Language Learning in Cyberspace: Teleporting the Classroom into the Target Culture

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ABSTRACT

From January to May 1998 the authors tested the possibility of language instruction in a MOO. The experiment consisted of two groups: a group of adult evening school participants in Germany learning English as a second language and a group of American college students in their fourth semester of college German. The two groups met together once weekly for two hours each in real time in a MOO. Partnerships were formed consisting of one member from the German group and one member from the American group. The partners then cooperated in accomplishing certain tasks in their respective L2s. The present article relates the results of this project.

KEYWORDS

MOO, Second Language Acquisition, CALL, Tandem Learning

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the foreign language teaching profession has witnessed growing recognition of the importance of a four-skills approach to language learning integrated with learning about the culture of the area(s) in which the target language is spoken. As a result, many teachers—faced with the difficult task of trying to orchestrate classroom sessions which are both culturally and linguistically authentic—are exploring ways in which computer technology can be employed to make language learning more
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effective and motivating for students. Yet often, the sophisticated graphics and enhanced audio files of even the most attractive CD-ROM package are more likely to reproduce the reality of a Super Mario game or a QUAKE\(^1\) session than the atmosphere of a Parisian boulevard or a café along the Kurfürstendamm in Berlin. On the other hand, while news broadcasts in the target language as well as many other programs available on the Internet or by satellite are current and authentic, they often fail to captivate the learner because they seem remote and irrelevant, even esoteric. Finally, the instructor dedicated to employing the latest technology in a truly effective fashion must find a way to realize the potential of recent innovations in a way which makes their relevance immediately apparent to learners and encourages them to explore further.

In an attempt to assess the potential of the Internet in teaching intermediate language in a fashion which might prove relevant to the learner, we undertook a joint project from January to May 1998. We had several objectives in mind. We wanted to provide a framework within which learners could practice their foreign language skills in conversation with native speakers of the target language, thereby creating opportunities for communication which were at once both authentic and realistic. We also wanted those conversations to be freewheeling and unstructured in which the participants had the ability to set the agenda. Nonetheless, we hoped to provide the impetus to advance the conversation beyond simple chatting to purposeful communication leading to the completion of specific tasks.

THE PLANNING STAGES

The project involved two groups of students: one in Germany and one in the United States. The German group consisted of eight enrollees in an adult evening school class in English as a Foreign Language at the intermediate level. The American participants were a group of 13 college students in their fourth semester of German. Each group, therefore, consisted of native speakers of the language that students in the other group were learning. The groups met together in a virtual classroom for two hours each week.

We decided to locate ourselves in a Multiple-User Domain, Object Oriented (M O O), a somewhat obtuse expression which tells the uninitiated very little. Above all, a M O O is a text-based virtual reality environment; its reality is one of words. The “objects” referred to in the M O O designation consist of written descriptions. Our concern was not to find the most dazzling implementation of the technology, rather, we were anxious to capitalize on the M O O’s capacity to “help learners to internalize language structure within the broader contexts of dialogue and culture” (Turbee, 1996). Encounters in the M O O take place in real time. One does not have
to wait an hour or a day for a response to an inquiry as often occurs with electronic mail. Moreover, a MOO advances the concept of a chat program. Unlike many chat programs, a MOO allows participants to describe themselves. Descriptions, be they honest or feigned, form the basis of the personality which participants assume in any discussion or relationship in cyberspace. Additionally, a MOO allows participants to create personal spaces, a room or rooms into which one can withdraw and in which one can entertain friends. A room can be embellished with drawings (in ASCII characters), but the visual impact of a room is more often a product of the words used to describe it. Once again, words constitute the reality of the room, “it is landscape, and it is momentarily frozen speech” (Turkle, 1998). Figure 1 presents the screen which users initially see when they enter a MOO.

Figure 1
Initial Screen of a MOO

To reach a MOO, users normally telnet to a specific address with the help of client software. The client software presents users with a split screen. The much larger upper window reflects the on-going dialog in the MOO; the lower window provides a space in which users can edit their input before sending it to the MOO by pressing the enter key. The entire session as reflected in the upper window of the screen can be saved to disk as a text file. We very consciously took advantage of the opportunity to log all sessions to assure both that the participants had a complete record of
their experiences in the M.O.O for later reference and editing and that we had documentation of growth and change among the participants over the course of the project. (See the sample logs in Appendix A.)

THE FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT

In all, the project ran for 14 weeks with weekly sessions of approximately two hours each. During the first two weeks, each group met on its own so that the participants could familiarize themselves with the basic commands necessary to negotiate the M.O.O. We were concerned that each participant be able to move about from room to room, to ascertain who was available in the M.O.O at any given moment, and to locate and connect with a possible partner. Each of these activities is tied to a specific command or set of commands within the M.O.O. Figure 2 displays a number of the available M.O.O commands by category.

Figure 2
M.O.O Commands

The full range of possible movements and commands is much more extensive, but we felt that familiarity with about a dozen basic commands would allow students to move about freely within the M.O.O and to engage others in conversation with a minimum of instruction in the complexities of M.O.O programming.

We allowed two weeks for our students to feel comfortable negotiating the M.O.O and to engage in conversations via the keyboard. During those first two weeks, participants were asked to describe themselves in the language they were studying. In the third week the groups met together in the M.O.O for the first time. During the first common meeting in the M.O.O,
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each individual was asked to consult the descriptions others had previously written, to seek out a potential partner, and to begin a conversation. As partnerships were formed, each new team was asked to move to one of the smaller rooms or cubicles which we had set up beforehand. The smaller rooms allowed for more private conversations than would have been possible in a room in which several people were exchanging text messages all at once.5

Over the course of the third and fourth sessions, eight tandem partnerships were formed. The imbalance in the numbers between the two groups was quickly resolved since it became apparent that not all students on the American side could remain for the entire two-hour session each week. Consequently, two Americans banded together at times to become a partner for a single German. By the end of the fourth session most of the teams had agreed on a project which they had chosen from a list prepared in advance. This list was available in the virtual classroom and on the homepage developed specifically for the project. Figure 3 shows the English version of the list of projects; both the English and German versions were available by means of links from the project homepage.

**Figure 3**
List of Projects on the Project Homepage

In the fifth and subsequent sessions the partner teams worked on their projects. We permitted the teams to schedule their time in the MOO in whatever fashion they thought most efficient. However, we informed them that we anticipated that they would finish at least two projects in the remaining weeks and should be able to communicate the results of their
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projects in the form of a presentation to their peers. We also encouraged the participants to be flexible and experiment with different combinations of English and German but to strive for a balance which would assure that each language was used about half the time. We promoted the idea that decided advantages were to be gained by spending an extended amount of time, say thirty minutes or more, in one language. The native speaker of the language being spoken at any given time could thus more easily model correct structures and better serve as a mentor to his or her partner.

THE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

The pedagogical principles upon which we designed the project were those of learner autonomy and tandem learning. Learner autonomy seeks to free learners from the constraints of the normal student/teacher paradigm, allowing them to set their own goals and to make informed decisions about how to achieve those goals. The concept itself is well known, and the principles of autonomous learning have been put into practice in various forms worldwide. However, actual classroom applications are still far from being the norm. We were particularly drawn to the formulation of the principles expounded by Dam and Legenhausen (1997). As Dam and Legenhausen state, the goal of Autonomous Language Learning (ALL) is to increase both the learners’ language skills and their language learning by raising their “awareness of communication as a process, [of] language as a system and [of] the learning process itself.”

ALL aims at the development of language and language-learning awareness. The major difference between ALL and more traditional concepts of teaching is that ALL assumes that learners who are taught to gradually take over more and more responsibility for their own learning become much more aware of their needs. Consequently, they are much better motivated to learn and, in the long run, become much more competent users of the L2.

ALL does not mean that learners are left alone with their learning, that they can do what they want, or that the teacher is redundant. Rather, “it is still the teacher’s exclusive task to set up general and subject-specific aims and to explain them to learners” (Dam, Legenhausen, & Wolff, 1990). However, the classroom roles of teacher and students change over time as the teacher increasingly becomes a moderator who ensures that learners’ self-set short-term goals are achieved. In the role as moderator, the teacher intervenes only if learners continue to neglect particular crucial aspects of the syllabus.

ALL comprises both group work and individual work, with the former being the preferred means of learning. It focuses on process rather than product and requires learners’ active participation throughout the pro-
The concept of tandem learning aims at developing mutual support between a native speaker of a language and the learner of this language who, at the same time, is a native speaker of the partner's target language. Some of the major advantages of this approach are that

- learners have more than just one informant (i.e., the teacher) who can illustrate aspects of the respective L2 and who can provide written and/or spoken examples to assist with problems or questions;
- learners use the L2 for authentic purposes in the learning process;
- the partners in the tandem become valuable informants about the culture of the respective target language community and can thus provide information that far exceeds that provided by textbooks, videos, etc.

The principle of reciprocity is fundamental to tandem learning. Partners in a language-learning team should on average engage their own interests and goals 50% of the time, leaving the other half of the time for their respective partner. Over time, both languages and cultures should receive a similar amount of attention (see Little & Brammerts, 1996).

The goals of tandem learning complement those of learner autonomy. In language learning, tandem work means that learners are paired with individuals who are native speakers of the language the other is learning. The partners become in effect “resident experts” of their own linguistic and cultural community and support the learning process of the other. The native speakers provide authentic input on a broad range of linguistic and cultural issues and receive, in return, expert advice from their partners. Additionally, native informants gain new insights into the language and culture they may largely take for granted. As they mentor their partner, they have the opportunity to see their own everyday experience from the vantage point of the learner for whom the commonplace products and practices of the new cultural community appear brand new.

**FINDINGS OF THE PROJECT**

We evaluated the project in three ways. First, we assessed and guided the progress of individual tandem teams. We met together as instructors each week in the MOO at a time about midway between the weekly sessions. We had usually studied the logs of the prior session before our
meetings. During our time together in the M O O , we discussed and assessed the progress being made by each tandem team and, when necessary, devised suggestions to facilitate conversations in the next session which we initially passed on to the relevant teams during the next session. In the early weeks we divided up the groups between ourselves during our own session together and then visited the groups during their weekly sessions. However as the tandems increasingly took responsibility for the agenda of each session, it became apparent that our intervention was perceived more as an intrusion than as a help. Since it was our goal to assist the participants in their process of becoming autonomous learners, it seemed counterproductive to continue to intervene in cases in which the tandem work was proceeding successfully. When it was necessary to pass on our suggestions to the tandem teams, we communicated the suggestions by E-Mail before the start of the next session. In this fashion we were able to influence the direction and makeup of the subsequent session without actively intervening in the tandem’s ongoing discussion.

The second method of evaluation involved reviewing the M O O logs. The third method of evaluation was the use of an extensive questionnaire which sought to gauge the reactions of the participants to the project. (See the student questionnaire in Appendix B.) Analysis of the data in the logs and students’ responses to questionnaire items revealed several significant insights on the efficacy of language learning in a M O O . We had initially intended to use the logs ourselves after the close of the project as the basis for a thorough examination and analysis of the pattern of the linguistic development among the participants over the four months and to allow the participants access to digital versions of their “conversations” so that they might more easily convert spontaneous exchanges into the presentation we had envisioned for the final sessions. As the project developed, however, the logs had an immediate and significant influence on each subsequent session. As it became more awkward for us to intervene in on-going dialogues in the M O O , the logs became a vital source of information on the progress of individual tandems. We reviewed and discussed each tandem’s performance during our own weekly instructor meetings and, where necessary, developed a plan for improvement or strategies for enhancing the language learning experience, which were then conveyed via e-mail or in person prior to the next group session. The logs thus supplied the information which allowed us to mentor the learners indirectly and to apply corrective measures which sought to improve the linguistic experience without interrupting the spontaneity of the M O O sessions.

The questionnaire sought responses in two broad categories: strategies the participants employed at those moments when communication threatened to break down and the means the participants used in order to mentor their partners. When participants were asked whether it was easy for them to understand their partner in the native language, 80% replied that
it was indeed “pretty easy.” To investigate what the learners did when understanding was difficult, we included the question in the questionnaire, “What did you do when you did not understand your partner?” Respondents could choose one or more of six possible answers. Among the more passive or evasive strategies were changing the subject, ignoring the utterance in question, or trying to guess at the meaning. The more active strategies involved asking partners to repeat, paraphrase, or translate the phrase in question. Students’ responses to this question can be summarized as follows: 85% asked their partners to paraphrase, translate, or both. What is particularly interesting with regard to the bilingual format of the project is the fact that most of the participants did indeed take advantage of the opportunities offered by their native speaking partners. They relied upon the advice of their partners as native informants, thus learning the language in a manner much more akin to learning in the native environment than learning in a classroom setting. In addition—and perhaps even more important when one considers the similarities between the MOO and a real-life target language community—25% of the students stated that they tried to guess what their partners meant.

When asked how difficult it was to express their own thoughts in the target language, 67% of the students claimed that expressing themselves in the target language was “seldom” a problem, whereas 33% conceded that they “often” found it difficult to find the right words. To assess how the students coped with situations in which they could not express themselves, we asked the question, “What did you do when you could not express what you wanted to say in the foreign language?” and provided a list of answers similar to the above question on not being able to understand. Almost half of the students reported that they tried to paraphrase what they intended to say in the target language. Almost all participants inserted one or more words from their native language into the target language at least once, and nearly every participant asked their partner for an occasional translation of a word or phrase.

The opportunity for code switching was another striking advantage of the bilingual format of the project. By code switching, we simply mean those instances in which learners are at a loss for a vocabulary item and insert an L1 word or phrase into L2 discourse. As opposed to some of the other advantages of language learning in the MOO, code switching is a phenomenon one encounters more often in the foreign language classroom than in the target language environment. In questioning the participants about their use of code switching, we tried to ascertain both the incidence of code switching and the degree to which code switching was employed merely as a convenience or as a part of larger strategy to enhance language learning.

Eighty percent of the students reported that they had substituted an L1 word for an unknown word in the L2 but had otherwise continued in the
target language. Forty-five percent declared that they had tried to paraphrase their utterance by employing vocabulary and grammatical structures with which they were already familiar. Most significant however, 50% stated that they had asked their partners to translate unknown words for them. In fact, analysis of the logs revealed that every participant did so at least once in the course of the project. As with problems in understanding, so here too the learners’ second most preferred strategy was to draw on the native competence of their partner. Students took advantage of the native speaker over a dictionary to provide instant feedback about the suitability of a word in a specific context. In addition, 33% of the participants noted (again confirmed by analysis of the logs) that they even requested advice on how to translate a whole sentence into the target language. They thus turned their lack of lexical knowledge into an active attempt to improve their target language competence, something which would and could not easily happen in a classroom, at least not to this extent.

In trying to judge the students’ success as mentors and peer teachers, we looked at how the students adapted their language to their partners’ needs and how they tried to foster their partners’ developing competence in the foreign language (e.g., when and how they corrected their partner, whether they avoided complex structures or specific vocabulary items, etc.). In their questionnaire responses, 50% of the students stated that they were unaware of having done anything to simplify their language so that their partner might better understand them. This figure was initially somewhat discouraging, but a closer look at the questionnaire data revealed that most of the participants who claimed not to have accommodated were Americans. Almost all the Germans, who collectively had more experience with English than their partners did with German, did in fact adapt their language to the problems they anticipated their partners might have. This finding is particularly noteworthy because none of the participants were trained as teachers or linguists; they accommodated their partners on their own initiative. Fifty percent of the whole group (63% of the Germans) stated that they had tried to avoid words which they thought might be unfamiliar to their partners. Students also reported reducing the complexity of their sentences, and 25% tried to avoid certain idioms or phrases because they thought that these expressions might prove too difficult for their partners.

Up to the fourth joint session, we let the students decide when and how to correct their partners in order to give the learners enough time to settle into their new environment. Beginning in the fifth joint session, we explicitly asked the participants to offer up to five suggestions per hour. Given that the students usually met for two hours per session, this would have amounted to a maximum of twenty corrections per session, which we thought enough to provide productive feedback without significantly in-
hbiting the flow of the conversation. Sixty percent of the participants felt that their partner's corrections were "very helpful." An additional 35% found their partner's suggestions for improvement at least "pretty helpful."

CONCLUSIONS

The project had several complementary goals. Foremost was the attempt to mesh independent learning with a team-oriented approach, and that aspect of the project went remarkably well. The number of participants in each of the two locations was not equal, so it was not possible to divide the group evenly into teams of two each. Moreover, unexpected absences and occasional scheduling conflicts sometimes meant that the same individuals were not always teamed together. Nonetheless, team members rather quickly assumed responsibility for the common agenda. Although the instructors randomly visited the various teams in their weekly sessions, the presence of an authority figure did not appear necessary to ensure that the teams carried out their assigned tasks. The teams occasionally queried the instructor about a word or a phrase or to ask questions about the scope or execution of an assignment, but the instructor was definitely outside the process, functioning in the role of consultant and mentor rather than teacher.

The immediate ramification of the success of the independent team learning was a rather surprising modification of the role of the instructor. The change from teacher to mentor was of course expected; indeed, it was an integral element of the original project. However, we did not anticipate the extent to which the participants would regard the active intervention of the instructor, even qua mentor, as an interruption. Precisely because the group sessions became genuine conversations, the instructor became an eavesdropper, tolerated perhaps but not particularly welcome. The instructor had been transformed into a bystander, at least during the group sessions while the teams were engaged in their work. Any action to modify or direct the flow of conversation impinged upon the authenticity of the ongoing conversation and threatened the success of the team effort up to that point.

The groups did need occasional guidance. Other goals beyond simple conversation were to be achieved. As teachers (even as closeted teachers), we asked ourselves whether the groups were taking advantage of the facilities of the M O O in their conversations. We wondered to what degree the participants were making measurable progress in language learning or deepening their cultural awareness and whether the M O O experience would enhance retention of what was learned. It became apparent that any guidance would have to be subtle and would have to take place outside the
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Fortunately, the initial list of possible projects was well crafted and provided guidelines for conversation without unnecessarily forcing a given strand of conversation. However, during the movement from conversation to “project,” a summary or set of conclusions drawn from the weekly discussions proved difficult. Even in their native language, many students had difficulty organizing the often random observations and comments of a conversation into a coherent and logical whole. In the second language, those difficulties were magnified many times over primarily because of the lack of appropriate vocabulary. In this context the logs of each session took on added significance.

Another major goal of the project was the use of the MOO itself as a potentially effective instrument for language learning. Here, too, there were both measurable successes and unforeseen surprises. Of greatest importance, participants reported (and evinced) a marked increase in interest and, hence, motivation as a result of having a weekly appointment with their counterpart across the Atlantic. Almost all of the participants were excited by the prospect of becoming acquainted with the genuine “expert” in the everyday usage of the language they were studying. The opportunity for relatively spontaneous, real-time conversation with a native informant in a MOO had undeniable appeal because it was considerably cheaper than a phone call and more immediate than mail, even E-mail.

Arguably, freewheeling conversation in a chat room would accomplish much the same end. However, the structured universe of the MOO had a number of advantages. Among other things, the ability to construct one’s own space or room added an important dimension to discourse in the MOO. The availability of a comprehensive on-line help file with examples on the use of the majority of day-to-day MOO commands also proved to be an asset. A preset description of oneself, which individuals could work on and polish in advance, offered a ready starting point in the early awkward stages of getting to know someone. “Emoting” and “building” gave the participants the opportunity to express their own character and individuality. Even the basic textual nature of the MOO may have been an advantage in many respects. Although most participants missed “seeing” their partners and found themselves imagining what a teammate might look like, the textual format of the MOO forced emphasis on the words and phrases and highlighted the difference between the spoken word and the written word. For advanced students of language (who also need to be decent typists), MOOs can provide a ready venue for conversation by the keyboard. For those less advanced in their study of a language, the opportunity to construct a sentence or two at the keyboard and recheck the text before sending it out for public consumption is a welcome feature.

The surprises lay in the realm of technology and computer expertise.
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The degree to which the minor technical complexities of the MOO and the client software used in the project proved more perplexing to the technically inexperienced than one might have imagined. The problems caused by technical complexities meant that several individuals never became particularly adept at moving within the MOO. Those individuals quite often also had less time in conversation with their teammate(s) because they required more time to log in and reach the proper location for each session.

The primary emphasis of the project on team work and learner autonomy downplayed some of the classroom amenities offered by the MOO. There was little occasion to use the MOO versions of classroom space, chalkboard, overhead projector, or tape recorders. However, limited experience with a few of those items seemed to indicate that those with limited computer experience would have difficulty adjusting to instruction in cyberspace.

In all, the project seems to have been an overwhelming success. The MOO is not necessarily the answer to all pedagogical needs, but then no technology, whether computer or otherwise, has been shown to be consistently superior in enhancing student learning. More recent language learning pedagogy has, in fact, emphasized the process of learning and the individuality of various learning styles. From that vantage point, the unmistakable success of the independent learning that took place in the project indicates that the MOO is a powerful tool in the arsenal of technological weapons to aid learning.

Oxford (1990) has reminded us that “... positive emotions and attitudes can make language learning far more effective and enjoyable” and even suggested that “... the combined attitude/motivation factor strongly influences whether the learner loses or maintains language skills after language training is over.” Certainly the computer and the “playful” aspects of participation in a MOO promise to attract and motivate many of today’s students. It remains for the skillful instructor to structure the syllabus and the classroom experience in such a way as to assure that directed learning takes place.
APPENDIX A

Sample MOO Log

Two extracts from the logs of a single session are included here to provide the reader with a sense of how students used the MOO to collaborate with their partners.

The persons appearing as “you” are German students, while “Rob” and “John” are their American partners. Both samples appear “as is,” that is, they have not been edited except for the substitution of the actual name by a pseudonym. Spelling errors and other idiosyncrasies have been preserved.

We would point out that since this article focuses on language learning, we have selected passages in which students interact with each other rather than with the medium. As the excerpts illustrate, students used a broad variety of strategies to tap the partner's linguistic and cultural knowledge, to negotiate meaning, to clarify the meaning of unknown items, or to help the partner express something in his or her target language. The logs reveal instances of code switching, self- and other correction, and evidence of many other fascinating aspects of language learning.

The first extract comes from the fifth session and shows how, some ten minutes after the beginning of the session, two students began to discuss environmental protection in their respective home countries. The second passage, which also comes from the fifth session, illustrates how students discussed which language they would use for the first part of their meeting. Readers should take note of the students’ use of humor and the relaxed and freewheeling nature of the conversation.

Session 5

You say, “Umwelt: Sollen wir besprechen, was wir verbessern können?”
Rob says, “Ja das ist gut”
You say, “Wie wäre es mit weniger Verpackung?”
Rob says, “Verpackung?”
You say, “Verpackung == packaging”
You say, “Rob, benutzt ihr in Amerika Mehrwegflaschen?”
Rob says, “Mehrwegflaschen?”
You say, “Bottles used more than one time”
Rob says, “Ich mache das, aber ich glaube das meisten Amerikanischer machen das nicht”
You say, “Einwegflaschen==Bottles used one time and than goes to waste”
You say, “Bekommt man leicht Mehrwegflaschen? Ist das teuer?”
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Rob says, “Ich glaube das es nicht teurer ist”
You say, “In Deutschland muss man Pfand zahlen, das man zurueckbekommt.”
Rob says, “Pfand? ist das "per pound" in Amerika?”
You say, “I think is is deposit”
Rob says, “Wie heisst “recycle” auf Deutsch”
You say, “Wir sagen auch recycle oder wiederverwenden.”
Rob says, “Ok. Ist es popular in Duetschland?”
You say, “Ja wir sind ganz verueckt danach.”
Rob says, “Es war nicht so popular hier, aber es hat sehr gross bekommen”
Rob says, “Das ist sehr gut. Was ist “Bio-Muell?”
You say, “Do you understand bio-waste?”
Rob says, “Nein”
You say, “Bio-Muell == Pflanzenreste, Fleischreste, Gemuesereste, usw.”
Rob says, “Ich habe einer fuer Papier, einer fuer Bottles, und einer fuer den Rest”

Session 5a

You say, “I know what you mean. What do you think of the suggestion to change the language after half the time?”
John says, “or we could try just english.”
John says, “or you do english and I do german”’
You say, “What would you prefer today?”
John says, “with an occasional english word in (—) when I don’t know the german word”’
John says, “we did the last two in 95% german, so its your decision”’
John says, “you have to stop spoiling me”’
You say, “What is more effective?”
John says, “my english”’
You say, “I won’t spoil you. My German is quite good, I promise. You have nearly a perfect teacher...”
John says, “echt cool”’
John says, “reread our last two conversations, and noticed you use echt cool often”’
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John says, “I reread our last two conversations, and noticed you use echt cool often”
John says, “I also noticed how well you translate from German to English”
You say, “Please let’s go on in English for a while, I feel like talking English at the moment. Let’s switch over to German in half an hour?”
John says, “sounds good to me”
You say, “Fine. “
John says, “so...where were we?”
John says, “um...weather?...no, we did that...um...”
John says, “Smoking. that’s it”

APPENDIX B

Dear Participant,

Below you will find a few questions concerning yourself, your experience with the MOO and other Internet applications, and other aspects related to this project. All of them are designed to help us assess and evaluate our MOO project, so please take a little time to answer them carefully and precisely.

Before you start filling in the requested information (i.e., tick one of the options or enter the respective data), please take a moment to read the whole questionnaire through. Note that some questions allow for more than one answer while others (e.g., yes/no questions) require only a single answer. To tick an option, please go to the line behind the option and enter an “x” like this: ___x____. When you are asked for additional information, you can simply enter your comments in the blank space after the question.

Finally, some questions contain text in asterisks (*). Asterisks highlight the important part of a question that might at first glance look like the previous one.

Be spontaneous and honest and answer all questions. Also, please return the completed questionnaire to us as soon as possible! We need questionnaires from everyone if we are going to assess the outcome of the project properly.

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

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Questionnaire:

0) Please enter your name:
_______________________________

1) How old are you?
_________

2) How long have you been learning German?
Since__________ (month/year) for a total of ____ years

3) Where and how did you learn it?
a) in elementary or highschool for ______ years,
b) in college for ______ years,
c) in evening classes for______ years,
d) in courses or through spending time abroad ______
   (if so, please specify when, where, and how long),
   _______________________________________

e) through self-study (if so, how and with which materials?)
   ________________________________

f) other (please specify) ______

4) Were you familiar with the MOO or any other electronic media (e-mail, computer conferencing, bulletin boards, audio applications, etc.) before this project? If so, please specify which medium/media you used and for how long.

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

5) Please describe - in a few sentences - what were your first impressions of the MOO.
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

6) How many sessions did you need to feel “at home” in the MOO?
   About_____ sessions
7) In your own words, what are the main differences/similarities between communicating in a real classroom and via the MOO?

Differences:

Similarities:

8) Please describe your tandem partner(s) in one or two sentences (each):

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

9) When you talked to your partner(s) in the MOO, did you have a visual representation of him/her in your mind?

a) yes ______  
b) no ______

10) Did you actually miss *hearing* your partner? (Either way, please give reasons)

   a) yes ______  
   b) no ______

11) Did you actually miss *seeing* your partner? (Either way, please give reasons)

   a) yes ______  
   b) no ______

12) Did you read out loud what *you were saying* to your partner(s)?

   a) always ______  
   b) often ______  
   c) seldom ______  
   d) never ______
13) Did you read out loud what *your partner(s) answered* you?
   a) always ______
   b) often ______
   c) seldom ______
   d) never ______

14) What did you do when it was very crowded in a room?
   a) I used the “to”-option ______
   b) I used my partner’s name ______
   c) I just entered my message ______
   d) none of the above, but ______

15) How often did you use the “emote”-function to support what you were saying with the description of *facial expressions or gestures*?
   a) always ______
   b) often ______
   c) seldom ______
   d) never ______

16) How often did you use the “emote”-function to convey *real-life* information about yourself, e.g., “xyz is really happy now” or “xyz is pretty tired today”?
   a) always ______
   b) often ______
   c) seldom ______
   d) never ______

17) Do you intend to *keep in touch* with your partner after the end of this project?
   a) yes, via the MOO ______
   b) yes, via e-mail ______
   c) yes, via paper mail ______
   d) yes, via other means (please specify)
       ________________________________
   e) no, I won’t ______
   f) I don’t know ______
18) Do you intend to continue to *learn in tandem* with your partner?  
   a) yes, via the M O O ______
   b) yes, via e-mail ______
   c) yes, via paper mail ______
   d) yes, via other means (please specify) ____________________________________________
   e) no, I won’t ______
   f) I don’t know ______

19) Would you recommend language learning in tandem in the M O O to other learners?
   a) yes, by all means ______
   b) yes, more or less ______
   c) no, I don’t think so ______
   d) no, not at all ______
   e) I don’t know ______

20) Would you like to have had more opportunities to communicate with your partner?
   a) yes ______
   b) no ______

21) If you ticked yes in question 20, what in particular did you miss?
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________

22) Did you get in touch with your partner(s) by other means than via the M O O?
   a) yes, ___ times via e-mail
   b) yes, ___ times via paper mail
   c) yes, ___ times via the telephone
   d) no ___
   (If you answered a) or b), please make copies of those texts available to us.)

23) How do you rate the effectiveness of your tandem(s), i.e., what did you most benefit from and what did your partner not do that you might have wished for?
   a) I particularly liked that ...
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
24) Do you think that it was good to log the conversations?
   a) yes  ______
   b) no   ______

25) If you ticked a) in question 24), how did you profit from the logs?
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

26) Did you regularly study your logs after a session?
   a) yes  ______
   b) no   ______

27) How useful was the initial list of projects for your work?
   a) very useful       ______
   b) pretty useful     ______
   c) of little use     ______
   d) useless           ______

28) How often did you re-read what you said in the MOO before you sent
    it?
   a) always           ______
   b) often            ______
   c) seldom           ______
   b) never            ______

29) How easy was it for you to understand your partner when he/she used
    his/her mother tongue?
   a) very easy         ______
   b) pretty easy       ______
   c) pretty difficult  ______
   d) very difficult    ______

30) Did it become easier for you in the course of the project to understand
    your partner?
   a) yes    ______
   b) no     ______
31) Was it difficult for you to express what you wanted to say in the foreign language?
   a) always ______
   b) often ______
   c) seldom ______
   b) never ______

32) What did you do when you could *not* express what you wanted to say in the foreign language?
   a) I tried to paraphrase what I wanted to say ______
   b) I used the English word but said the rest in German ______
   c) I said the whole sentence in my mother tongue ______
   d) I asked my partner to translate the word for me ______
   e) I asked my partner to translate the sentence for me ______
   f) other (please specify) _________________________________

33) What did you do when you did not understand your partner?
   a) I asked him/her to repeat the utterance ______
   b) I asked him/her to paraphrase what he/she said ______
   c) I asked him/her to translate what he/she said ______
   d) I tried to guess what he/she meant ______
   e) I ignored the utterance ______
   f) I changed the subject ______
   g) other (please specify) ______

34) What do you think about the corrections your partner(s) suggested?
   They were ...
   a) very helpful ______
   b) pretty helpful ______
   c) rather useless ______
   d) completely useless ______
   e) I don't know ______

35) No matter which answer you chose in question 34), please give reasons as to why you did or did not benefit from your partner's corrections:

   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
36) Did you simplify your language because you expected that your partner would not understand you otherwise?
   a) yes, I used simple structures
   b) yes, I used more general vocabulary
   c) yes, I avoided some idioms or phrases
   d) no, I did not modify my language

37) Did you consciously play with your *native* language?
   (Either way, please explain how, why, and when)
   a) yes
   b) no

38) Did you consciously play with your *target* language?
   (Either way, please explain how, why, and when)
   a) yes
   b) no

39) Do you think that language learning in tandem in the MOO should be supported by off-line instruction from your teacher?
   (Either way, please give reasons)
   a) yes
   b) no

40) What do you think about the “text-only” nature of the MOO, i.e., was it easy to find your way around in the MOO?
   a) yes
   b) no

41) If you had the chance to improve the MOO with regard to its layout or to supplement it with additional tools, what would you add or alter?
   a) the MOO is fine as it is
   b) I would make the following modifications:


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42) From what you’ve learned about MOOing during the project, is there any advice you would like to give other users in order to prepare them for the “MOO-experience”? Please state a few guidelines that you figured out for yourself during the project:

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

43) Are there any additional comments you would like to make?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Thank you. Please don’t forget to return this questionnaire to us as soon as you have filled it in!

NOTES

1QUAKE is a computer simulation particularly popular among some segments of the college-age population. Although not directly pertinent here, the literature on the creation and effect of virtual realities, particularly within the community of those who play QUAKE regularly, is relatively extensive.

2For a complete “history” of the MOO, see, for example, Curtis (1998).


4Without the client, users would be forced to deal with the rather primitive exchange of data which simple telneting provides. The most disarming feature of simple telneting is that typed input does not appear on the screen until the text is actually sent by pressing the enter key. Users must, therefore, enter data blindly, not knowing whether there are any typographical errors or other mistakes until the message is actually sent. For anyone but an expert typist, the experience is frustrating at best. A client adds functionality which would normally be lacking if one were simply telneting. We chose Pueblo, a PC client which is available at http://www.chaco.com; a good Macintosh client would be MacMOOse, available at http://www.cc.gatech.edu/fac/Amy.Bruckman/MacMOOOSE/.

5Cubicles had been constructed adjacent to the larger classroom. Conversations in any given room are public; anyone else in that room can “hear” what is said unless one uses the “whisper” command. When a number of people convene in the same room and strike up a conversation, the result is often a cacophony of text messages which can be as disconcerting as trying to hold a private conversation in a noisy auditorium. The cubicles were an attempt to accommodate the need for each partner team to continue its conversation in a more intimate context.

6In the present project each participant was paired at least twice on a one-to-one basis so that each individual had two partners. No one was obliged to work exclu-
sively with a given partner, but the availability of two partners ensured that there was always someone available should one partner be unable to make the weekly meeting.

7For example, the American group was part of a class and therefore had to be evaluated on their performance. The German group was not being graded.

8But see, for example, Auer (1998) and Milroy (1995), two of a number of anthologies on the current state of this field.

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AUTHORS’ BIODATA

Randall Donaldson has taught German language and literature at Loyola College in Baltimore, Maryland, for the last 26 years. He earned his doctorate at the Johns Hopkins University and wrote a dissertation on Robert Reitzel, a German-American of the latter part of the last century, but spends most of his classroom time teaching German language at the beginning and intermediate levels. For the last 15 years he has also been active in training and consulting on software applications and development. His interests come together in the use of the computer to augment and enhance language learning. He has developed HyperCard applications for teaching reading to intermediate and advanced students and published with colleagues on several related issues.
Markus Kötter is a doctoral candidate at the University of Münster, Germany. Inspired by his 1996 thesis about the place of E-Mail communication on the continuum of spoken and written discourse, he began to take a systematic interest in the potential of the new media for language learning. Thus, in 1997, he joined various MOOs and began to develop a project for intermediate language learners which combines the benefits of off-line E-Mail-based tandem learning with the advantages of on-line communication in a text-based virtual community of native speakers of the target language. He recently joined the British Open University's Centre for Modern Languages where he continues working on his Ph.D. paper about potential of the MOO as a language learning environment.

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