure 6.4) Aylin creates in the subsequent activity where students were invited to create a visual representation of their presence and participation patterns using Glogster provides further evidence to this effect. It also reveals that she is a skillful user of various representational resources to project SP and, thus, qualifies as a successful semiotic initiator.

Aylin not only includes the mouse and the wolf, but also the rabbit (“Lives online, prolific message writer, responds very rapidly”), the stag (“Tendency to dominate discussion at certain times”) and the dolphin (“Intelligent, good communicator and playful online”). She describes her shifting SP and participation patterns in a cyclical motion, indicated by the arrows. She starts as a person overloaded with work who refers to the less busy days as “butterfly days.” Her choice of words is likely to be influenced by the concept of being a “social butterfly.” However, with increasing amounts of work, her “butterfly days” end and her participation pattern evolves into a mouse as she reads and contributes very little online. The mouse actually reveals itself as fairly relaxed about contributing less, which is echoed in the accompanying speech bubble “Little – less – least is my motto! Love my life :).” Next, Aylin’s role shifts to the wolf, visiting once a week, contributing a lot, and then disappearing. The speech bubble indicates that she is more “proud of” this enhanced participation which is closer to her aspirations. She also makes an external reference to the famous Twilight TV series adding to the presence she is creating as a modern Turkish woman up-to-date with popular shows. Her next roles are the “hardworking” rabbit and the “boss” stag. The latter is
given emphasis with a song embedded in the poster from YouTube.” The song is by Burl Ives, called “I’m the Boss.” The lyrics of the chorus are:

I’m the boss. There’s no doubt of it.
I’m the boss. And he’s proud of it.
I make the decisions and mine is the final one.
Don’t tell me how the dishes should be done.

The lyrics convey the message that Aylin is proud of participating regularly in the community, even dominating it at times. This is corroborated by teacher observations and, to a certain degree, by “Adventurous Aylin,” who clearly communicated her strong views about the content and workload in the module to the teachers, all the while “hiding” the stag, which could be perceived as appropriately fitting the respectful profile of Turkish students in general.

Finally, the stag transforms to the playful dolphin, communicating well and enjoying the act of participation. As the speech bubble (“What I should have been in the first place :)!”) suggests, this is the ultimate role Aylin aspires to and which she only manages to establish at the end of her online experience. Her example speaks to the difficulty of delineating SP and PL with a static approach and the need to explore the evolving and transient nature of the phenomena under investigation. It also provides evidence for the multiple parts of our hypothesis. Namely, that online learners’ ability to display SP as defined by Kehrwald (2010) and to develop PL as defined by Pegrum (2009) and multimodal competence as defined by Kress (2003) are interdependent, and that being multimodally competent and—as a result—a skilled semiotic initiator able to establish SP and participate online are pre-conditions for CSCL.

<C> Nermin’s participation
While Aylin’s poster is representative of those trainees who displayed a stronger presence and participation patterns during the module, others probably struggled because of being less semiotically aware and skilled. Nermin’s Glogster creation (Figure 6.5) illustrates this:

[insert figure 6.5 here]

Nermin’s poster is distinct from Aylin’s (Figure 6.4) in several respects. The latter represents a clear sequential journey with the reader being guided by arrows, while the layout of Nermin’s poster leaves the reader somewhat lost in terms of how to read the intended meaning. Assuming we could read the poster starting from the top left corner similar to reading texts in both Turkish and English, the rabbit in this position seems quite prominent, implying that Nermin starts the course as a prolific author of messages. The wolf at the bottom seems to conclude her journey, indicating that her participation became infrequent towards the end of the module. While the rabbit introduces the eager self, the wolf in the picture is puzzled, and perhaps exhausted. The positioning of the texts in bubbles and other pictures does not seem to follow any pattern at all. This confusing layout could be reflecting Nermin’s fluctuating positioning of herself. The three overlapping table tennis images, the books, and the eagle around the center of the poster do not adequately represent her online presence and seem to have been placed randomly across the poster. The eagle could, at worst, be interpreted as the teacher watching her, and thus a testament to how Nermin assesses teacher presence. Most the linguistic content of Nermin’s poster is related to her offline rather than her online presence, leisure activities except the content of the speech bubbles linked to the rabbit and the wolf. Overall, her poster evidences weak multimodal competence, which does not facilitate projection of her online self, nor convey a willingness to participate in the online community.
Her forum contributions confirm our interpretation that Nermin might feel more comfortable as a *semiotic responder* than an *initiator*. In her introductory posting she describes herself as a consumer of digital content.

Nermin (Nov. 6)

...Although I am in favour of face-to-face interaction and real settings for education, I am happy to take part in such a research study because I can use it in some of my classes; for example, to conduct discussions after the lessons.

The 2.0 Web tools that I use Facebook, Youtube, and Hotmail. I use Facebook very often. Even if I don’t post anything everyday, ... I read my friends’ posts, I comment on their posts, I read caricatures and comics, I follow events, I share photos, and I talk with my friends. I use Youtube to watch videos, to listen songs, and to download them. ... I often use videos from Youtube in my presentations.

**Conclusions**

A growing body of literature (e.g., Kirschner and De Bruyckere 2017; Kurek and Hauck 2014; McBride 2009; Sharpe 2010) draws our attention to the fact that young people, although seemingly proficient at technology, are often challenged when interpretation and independent production of content as well as collaborative knowledge creation and sharing such as in CSCL come into play. An important part of their digital literacy, their PL (which, as we have argued, is both reflected in and dependent on their multimodal competence and their ability to establish online SP) tends to be “limited to the possibilities and use of… emailing, text messaging, Facebook, and surfing the Internet” (Kirschner and De Bruyckere 2017). Moreover, as Kennedy and Fox (2013) found, they are using technologies mostly for “personal empowerment and entertainment,” but are “not always digitally literate in using technology to support their learning” (76). This manifests itself in particular “when it comes
to student use of technology as consumers of content rather than creators of content specifically for academic purposes” (ibid.). What presents itself initially as digital proficiency often turns out to be a familiarity with basic affordances of the most common applications and communication modes only, used mainly for downloading and social networking purposes. Thus, young learners’ digital proficiency tends to remain superficial and does not readily transfer across domains (Selwyn 2009). Moreover, most of what they produce and consume as semiotic initiators and responders are short multimodal texts. While this widespread online participation may be gratifying, it often happens in semiotically uninformed ways accompanied by a lack of critical and evaluative skills (Sharpe 2010). Yet, as Bezemer and Kress (2015, 8) remind us, “[s]ign makers, including young people, now need to understand the semiotic potentials of a much wider range of resources.” Thus, multimodal competence (which, as the findings of our study corroborate, impacts SP and PL skills) emerges as the conditio sine qua non for meaningful CSCL where learners alternate their roles as semiotic responders and semiotic initiators with full multimodal awareness.

Hampel’s (2006) assertion that learners should not be thought of as competent users of the new media, aware of the affordances and knowledgeable about how to use them constructively seems still justified, and Jenkins’s et al. (2009, 12) “transparency problem” (i.e., the assumption that users are “actively reflecting on their media…experiences and can thus articulate what they learn from their participation”) remains unresolved.

The language learning process in technology mediated environments is by default mediated twice—through the context and through the foreign language. Therefore, educators need to be able to illustrate and model for their students the interdependence between being multimodally-competent as reflected in informed semiotic activity and the ability to establish SP and display PL skills. Considering the insights gained from our case study, a pedagogical approach as promoted by Kern (2014, 340) that “exposes students to a broader scope of
symbolic enquiry,” and fosters “a critical perspective that will prepare them to understand and shape future language and literacy practices,” and, as we would add, helps them build their “semiotic budget,” seems adequate. Therefore, tasks like those trialed in the training program that informed this study, triggering on-going reflection on the relevance of “symbolic competence,”⁴ SP, and PL, need to become part of CSCL-based teacher education.

References


⁴See, for example, Kramsch (2006, 2009).


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