Telecollaboration for Professional Purposes: Towards Developing a Formal Register in the Foreign Language Classroom

D. Joseph Cunningham and Nina Vyatkina

Abstract: This study reports on the development of a professional spoken register among learners of German as they participate in four synchronous Web conferences with German-speaking professionals. The researchers investigated the effect of interaction with expert German speakers combined with an instructional intervention focusing on pragmatic competence on the development of learners' ability to communicate in a second language(L2) professional register. The data reveal a positive effect on the strategic use of modal verbs for expressing polite requests as well as a moderate effect on learners' use of the subjunctive mood to establish social distance. These results add further support for the use of intercultural online exchanges mediated by data-driven instruction in the foreign language classroom and highlight the utility of a microgenetic approach to analyzing spoken data.

Keywords: German, interlanguage pragmatics, online intercultural exchanges, professional communication, SCMC, telecollaboration

The last two decades have been a time of dizzying development in Internet-based technologies. With the associated surge in computer-mediated communication (CMC), language learning has undergone a concomitant shift. CMC provides distinct advantages for foreign language (FL) learning. Early research revealed that the use of synchronous text-based chatting in foreign language classes can have a democratizing effect on participation patterns, and may help to reduce learner anxiety that results from differences in age, socioeconomic status, or gender (Chun, 1994; Kern, 1995; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996; Warschauer). Furthermore, depending

on the mode of CMC used, certain characteristics of the interaction take on increased importance. For example, synchronous CMC (SCMC) has, in some cases, has led to more learner output (Abrams, 2003) and richer interactional discourse patterns (Chun, 1994; Sotillo, 2000), whereas asynchronous CMC can be conducive to more syntactic complexity (Sotillo, 2000; Warschauer, 1996). Beyond these benefits, Poza (2005) and Schwienhorst (2003) conclude that the use of CMC may also increase learner autonomy and risk-taking, both of which are among strategies used by successful language learners (Kumaravadivelu, 2002).

Whereas early CMC research has highlighted several benefits of online interactions between learners within the same institution, the full potential of online interactions in FL education has been realized with the emergence of intercultural exchanges between distally located participants. Dooly and O'Dowd (2012a) point out that such learning configurations are uniquely suited to connecting 'learners around the world to develop FL competency, intercultural awareness and e-literacies' (p. 11). Since the emergence of online intercultural exchanges, the number of publications exploring their different facets has incrementally grown, including a series of thematic edited collections (Belz & Thorne, 2006; Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012b; Guth & Helm, 2010; Hanna & de Nooy, 2009; O'Dowd, 2007; Warschauer & Kern, 2000) and reports on federally funded projects (Hasko, 2012). However, as Dooly and O'Dowd (2012a) observe, 'as more and more educators are beginning to engage their learners in this type of interaction the need for circumspection and reflection in their own practices indicates a growing need for practitioner research for improving and building on these innovative approaches' (p. 12).

Our article contributes to such reflection by describing the implementation of a tele-collaborative exchange with an integrated intervention for teaching CMC second language (L2) competence conducted within the framework of a language for special purposes (LSP) course.

We begin with a review of issues surrounding the recent 'internationalization' of education and the need for integrating language and content in FL courses. Next, we review studies reporting on pedagogical interventions that involved online intercultural exchanges. This literature review provides a framework for describing our pedagogical innovation that incorporates a multimodal online exchange between learners of German and German business professionals. We first describe the design of the course and its pedagogical goals, and then we report on a descriptive, exploratory action research study investigating the development of L2 pragmatic competence in the professional communication register. We ask the specific research question: does interaction with expert users of German in a professional setting combined with data-driven instruction lead to development in learners' use of politeness strategies, namely expressions of mood and modality? We conclude by describing directions for modification and expansion of this pedagogical and research design; some of which are already in process.

Study background

Internationalization of education and content-based instruction

The Modern Language Association (MLA) Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages report has stated that overcoming 'the nation's language deficit' and fostering 'translingual and transcultural competence' (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007, p. 2) is the nationwide goal for FL education in the United States. One of the triggers for the report's call for curricular innovation may have been the paradox described by Warner (2011): 'humanities fields, including foreign language and cultural studies departments, are regularly cited as the

least "internationalized" disciplines, while business and economics are often listed as the most internationalized fields' (p. 1; based on Knight, 2006). This statistic is unfortunate because many FL programs have attempted to address the disconnect indicated above with curricular initiatives such as language across the curriculum, immersion, and study abroad programs (see Warner, 2011 for an overview). More recently, it has been argued that curricular innovations can only be successful if aimed at cross-articulation of instruction at all levels and if based on an integrated approach of developing multiple literacies (Byrnes, 2001; see also Allen & Paesani, 2010; Swaffar & Arens, 2005).

Another deficit ascertained years ago is the disintegration of FL knowledge and content knowledge, which Warner (2011) refers to as an 'assumed dichotomy between literacy and use' (p. 4; emphasis in original). One of the approaches in FL pedagogy aimed at bringing together language study and language use is content-based instruction (CBI) or content-based language teaching (CBLT). Whereas this approach can take on many forms in different FL instructional contexts (Byrnes, 2005; Stoller, 2004), one of the most common applications at the tertiary level is language for special purposes (LSP). In LSP courses, language is taught for vocational or academic purposes and incorporates content from disciplines other than FL study. Business language courses are one, prominent example of 'interdisciplinary collaborative courses' (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007, p. 5) because they often combine the expertise of FL faculty as well as business and economics faculty, thus facilitating the desired integration of language and content.

However, with advances in computer technology and electronic networking, educators now face new imperatives for preparing a new generation of professionals in addition to integrating language literacy and language use. As Dooly and O'Dowd (2012a) state,

the areas of FL competence and e-literacies have merged inextricably as integral

components of the *new skills required in emerging labour markets*. The growing

importance of online technologies for the ways in which we work and learn in

global networks has meant that today, instead of using technologies simply to

learn FLs, learners need to learn how to combine both FL skills and 'e-skills' or

'new literacies' to be able to work and collaborate in new contexts where the

borders between the virtual and the real and between the distant and the proximate

are increasingly blurred. (p. 15; emphasis added)

In the European context, these recent developments in education are officially recognized

in a European Commission document, which lists FL competence, digital competence, and

cultural awareness and expression among the 'key competences for lifelong learning' (European

Commission, 2010, cited in Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012a, p. 15). In the next section, we review

recent research reporting on the development of these new literacies in FL education in general

and LSP courses in particular.

Discursive practices in digital intercultural environments

Recent research on discursive practices in digital environments including FL educational

environments contributes to the argument in favour of fundamental inseparability of language

and content discussed above. Following Lave and Wenger (1991), Young (2007) proposes that

while learning languages for the purpose of communication, one essentially learns new practices

of participating in discursive communities. Similarly, Ortega and Zyzik (2008) maintain 'that

online interaction is never just about language, but about repositioning oneself and negotiating

cultural, personal, and power differentials online' (p. 339). By studying different social and linguistic practices in different contexts, researchers of intercultural online discourse invoke the concept of multiple literacies (Abraham & Williams, 2009, p. 3). Magnan (2008), for instance, argues that the main goal for FL learners in intercultural online exchanges is to develop strategies for creating discourse, namely for facilitating collaboration, creating solidarity, as well as building and maintaining intercultural connections.

In what follows, we review research that focuses 'on how discourse is constructed collaboratively and how that mediated exchange results in creating new ways of thinking and interacting' (Magnan, 2008, p. 3). Whereas online intercultural exchanges have included a variety of formats (see Chun, 2008; Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012a for recent overviews), we will only review those relevant for our study, namely institutionalized exchanges that involved using the target language by both learners and expert speakers of that language.

Telecollaborative exchanges

A series of recent studies have explored online learner-tutor interactions where more proficient speakers of the target language (e.g., native speakers [NSs]) acted as linguistic experts vis-à-vis learners (e.g., Lee, 2009; Sauro, 2009; Sotillo, 2009). These studies have shown benefits for improving selected aspects of L2 proficiency; however, they also highlighted persistent difficulties that learners experienced in such exchanges, particularly concerning L2 pragmatic features and the absence of assistance from their instructor. One specific kind of online intercultural exchange that places emphasis on the development of both pragmatic and grammatical competence as well as on the role of the teacher in such exchanges is called 'telecollaboration.' It is defined by Belz (2003) as 'institutionalized, electronically mediated

intercultural communication under the guidance of a languacultural expert (i.e., a teacher) for the purposes of foreign language learning and the development of intercultural competence' (p. 2). In telecollaborations, it is the teacher's role to provide assistance to learners in their 'languacultural' (Agar, 1994) development using the very discourse that the learners themselves produced in interactions with expert speakers. This pedagogical method originated in corpus linguistics, where it became known under the term 'data-driven learning' (Johns, 1986).

Telecollaboration has been shown to be especially conducive to the development of L2 pragmatic competence. Belz (2007) comments that this approach 'may expand the variety of discourse options to which learners are exposed as well as create opportunities for the performance and practice of L2 pragmatic competence in meaningful interactions' (p. 52). As Belz and Kinginger (2003) demonstrate, the building and maintaining of personal relationships had a decisive impact on participants' accurate usage of the German and French informal (T) and formal (V) pronouns of address. When participating in situations with increased social pressure to maintain face, learners attended more carefully to the accurate usage of either T or V pronouns. This effect was also seen in Belz and Kinginger (2002) when, as a result of a series of 'critical incidents' (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996, p. 165) that happened during informal interpersonal discussions, the American participant Joe came to realize his inappropriate use of the V pronoun with the German participant Gabi.

In a series of studies, Belz and Vyatkina (2005, 2008; see also Belz, 2005; Vyatkina & Belz, 2006) employed data-driven pedagogical interventions to assist American learners in their acquisition of features of German that are notoriously difficult for first language (L1) English speakers both grammatically and pragmatically: modal particles and pronominal adverbs. The American university students interacted by e-mail and text chat with German university students

to complete several projects, including building Web sites and writing essays, which constituted a major portion of their intermediate FL German course. The researchers showed that despite ample exposure to the focal features in their NS partners' writing, the learners did not notice them and did not use them in their own writing. After a series of in-class pedagogical interventions that sequentially moved from being more implicit to explicit and were based on the excerpts from the intercultural online exchanges, learners showed a marked increase in range, accuracy, and pragmatic appropriateness of usage of the focal features as well as in pragmatic awareness. Thus, the results provide strong support for the utility of data-driven explicit instruction supplementing online exchanges.

Rare examples of intercultural exchanges for professional purposes are provided by Vetter and Chanier (2006) and Golato (2008). Vetter and Chanier explored synchronous tutoring sessions with NS professionals that combined audio conferencing with text chat between vocational Master-level students enrolled in an English LSP course at a French university. Their tutors were Master-level students with a similar professional specialization, but were NSs of English enrolled at a British university. The results showed that these exchanges helped L2 learners 'to regain self-confidence' (p. 5) and improve their rate of participation in conversations about professional topics at different levels of notional complexity. The authors conclude that 'the equalizing effect that can be observed to take place between the two modalities (audio and chat) is particularly relevant for false-beginners' (p. 21) and strongly recommend simultaneously using multiple modalities in intercultural professional exchanges. Golato (2008) reported on a university German business language course, which used online text chats with German-speaking professionals as a culminating activity in a teaching unit on company presentations and workplace descriptions. After careful in-class preparation for this activity, students were divided

into groups; each interviewed one German about their work place and reported back to the entire class. In Golato's study, however, the participants were either experts (German professionals) or novices (American students) not only in relation to language but also professional expertise. Reported benefits of the exchange included the students' involvement in meaningful intercultural communication and the learning of linguistic and cultural information first-hand from professionals working in the country of the target language.

Although a comprehensive review of tele-collaborative studies is beyond the scope of this paper, it can be summarized that such studies have illuminated a high potential of electronic exchanges for involving learners in intercultural contact. Most of these studies follow the framework of sociocultural theory in FL learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), which 'puts much greater emphasis on the social aspects of language and contextualization of the language learning process (situated learning)' (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012a, p. 23). Our contribution also follows this general approach to studying L2 development and intercultural interaction.

Web conferencing

With increasing bandwidth becoming more widely available, Web conferencing has emerged in recent years as a viable complement to text-based SCMC. Its use has been studied from two main perspectives, in teacher-learner interaction and in learner-learner interaction. Hampel (2003) and Hampel and Baber (2003) identify several advantages to the use of Web conferencing software in formalized language instruction. They note that online language courses in which participants are generally expected to engage in asynchronous self-study often suffer from very low levels of retention. In contrast, online courses with a Web conferencing component feature more regular scheduling and frequent, direct contact with other participants.

This setup may increase overall retention rates and lead to more direct learner participation. In learner-centred communication, the presence of a webcam can also contribute to increased awareness and performance (Yamada & Akahori, 2009). Develotte, Guichon and Vincent (2010) further explore the use of webcams in video-conferencing in their study of graduate students learning to teach French online. By examining the ways in which the webcam contributes to pedagogical communication, the researchers found a gradation among users, with some giving only partial focus to the webcam and others using it throughout the entire teaching session. Although there appears to be variation in the degree and manner that participants use and react to the presence of video in a multimodal setting, the emerging consensus points to a positive impact on learner performance.

The study: Instructional setting and participants

The instructional context of the study was a tele-collaborative Web conferencing exchange between university learners of German for Professional Purposes (who acted as novices both in relation to language and their professional expertise) and German professionals (who acted as experts in both respects, similar to Golato, 2008). Following Belz and Vyatkina's (2005, 2008) recommendations, the exchange was teacher-guided to alleviate potential threats to participants' social face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) in a novel communication setting. According to Chun's (2008, pp. 18–19) taxonomy, the configuration can be described as synchronous multimodal (audio-based, video-based, and text-based), intercultural, multi-person CMC. Its main goal was to foster learner's ability to orally communicate in a formal professional register. Although we are making no claim that skills learned in a moderated Web discussion can be

easily transferred to a face-to-face communication setting, we consider the context of our study a legitimate situation of contemporary professional life, where there is an increase of encounters at a distance and in virtual space.

Curricular context

The study took place at a large public Midwestern US university. The focal tele-collaborative exchange constituted a mandatory component of the semester-long German for the Professions course, the second of a three-course German Business Language series. To take part in the course, students must have previously completed a four-semester proficiency sequence or they must demonstrate adequate knowledge through a placement test. During the last semester of the four-semester proficiency sequence, students had the option of enrolling in the first of the courses in theGerman Business Language series, Introduction to Business German, with four of the participants in the current study having done so. The third course in the German Business Language series, The German Business Environment, follows German for the Professions and has a twofold aim: (1) to prepare German learners for a six-week internship opportunity in Germany, and (2) to prepare German learners to take the Goethe-Institut[1] administered test *Zertifikat Deutsch für den Beruf* (Certificate of Professional German). Those who successfully pass the test are certified to have achieved a level of B2 in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), roughly equivalent to Advanced Low on the American Council of Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) framework (Mosher, Slagter, & Surface, 2010). One can therefore characterize the course as being part of a carefully articulated curriculum (Byrnes, 2005) aimed specifically at developing the professional language skills needed to operate successfully within a professional environment where German is the spoken language.[2]

Participants

There were nine course participants (five male, four female), with varying specialization and exposure to German before the course (see Table 1).

Table 1: Background information of student participants

Pseudonym	Major / minor	High school instruction	University instruction (before study)	Time spent in a German-speaking country
Karl	Linguistics / German	none	4 semesters	2 weeks of private travel
Gregor	Architecture / German	2 years	4 semesters	2 weeks of private travel
Tim	Film / German	none	4 semesters	1 week of private travel
Andrea	Biochemistry / German	3 years	2 semesters	6 weeks as a high school exchange student; 1 week of private travel
Bill	German	4 years	3 semesters	5 seven-day visits during 2006–2009
Beth	German, International Studies / Business	none	6 semesters	1 year living and studying in Germany
Jenny	Architecture	none	none	15 months living and studying in Austria and Germany
Jackson	German	3 years	4 semesters	9 days of private travel
Kate	International Studies	4 years	none	6 weeks as a high school exchange student; extensive private travel

The German professional guests were a teacher at an upper-level vocational school (Roland),[3] a project manager at Siemens (Erika), and two employees of a community bank (Thomas and Jürgen); all of the guests were living and working in Germany. The first author, who was also the instructor of the course, had established contacts with L1 German speakers

before the course and invited them to participate as expert guests in a series of four synchronous online discussions (See Table 2 for the study's timeline).

Table 2: Study timeline

Stage	SW	Event
Preparatory	1	Students receive an explanation of online discussion course component
	2	Students choose the discussion they wish to moderate
	5	Students are trained in use of Web conferencing software
Pre-intervention	8	discussion 1 (invited guest: Roland)
	10	discussion 2 (invited guest: Erika)
Intervention	12	Instructional intervention
Post-intervention	13	discussion 3 (invited guest: Thomas)
	15	discussion 4 (invited guests: Thomas and Jürgen)

SW = semester week

Participant roles in interactions

The interactions in the focal exchange can be classified as mediated chats, which are characterized by non-equal participation distribution and an interview style where the public poses questions to the guest (van Compernolle & Pierozak, 2009). Mediated chats are often associated with more formal language, which was the target register for this study.

During their respective discussions, the invited guest often acted as a single addressor speaking to a group, but there were also many instances of individuals addressing specific interlocutors. At any given time in the discussions there were many participants who were not actively speaking, thus acting in the capacity of an audience. The first researcher was present at all interactions, and the second researcher was present at some interactions in a non-participatory role. Therefore, the researchers acted as audience members.

As native-speaking Germans with expert knowledge of their respective fields, the invited guests enjoyed a high status in the online discussion. In addition, the American participants who

were acting in the role of discussion moderators (more below) had to employ several moves to manage the discussion. Such management involved, but was not limited to, greeting the invited guest, posing questions to both the guest and other participants, and closing the discussion. Invited guests did not have personal knowledge of the other discussion participants.

Setting

The online discussions were hosted on the university's Adobe Connect Pro desktop conferencing platform. Only those on a pre-determined guest list (learners, invited guest, and investigators) were allowed access to the discussion, making it a private forum. The German learners were gathered together in a single university computer lab, with each participant seated at his or her own computer station using a headset to interact with other participants. Invited guests participated from their respective locations in Germany using their own personal computers. A seven-hour time difference existed at the time of the discussions, resulting in American participants logging on in the late morning, and invited guests logging on in the late afternoon. Each online discussion lasted approximately one hour.

Discussion topics

The general topics were set before the discussion, with discussion moderators having prepared a set of approximately 10 questions in advance for the guest. Given these factors, one can characterize the text as planned, but not scripted. Although participants had a clear idea of the topic and potential areas for discussion and interaction, it was not clear beforehand exactly who would speak when and what would be said by whom. In addition, given that the various topics were directly related to the guests' field of employment, it is reasonable to believe that

they attached particular value to the respective topics, especially as they related directly to their status as an expert in the discussion. Invited guests were concerned with communicating factual information to the addressees in a way that was both accurate and accessible. On occasion, invited guests revealed some information about themselves during the interaction, primarily with the intent of exemplifying factual statements.

Web-conferencing software: Adobe Connect Pro

All communication between course participants and invited guests took place within the environs of Adobe Connect Pro, a desktop conferencing platform that enables participants to gather in a private virtual room irrespective of physical location. Any person entering the virtual room has one of three status levels: host, presenter, or participant. Hosts have the ability to change any settings within the room as well as reassigning the status of others. Presenters have the ability to moderate the discussion in that they control who may or may not actively speak at a given moment. Student discussion moderators are given presenter status. Participants may observe the happenings in a virtual room, but unless given explicit permission to speak (i.e., the virtual microphone has been passed to them) they remain in the relatively passive role as an observer. All non-moderating course participants are set to participant status. This hierarchical design mirrors the formal structure of corporate meetings, a fact reflective of the software developers' original intent.

Once in the room, users of all status see several preselected pods analogous to the resizable windows common in today's computer operating systems (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Screen shot of discussion room in Adobe Connect Pro

The video pod shows the current speaker and is set to automatically switch between

speakers. Below the video pod is the pod listing all of the current discussion participants. In

addition to displaying names, the icon preceding the name indicates participants' current status in

the discussion. Below the participant pod is the text chat pod, which serves primarily to manage

technical or logistical aspects of the discussion, but may also feature typical small-talk gambits

(e.g., "How is the weather?"). The three small pods described here serve a relatively marginal

role compared to the large sharing pod that encompasses most of the screen. This pod is used to

display visual material to discussion participants, such as pre-loaded PowerPoint presentations,

Web sites, or other documents. There is also the option to use this pod as a white board, enabling

users to write or draw freely in several colours, fonts, and shapes. The white board functions can also be overlaid on any other visual material, allowing an invited guest to highlight text on a slide or circle or underline pictures, charts, etc. This use of interactive tools is seen clearly in Figure 1, where the invited guest has drawn several black lines to focus participants' attention on several visual elements that correspond with his verbal explanation of the German school system.

The study: The development of pragmatic competence

Design

The primary goal of the study was to investigate whether learners of German improve their ability to communicate in a professional register by means of employing specific politeness strategies as a result of interaction with expert users of German combined with a data-driven instructional intervention. The study was qualitative and exploratory in nature and was designed as a pilot for a larger study being conducted by the first author. It utilizes the method of micro-genetic analysis, characterized by Belz and Kinginger (2003) as 'the observation of skill acquisition during a learning event' (p. 594), including the examination of 'the precise, concrete social practices leading to change in learner language over time' (p. 601). The pedagogical intervention was designed and implemented by the first author, who was also the instructor of the course. All transcriptions and coding were performed by the first author and proofread by the second author, and all divergences were resolved by agreement. The timeline of the study included four main stages (see Table 2), beginning with a first preparatory stage.

The pre-intervention stage included the first two Web conferences. After they were completed, the first researcher listened to each hour-long audio recording and found occurrences of 'critical incidents' (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996) where participants attempted to engage in polite behaviour. Polite behaviour is operationalized here to mean the presence of grammatical and/or structural elements marking respect and conveying social distance (Crystal, 1997), which are described in the next section. Then, all audio data representing such critical incidents were transcribed and coded for the focal politeness markers as used by both expert speakers and learners. L2 data were additionally coded as to whether they were used appropriately and accurately. Finally, the coded data were grouped into three categories: politeness markers that (1) were used by the learners appropriately and accurately; (2) were used by the learners either not appropriately or not accurately or neither; and (3) were used by the expert speakers but not by the learners.

Categories 2 and 3 were then used in the pedagogical intervention stage, which was designed 'in response to the learners' (emerging) use of the focal features' (Belz & Vyatkina, 2008, p. 35). More specifically, pragmatic awareness questionnaires were designed based on examples from the pre-intervention Web conferences (see detailed description below), which were then analyzed and used in teacher-guided discussions with the learners.

At the end of the course, the procedure of transcription and analysis of the production data was repeated for the last two conferences, which constituted the post-intervention stage. This stage was implemented to establish whether the learners improved their use of the focal features after the intervention.

In sum, this study did not aim at an exhaustive listing and analysis of all focal features in learner language. Rather, it supplied an inventory of the focal features that lend themselves to

targeted instruction and that are being currently used in the first author's larger study, which applies a mixed qualitative and quantitative design.

Focal features

One way to achieve a formal register and establish polite rapport with an interlocutor is through the strategic use of mood and modality, for example, using the subjunctive mood, modal verbs, and politeness tokens (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Diewald, 1999; Lin, 2009; Maden-Weinberger, 2008). These linguistic forms were chosen as focal features in this study for various reasons. First, the subjunctive mood is notoriously vexing for American learners of German, and its use as a means of expressing social distance is often not taught in favour of focusing its use to express hypothetical or unreal information. Second, modal verbs were chosen based on their frequency in polite discourse, particularly as a means of making polite requests. Third, politeness tokens were chosen due to the fact that they are a highly lexicalized means of expressing politeness and, as such, are not normally subject to form-based errors. It was therefore interesting to compare learner use of more and less grammatically complex politeness features. Finally, while the researchers were initially interested in examining the use of pronominal address forms (V: *Sie* and T: *du*) in addition to features of mood and modality, preliminary screening of the data did not reveal learner problems in this area. All of them followed the formal form *Sie* while addressing the German professionals, who also consistently addressed the learners with *Sie*. It was thus decided not to include this feature. Note that learner errors not related to the focal forms were also ignored in our analysis.

Pre-intervention data analysis

The students engaged in a total of four Web conferences during the semester: two before an instructional intervention and two subsequent to the intervention (see Table 2). An analysis of the pre-intervention data reveals three key points. First, the students seemed to have a firm grasp of the appropriate use of politeness tokens (*danke, bitte*). Second, they did use modal verbs, but had some difficulty producing the appropriate verbs and correct forms. Third, the data do not show any use of the subjunctive mood to make polite requests, despite opportunities to apply this structure.

Politeness tokens

Politeness tokens (Brown & Levinson, 1987) are frequently used in the discussions to acknowledge a speaker's contribution. Consider example 1 from minute 13 of discussion 1 between Roland (invited guest) and Tim (student moderator):

Example 1

ROLAND:	*Wir können die Diskussion sehr locker und direkt gestalten.*
	Wenn Sie irgendwas nicht verstehen, wenn ich zu schnell
	spreche, bitte geben Sie mir Bescheid.
	We can conduct the discussion very loosely and directly. If
	there is anything you don't understand, if I speak too
	quickly, please let me know.
TIM:	*Vielen Dank, Herr Schmidt.*
	Thank you very much, Mr. Schmidt.

Tim's *Vielen Dank* has the dual effect of recognizing Roland's offer to be an accommodating speaker and expressing gratitude for the offer. Such usage can also be seen in example 2, occurring between Roland and Gregor (student moderator) in minute 22 of the same discussion:

Example 2

ROLAND:	*Wenn der Notendurchschnitt eben nicht so gut ist, dann müssen sie auf die Hauptschule gehen. Und wenn der Notendurchschnitt so mittel ist, dann können sie auf die sogennante Realschule gehen.* If the average grades aren't exactly that good, then they have to go to the secondary general school. And if the average grades are middling then they can go to the so-called intermediate secondary school.
GREGOR:	Okay, vielen Dank. Okay, thank you very much.

Roland has just completed a lengthy explanation of how students are streamed into one of three different schools after completing the fourth grade. By thanking him explicitly, Gregor has acknowledged Roland's contribution in an appropriate and respectful manner, allowing the discussion to continue smoothly onto the next topic.

Modal verbs

The pre-intervention analysis of modal verbs used to engage politely with the invited guest shows mixed usage patterns. Consider the following request in minute 14 of discussion 1:

Example 3

TIM:	Ich musste Sie zuerst sagen, ähm können Sie bitte uns erklären, was eine Berufsoberschule ist? I had to tell you first, um can you please explain to us what an upper-level vocational school is?

Two modal verbs are used in example 3, one appropriately and one problematically. In the first line, Tim prefaces his request with the modal verb *musste* ('had to'). Tim has no past obligation to ask his question, so the more likely goal is that he is attempting to use a subjunctive form of a modal verb *möchte* ('I would like'), but inappropriately uses *musste* instead.

Immediately following, however, Tim makes a perfectly appropriate request by means of the modal verb *können* ('can') combined with the politeness token *bitte.*

Such mixed usage patterns also appear in minute 5 of discussion 2, featuring the invited guest Erika and the student moderator Andrea.

Example 4

ERIKA:	Da vielleicht eine Gegenfrage, kennt jemand von Ihnen Siemens? Here perhaps a question in return, do any of you know of Siemens?
ANDREA:	Ja, wir können auf 'zustimmen' klicken, wenn wir könnten, äh, *kennten diese Firma und ich glaube, alle kennen das, aber Sie können das sehen. Yes, we can click on 'agree', if we could, uh, *knew this company and I think everyone knows that, but you can see that.

The confusion in example 4 seems to revolve around confusion between the lexical verb *kennen* ('to know of,' 'to be familiar with') and the modal verb *können*. Andrea uses *können* appropriately the first time in the interaction. Next, she uses the modal verb *könnten* inappropriately and produces a grammatically inaccurate form **kennten* while searching for an appropriate form of the verb *kennen*. At the end of this excerpt, she arrives at appropriate and accurate uses of both *kennen* and *können.* This complex interplay of very similar sounding forms indicates that Andrea is aware of the meaning of both verbs and is able to successfully produce them, although she makes occasional mistakes while speaking under time pressure.

Subjunctive mood

The first two discussions show no evidence of students using the subjunctive form of the verbs 'to have' and 'to be' for achieving social distance. For example, in discussion 1, the student moderators use the phrase *Ich habe eine Frage* ('I have a question') a total of four times. While grammatically correct, a more polite way to preface a question would make use of the subjunctive mood, *Ich hätte eine Frage* ('I had a question'.

The instructional intervention and intervention data analysis

Based on the analysis of the pre-intervention data illustrated above, the instructional intervention focused on two grammatical features used to express specific inflections of politeness and formality: (1) modal verbs (e.g., *können, dürfen*) for making polite requests; and (2) the subjunctive mood of auxiliary and copula verbs (e.g., *hätte, wäre, würde*) for achieving social distance. Politeness tokens did not form part of the instructional intervention, as the data from the first two conferences indicated no major problems in this area.

The instructional intervention took place over two class periods during semester week (SW) 12 and was designed to initially raise the learners' awareness of the focal structures (day 1) thereby helping them to use the structures more productively (day 2). The initial awareness raising took place by replicating the data-driven approach of Belz and Vyatkina (2005, 2008). To do this, specific instances of interaction between the learners and the invited guests were transcribed and presented to the learners in the form of a judgment task. Identifying information

was removed so that the status of a speaker as an expert or novice would not influence learners'

judgments.

For example, learners were asked to evaluate the exchange represented in Figure 2. A

score of 1 corresponds to strong agreement that the statement is grammatical or appropriate.

Conversely, a score of 5 indicates strong disagreement that the statement is grammatical or

appropriate.

A: Ich hatte eine andere Frage, wenn das auch okay ist. 'I had a different question, if that's also okay.' *B: Ja, sehr gut, wir können das machen.* 'Yes, very good, we can do that.'						
	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
It is grammatical.	1	2	3	4	5	
It is appropriate.	1	2	3	4	5	
Explanation of your rating:						

Figure 2: Example of judgment task
A = Kate, B = Andrea

This interaction features two learners during discussion 2 and was chosen for the missed

opportunity to use the subjunctive mood. (*Hatte* is the simple past form of the verb *haben* ['to

have']. It is most likely the case that Kate is using a calque from the English 'had' here; the more

appropriate form would have been the subjunctive *hätte*). Learners judged the exchange and gave

responses, which are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Student responses to adjacency pair beginning with *Ich hatte eine andere Frage. . .*

Pseudonym	Grammaticality	Appropriateness	Explanation
Karl	1	1	Sounds good.
Gregor	1	3	Subjunctive would be more appropriate when asking a question.

Tim	2	2	I don't feel that the response is entirely fluid or natural sounding. (*machen* is a weird response to me.) Something like *natürlich* or *Ja, kein Problem* would make more sense to me.
Andrea	1	3	Grammar makes sense. The speaker recognized they had to ask permission to talk on a different topic.
Bill	2	2	–
Beth	1	3	Answer 'B' doesn't seem like something that would really be said in German in this situation.
Jenny	1	2	It could perhaps be phrased a bit clearer and more professionally, but I don't see this as in any way rude.
Jackson	5	5	'A' seems to be in the past tense.
Kate	1	2	A bit clunky but alright.

Recognizing that Jackson is an outlier regarding this particular item, the general trend seems to be that students recognize the sentence as grammatical. In contrast, the judgments regarding appropriateness span a wider range and do not always seem to be adequately addressed in the explanation of the rating. Nonetheless, a sentiment emerges from some that the exchange is somewhat awkward or unnatural. Interestingly, only two responses identify the specific locus of the problem. Gregor notes the lack of the subjunctive mood when asking questions, and Tim comments on the choice of lexical items. Thus, it seems that only one learner is explicitly aware of the fact that the subjunctive mood would have helped to make the exchange more appropriate.

In Table 4, we see learners' evaluations of the following utterance, produced by Erika (invited guest) in minute 36 of discussion 2:

A: *Da wäre meine Frage an Sie, ob es sowas auch in den USA gibt.*
So that would be my question to you, whether there is something like this in the USA.

Table 4: Student responses to utterance *Da wäre meine Frage an Sie. . .*

Pseudonym	Grammaticality	Appropriateness	Explanation
Karl	5	3	I think it would be understood, but *da* needs to be replaced.
Gregor	5	1	*Das* should replace *da*, but in spoken German it is plenty appropriate to shorten words like that.
Tim	1	1	It seems smooth and appropriate.
Andrea	4	2	Seems awkward/not correct.
Bill	4	3	–
Beth	5	5	Should it say, *Da(s) war meine Frage an Sie…*? *Wäre* expresses a different idea that probably wasn't intended here.
Jenny	1	2	I think it seems to be an appropriate statement.
Jackson	1	1	Seems fine.
Kate	1	1	It's a fragment, but continues on. Sounds pretty natural to me.

This utterance features the subjunctive form *wäre* of the verb *sein* ('to be') as a way of prefacing Erika's question to the learners. Judgments regarding the grammaticality and appropriateness of the utterance vary widely. The learners interpret the grammar as being either totally fine (1) or highly problematic (4 or 5), alternately focusing on the presence of either *da* or *wäre* as contributing to its ungrammaticality. In evaluating the appropriateness of the utterance, we again see a broad range of responses. Two thirds of the respondents rate the utterance with 1 or 2, reflecting a belief that such an utterance is conventional in polite interaction. Beth rated it as highly inappropriate, though, postulating that '*[w]äre* expresses a different idea that probably wasn't intended here.' This comment seems to reflect that she sees the form as grammatically possible, but not attested in this context. Given that the utterance was produced by a native speaker of German, the varied evaluations indicate some learners lack awareness of this use of the subjunctive mood.

Following the awareness raising component of the pedagogical intervention, the learners received explicit instruction in the form and use of: (1) modal verbs for polite requests; and (2) the subjunctive mood for social distance. To address the use of these structures, learners received a worksheet featuring a series of utterances with the intended effect of getting an interlocutor to close a door. After ranking the utterances in terms of their politeness, they identified what elements in the sentences made them more or less polite, concluding that the use of modal verbs and the subjunctive mood in interrogative sentences was the most polite and formal way to make a request. Having discussed the target structures, the instructional intervention concluded by returning to the utterances originally presented during the awareness raising component. Learners then proceeded to make the less appropriate utterances more appropriate by using the focal structures.

Post-intervention data analysis

Following the instructional intervention in SW 12, students engaged in two more Web conferences (SW 13 and SW 15) with expert speakers of German. Generally speaking, there seems to be an improvement in the use of modal verbs for polite requests, and an uneven effect for the use of the subjunctive mood to establish social distance. Consider example 5 occurring between Beth (student moderator) and Thomas (invited guest) during minute 5 of discussion 3:

Example 5

BETH: *Möchten Sie . . . sich vorstellen, dann können wir mit*
        unsere Fragen anfangen.
        Would you like . . . to introduce yourself, then we can start
        with our questions.

THOMAS: *Das mache ich gerne.*
        I'm happy to do so.

Beth appropriately uses the subjunctive form *möchten* of a modal verb to invite Thomas

to introduce himself. Later in the discussion (minute 26), Beth again produces the subjunctive

form *möchten* to make an appropriately polite request, as seen in example 6:

Example 6

BETH:	*Danke! Ähm . . . Wenn Sie etwas vorbereitet haben, können Sie es gerne präsentieren, wenn Sie möchten. Wir ähm haben noch nicht irgend Frage* Thank you! Um . . . If you have prepared something, you are most welcome to present it, if you like. We um don't have a question yet
THOMAS:	*Ja?* Yes?
BETH:	*keine Fragen mehr, ja danke ((lacht))* no more questions, yes thank you ((laughs))
THOMAS:	*Sie haben keine Fragen mehr, meinen Sie.* You don't have any more questions, you mean.

Tim also seems to make progress regarding his use of both modal verbs and subjunctive

forms, as evidenced by the following interaction:

Example 7

TIM:	*Äh, ich hätte äh eine kurze Frage.* Um, I've got um a short question....
THOMAS:	*Ja?* Yes?
TIM:	*Ähm es ist äh mit diesem Thema ein Bisschen *unverbind unverbunden vielleicht, aber ich möchte ähm wissen, wie viel Deutsch *möch, muss man sprechen können, um als Praktikant bei der Volksbank zu arbeiten?* Um it is um a little *unconnect unconnected to the topic perhaps, but I'd like to um know, how much German does one *lik, does one have to be able to speak, in order to work as an intern at the People's Bank?

THOMAS: *Wie viel Deutsch ist schwer zu sagen, da ich die Levels*
nicht kenne.
Also, sollte gut sein.
How much German is difficult to say, as I don't know the
levels.
Well, it should be good.

To recall, Tim experiences difficulty producing the form *möchte* in example 3 when it is needed. In example 7 (minute 40, discussion 3) he uses *möchte* appropriately and accurately and begins to produce an infelicitous structure (*möch*), but self-corrects to the more appropriate *muss*. This example shows Tim carefully attending to correct and appropriate usage of modal verbs and reflects progress as compared with his performance in discussion 1.

Also striking in example 7 is Tim's use of the subjunctive form *hätte* to preface his question to Thomas. This is the first example of any learner using the subjunctive mood to establish social distance, and is significant in that it only occurs following the instructional intervention. Other examples of productive use of the subjunctive mood also appear in discussion 4. The following exchange occurs between Jenny (student moderator) and Thomas (invited guest) during minute 28:

Example 8

JENNY: *Also noch eine Frage. Ähm..Hätten Sie Vorschläge, wie*
eine Praktikant in einer ausländischen Firma erfolgreich
arbeiten kann?
So another question. Um..Would you have any suggestions
how an intern in a foreign company can work successfully?
THOMAS: *Vorschläge konkret nicht.*
No concrete suggestions.

Such usage is evidence that the instructional intervention has pushed certain learners to produce a structure that previously did not exist in the discourse. This progress is uneven,

however, both within individuals and across the group. In the case of Bill, Jenny's discussion co-moderator, the instructional intervention appears to have little effect on the production of the subjunctive mood for social distance. He produces the following utterances during discussion 4 (displayed in example 9):

Example 9

[Typesetter: please maintain spacing as is displayed in the following but do not insert borders]

German English number of utterances

Ich habe eine Frage	I have a question	3
Haben Sie eine Frage?	Do you have a question?	1
Hat jemand eine Frage?	Does anyone have a question?	2

Given six opportunities to produce the subjunctive form *hätten*, Bill fails to do so. Clearly, there are factors extraneous to the instructional intervention that are at work in individual learners' developing interlanguage systems.

Summary and discussion

Modal verbs

The first focal feature in our analysis was the use of modal verbs to make polite requests. Prior to the instructional intervention, learners produced a variety of modal verbs, but not with consistent accuracy and appropriateness. Such mixed usage can be attributed to processing problems rooted in the homophony between lexical and modal verbs (e.g., *kennen* vs. *können*) or between different modal verbs (*mögen* vs. *müssen*). Following the instructional intervention, we observe learners carefully attending to the appropriate usage of modal verbs, even going so far as

to correct their own online speech. Interestingly, the data also reveal that the lexicalized subjunctive form *möchten* of the modal verb *mögen* is used more frequently than other modal verbs when making requests. Such 'lexical teddy bears' (Hasselgren, 1994, p. 237) are often found in learners' interlanguage; due to their relative comfort and facility with möchten, the learners in this study may overuse this modal verb when others might serve equally well. It must also be acknowledged that emphasizing modal verbs in the instructional intervention may have led learners to overuse these structures in comparison to their expert counterparts (Maden-Weinberger, 2008). Future research should aim to tease apart such differences in usage to address them during the instructional intervention.

Subjunctive mood

The researchers were also interested in determining the influence of interaction and instruction on the appropriate use of the subjunctive mood to establish social distance. In contrast to the progress we see regarding modal verb usage, development regarding the subjunctive mood is more limited and uneven. Given the complete lack of such structures in the two discussions before the instructional intervention, we must conclude that learners were either unaware of how to use the subjunctive mood to establish social distance, or if they were aware, they were not able to appropriately produce the correct forms in a high-stakes situation. Following the instructional intervention, subjunctive structures begin appearing in the data, albeit to a limited degree. The intervention thus appears to have pushed only certain learners to appropriately produce these structures. Such a result is not totally unexpected. The difference in illocutionary force between *Ich habe eine Frage* and *Ich hätte eine Frage* is admittedly subtle, and the use of the former caused little disruption in the communication between discussion participants. Lacking clear

critical incidents in which face and status are at stake, some learners may have simply chosen to continue to use the more familiar indicative mood.

Conclusion and future directions

As the overriding goal of the course was to provide participants with the ability and opportunity to engage in authentic communication in a professional register in German, it was decided that students could greatly benefit from online conversations with German professionals. We wanted to open the classroom door into the real world in order 'to create learning scenarios which integrate the tools and communicative practices which learners will later face in their working lives' as well as to improve their 'employability in a knowledge society' (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012a, p. 15). To that end, we implemented a cyclical instructional intervention for socializing the learners into the professional online discourse based on 'the alternation of Internet-mediated *inter*cultural sessions with face-to-face *intra*cultural sessions' (Belz, 2006, p. 214; emphasis in original). Such use of Web conferencing with expert users of German under a teacher's guidance has indeed been fruitful, broadening the classroom discourse far beyond what is typically available in a traditional setting, and resulting in many instances of more appropriate interaction on the part of the learners. Although this research was exploratory in nature, we argue that, similar to Vyatkina and Belz (2006), our instructional study 'proved to be conducive to the development of pragmatic competence with respect to performance because the need for the focused instruction arose from a specific learner problem and because the learners could immediately apply the learned features in real-life interaction' (p. 343). The study also

pinpointed specific mood and modality features that lend themselves to such interventions, which will be further explored in a larger study.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that politeness and formality in online discussions involve much more than simple choice of grammatical form. Rather, they are best understood with the addition of discourse-level analysis. Given this fact, during the next iteration of the project the instructional intervention will not focus merely on structural politeness and formality but will also focus on the broader use of speech acts, including 'modalized speech acts' in which learners employ modal verbs in fixed expressions as a means of increasing rapport between speakers (Gloning, 1997, p. 307).

Of great interest would be the implementation of a post-course interview module in future iterations. Such data would shed light on the linguistic choices certain learners made during the discussions. For example, the researchers have noted the complete lack of subjunctive forms in Bill's interlanguage, despite having participated in four online discussions and having received targeted instruction in this area. We can hypothesize that time constraints led to difficulty producing more appropriate forms, but such conjectures must remain speculative unless confirmed by the learners themselves. Also of interest would be an analysis of the other modes of communication (text chat and video) used during the online multimodal discussions. Finally, pragmatic awareness questionnaire responses, used here only for instructional purposes, can also be collected as pre-intervention and post-intervention data and analyzed from the developmental perspective to supplement the analysis of production data (cf., Vyatkina & Belz, 2006).

To conclude, telecollaboration is a complex endeavour requiring a great deal of planning and preparation (see Hasko, 2012). Such constraints must be acknowledged and accepted before

starting such a project. For those who are willing and able to utilize this approach in their

language teaching, however, the benefits can be considerable.

Notes

1 The German cultural institution promoting the teaching and learning of German worldwide and administering official examinations in German.

2. The course encompassed a variety of materials, both published and developed by the instructor. The textbook (Becker, Braunert, & Eisfeld, 2002) was chosen because it belongs to a series of textbooks designed specifically to help develop those skills assessed in the *Zertifikat Deutsch für den Beruf* test. As only textbooks from this series are used in all three courses of the Professional German strand, there is a high degree of integration between the materials.

3. All participant names are pseudonyms.

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