Learning the Subjunctive in German: With or Without Technology?

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a study carried out with intermediate learners of German and native speakers of German who participated in an online exchange. During the exchange, participants had to practice complex grammatical forms such as the subjunctive II. One group of students was allowed to utilize an online toolbar that identified subjunctive II forms written by native speakers in an online forum and provided activities for the students to practice those forms. The second group did not use the toolbar. The results showed that, with time, participants of the group working with the toolbar used more of the most difficult subjunctive II forms (irregular verbs) and more of those forms correctly than the group who did not have access to the toolbar.

1   Introduction

Acquiring complex grammatical forms can be a challenge for foreign language students. An interesting question is if native speakers can assist learners in that process. Online exchanges have been used since the 1990s starting with so called tandem projects (Little, 2001) and provide an excellent opportunity for students to learn from speakers of the target language (Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2003; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). However, as Dooly (2001) highlighted, one has to be careful when setting up such an exchange. In particular, finding participants with matching levels of proficiency, setting clear instructions in regard to tasks, monitoring the use of vocabulary and, most of all, providing feedback at all times are key factors that need careful consideration. Furthermore, Stockwell (2003) pointed out that a successful interaction of participants might depend on topic choice as well as topic organization in terms of threads.

Interestingly, most studies carried out on online exchanges deal with cultural aspects, vocabulary or colloquialisms. It seems that the opportunity to improve grammar is often avoided. The few studies dealing with grammar, however, have shown that native speakers can in fact assist learners. For example, Belz (2004) investigated the use of da-compounds, and Belz and Vyatkina (2005) the use of modal particles in German. These two studies tracked the usage of da-compounds and modal particles respectively over the duration of an exchange between students of German at an American university and students of English at a German university. They reported that, over time, students of German at the American university started using those compounds and modal particles correctly in their writing.

The success depends very much on the design of the tasks (Blake, 2008; Brandl, 2012). The design, in turn, depends on the technological tool that is used. In order to provide learners with more options in addition to the forums typically used in online exchanges, an online toolbar was developed that can be easily integrated into any forum discussion. The toolbar, developed at the University of Tübingen and named VIEW (Visual Input Enhancement Web), is available as freeware/open source to anyone who wants to use it.[1]

2   Context

A question for every language learner as well as teacher is how to become fluent in another language, speak that language with accuracy, and be able to use complex language forms. These three criteria – fluency, accuracy, complexity – were first proposed by Skehan and Foster (1997) and subsequently developed further (Skehan & Foster, 2012). In particular, the third component – complexity – is difficult to achieve, as most grammatical rules have exceptions that can only be mastered by encountering a particular grammatical form in many contexts. Therefore, a common approach is to provide the learner with as much input from authentic sources as possible. However, input alone is not sufficient to acquire a foreign language (Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Long, 1996). Rather, to overcome incomplete or incorrect knowledge of grammatical forms, it is beneficial to draw students' attention to these forms as they arise incidentally in communication and texts (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). It has been long argued that software in the form of input enhancement (Sharwood-Smith, 1993), which highlights language categories and grammatical forms, can assist in that process. Therefore, a challenge for any software development is to allow the learner to access rich authentic contexts in order to attract and keep the learner's interest while at the same time providing a variety of task types to select from.

Enabling the learner to choose the material he or she is working on is part of the concept of intrinsic motivation which has been identified as playing a key role in language learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002). Two key factors of that concept are autonomy and self-determination – that is, if the educational environment provides rich sources of stimulation where students can follow their natural curiosity, their motivation is likely to flourish (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 245). In order to keep the learner's interest, tasks need to find a balance between ones that are manageable in order to avoid frustration, but are difficult enough for the learner to use all of his or her resources to find the correct answer. In that situation, the learner needs to be given immediate feedback to guide him or her towards the learning goal.

The design of the toolbar VIEW supports the concept of intrinsic motivation. Learners interfacing with the toolbar can choose any HTML text. The toolbar analyzes the chosen text according to the grammatical feature selected. For the study presented here, that was the subjunctive II. First, the toolbar can be used to highlight the grammatical forms. Then, it provides learners with three different task types: identify the form (by clicking on words); multiple choice (the form is omitted but four options are given); and fill-in-the-blank (the form is omitted and needs to be typed in). For each task, learners receive direct feedback: the form is highlighted green (if correct) or red (if incorrect). Ideally, learners would also receive indirect feedback by providing them with clues to what the correct answer might be (Lyster & Saito, 2010; Mackey, 2012; Nassaji & Fotos, 2010). However, in this version of the toolbar, that could not be included.

The present study was designed to test the functionality of the toolbar in an online exchange setting. The research question was if learners improve using a complex grammatical form (the subjunctive II in German) correctly when using a technology (a toolbar) that supports intrinsic motivation and provides a variety of tasks and feedback to analyze the writings of native speakers in an online forum.

3   Methodology

In an online exchange, the most common forms of communication are forums and chats. It is important to distinguish between the two. While chat is a synchronous tool enabling a mix of writ-

ten and spoken speech to be produced by participants, a forum is an asynchronous tool providing opportunities to write. According to Sotillo (2000), a forum gives participants time to reflect on what to write, therefore promoting sentences with greater syntactic complexity. Therefore, for the study presented here, the forum was chosen as the means of communication in the exchange.

The study was carried out by tracking the learner's progress during the exchange along with testing learning gains in a pre/post-test format. Before that study, a pilot had been carried out testing the accuracy of the toolbar and its user-friendliness.

3.1 Pilot

The pilot consisted of two experiments carried out with students enrolled at a West Coast University in North America learning German at the intermediate level. It was carried out one year before the study presented here. So participants of the pilot had moved on to advanced German in order to avoid any student participating in the study more than once.

In the first experiment, twelve participants surfed the Internet in three 45-minute sessions selecting any authentic HTM or HTML text they liked. There was no control over what texts learners would select on their own and what verbs those texts contained. A tracking function of the toolbar showed what texts participants had chosen and how many verbs they had identified and practiced in the subjunctive II. A pre-/post-test showed that participants improved the use of the subjunctive II ever so slightly (for a description of the pre-/post-test, see Section 3.4 below; the same pre-/post-test was used for the pilot as well as the main study). A possible explanation was that there was simply not enough time to practice with the toolbar. The tracking function showed that students spent much time looking for texts that actually contained subjunctive II forms. Although the subjunctive II is used in German and considered a complex form, it does not occur frequently in standard texts. Therefore, a second experiment was designed where students worked with texts that had been pre-screened by the researcher to ensure they contained enough subjunctive II forms to work with. The participants could then choose which of those texts they wanted to work with. Again, participants improved the use of the subjunctive II ever so slightly. It was decided for the main study to double the time practicing with the toolbar to six 45-minute sessions.

Both experiments showed that the toolbar's accuracy of identifying subjunctive II forms was around 80%. This has to do with the linguistic fact that in German some subjunctive II forms are identical to the simple past tense forms and it is only possible to tell them apart when looking at the context. Both experiments showed that the tasks types of the toolbar all worked well, after it was moved to a different server. In a short questionnaire, participants indicated that they enjoyed utilizing this tool.

3.2 Participants

Participants were undergraduate students ranging from age 18 to 26 with an average age of 20.6. They were selected to participate in the study, because they were enrolled in German 201 "Intermediate German" at a West Coast University in North America.

The study was approved by the university's ethics committee. It took place during two weeks of the semester under the supervision of a research assistant. Initially, all nineteen students of the class participated in the study and were divided into a group of ten and a group of nine. However, two students missed one of the three sessions of the first part of the study and one student missed one of the three sessions of the second part. That left eight students in both groups who participated in the study from start to finish. One group used the toolbar during the exchange with native speakers in German, the other one did not use the toolbar during the exchange. On the German side, a total of sixteen students participated in the exchange.

3.3 Subject matter

In intermediate German, one of the challenges for learners is to master the subjunctive, particularly, the subjunctive II (also called the past tense subjunctive). Subjunctive II is a complex part of speech in German and through its use, a learner demonstrates a high level of proficiency (Hentschel & Weydt, 2003). By correctly using the subjunctive, both grammatical and lexical complexities are displayed. The grammatical rules for the subjunctive are relatively simple. They are based on the simple past tense forms of verbs. Some verbs have regular forms and some verbs have irregular forms. These forms are assigned to the verb arbitrarily. Thus, the simple past tense and, consequently, the subjunctive forms can be termed exemplar based (Ellis, 2005; Skehan, 1998), requiring much practice as well as corrective feedback.

The toolbar has four functions and we used three of them for the experiment: 1) to highlight all subjunctive II forms; 2) to identify a subjunctive form by clicking on any word; and 3), to type in the subjunctive form after the toolbar has turned the text into a fill-in-the-blank activity.

3.4   Pre-/post-tests

The study started with a 20-minute pre-test, followed by a 25-minute review of the subjunctive II. The rules of the subjunctive had been learned in the week before the study started.

In order to know the correct subjunctive II form, a learner has to know how the simple past tense of the verb in question is formed. Although students in intermediate German should know this, there is the possibility that a learner makes an error in the subjunctive II that is not grammar related (knowing how to form the subjunctive II), but word related (not knowing a particular simple past tense form). However, the study was designed in a way that the likelihood of that type of error occurring was the same for participants of each group. For more information, see Section 3.6 on Study Design below.

In general, there are two verb categories in the subjunctive II. The first category consists of the following auxiliary and modal verbs: haben [to have], sein [to be], sollen [should], wollen [want], können [could], dürfen [allowed to], müssen [have to], mögen [want to] as well as the construction of würden [would] plus infinitive. The second category consists of regular and irregular forms of main verbs. For practical purposes, we labeled the first category 'auxiliary/modal verbs' and the second category 'regular/irregular verbs.'

The 'auxiliary/modal verbs' were used to verify the methodology of the study. These verbs (haben [to have]; sein [to be]/six modal verbs/würde [would] plus infinitive) have a limited number of forms. They can be memorized, which is why the methodology used acquiring those should not matter as much. The results should show no differences between the two groups of participants, each using a different method practicing the subjunctive II. The 'regular/irregular verbs' are frequent in number and cannot all be memorized. These are the ones where the methodology should matter, because they can only be used correctly, if a learner understands how the subjunctive II is formed.

The pre-/post-tests in each experiment tested comprehension, controlled production, as well as free production. In the first section of the test, a short passage, participants had to identify four 'auxiliary/modal verbs' and four 'regular/irregular verbs' by underlining all subjunctive II forms. In the passage given in the post-test, participants also had to underline all subjunctive II forms. The content of the passage was different than the one of the pre-test, but the type and number of verbs tested were the same. Four verbs functioned as a control (these were identical to the ones used in the pre-test) and four verbs were new (one modal verbs, one regular and two irregular verbs). In the second section of the test, participants had to transform twelve sentences into the subjunctive II in the pre-test as well as in the post-test (four with 'auxiliary and modal verbs,' four with 'regular verbs,' four with 'irregular verbs'). As in the first section, four controls were used. In the post-test, two of the 'auxiliary and modal verbs' tested were new as well as three of the 'regular' and three of the 'irregular verbs.' In the third section of the test, participants were given a dif-

ferent topic to write about in the pre-test compared to the post-test and told to use at least one auxiliary, one modal, one regular and one irregular verb in the subjunctive II.

Results of the pre-test were used to form the two groups for the experiment. The two groups were balanced: in each group were students who had high, medium or low scores in the pre-test. Pre- and post-tests were carried out in the following way. Participants were given the first section of the test and had five minutes to complete it. The tests were collected by the research assistant. Immediately after, participants were given the second section of the test and had ten minutes to complete it. Again, the tests were collected and immediately after the participants were given the third section of the test. For that section, participants had five minutes for a total test time of 20 minutes. The rationale for collecting the different sections of the test was to avoid any copying effects, that is, participants using information from one section of the test to do another section.

3.5   Questionnaire

Once the post-test was carried out, it was followed by a short questionnaire to get feedback from participants in regard to the functionality of the toolbar, any advantages and disadvantages they discovered from using it, any problems that occurred, and the general experience. The results are reported in Section 4 below.

3.6   Study design

The study consisted of two parts. Each part consisted of three sessions that were completed in one week for a total length of two weeks for the study. The topic of the first part was the short film *Der Schwarzfahrer* [*Black Rider,* 1993] portraying a black immigrant in Berlin who, while riding the streetcar, is verbally abused by an elderly woman. The topic of the second part dealt with stereotypes about Turkish culture: students watched a short video clip showing a native speaker of German giving a German lesson to students of Turkish heritage who speak German perfectly.

Students participated in an online exchange with native speakers using the learning platform Moodle. As part of the exchange, students had to discuss three questions in the forum of Moodle. For each question, they were given some time in the lab to start the discussion online and were then asked to continue the discussion as part of their homework assignment. As students had to wait for the responses of the native speakers with a time difference of nine hours, they were told to log on to Moodle several times. They were told to reply to at least five other students and write between 50 and 100 words per message. Questions used the subjunctive to encourage students to use the subjunctive as well, for example: "Stell dir vor, du wärst der Ausländer in der Straßenbahn. Was hättest du gemacht?" [Imagine you were the foreigner riding the streetcar. What would you have done?] or "Wir denken, dass Menschen, die anders aussehen, nicht unsere Sprache sprechen können. Wie könnte man das ändern?" [We think that people who look different are not able to speak our language properly. How could we change that?].

Students were divided into two groups. The first one used the toolbar to analyze the messages by the native speakers in regard to the subjunctive II, that is, to identify and practice the subjunctive using the three functions of highlight, identify and fill-in-the-blanks. The second group did not use the toolbar. The students that used the toolbar in the first part of the experiment kept using the toolbar and the ones who did not continued the exchange without the toolbar. The rationale was that students needed as much time as possible with the toolbar to have any learning effect based on the pilot study that had revealed that practice sessions in those experiments had been too short.

4   Results

In this section, the results of the pre-/post-test are reported first. Second, results of an analysis that was carried out determining how many subjunctive forms were used (and how many of those correctly) during the exchange, are presented. Third, excerpts from the questionnaire that students filled out after the experiment are given.

The analysis distinguished between the 'auxiliary/modal verbs' and the 'regular/irregular verbs.' The number of participants in each group was eight. That number was too small for inferential statistics. The data presented here is based on descriptive statistics.

All in all, students were very much engaged in the discussions. In part one, discussing the first topic, the sixteen students at the West Coast University exchanged 126 messages in 29 discussions with the sixteen native speakers at the Gymnasium Kiel in Germany. The longest message written by a North American participant was 184 words long, by a German participant 181 words. The longest thread of any discussion had 14 messages, the shortest 3. The North American students using the toolbar spent on average 57 minutes per session in the Moodle forum. In summary, the exchange was very well balanced with students on both sides of the Atlantic being engaged in the topic and participants in North America having the opportunity to see how native speakers their own age use the subjunctive II.

The same can be said for part two in which students discussed the second topic. The exchange was shorter. Students participated in 16 discussions, sending 90 messages back and forth, the longest message by a North American student being 154 words long, the shortest 12 words, and by a German student 188 words, the shortest 13 words. The longest thread had 9 messages and the shortest 3. The North American students using the toolbar spent on average 49 minutes per session in the Moodle forum.

The pre/post-test tested comprehension, controlled production as well as free production. For comprehension, four 'auxiliary/modal verbs' and four 'regular/irregular verbs' were tested. For controlled production, four 'auxiliary/modal verbs', four 'regular verbs' and four 'irregular verbs' were tested. For free production, participants were asked to write four sentences using one auxiliary, one modal, one regular and one irregular verb. This was the same task for the post-tests, although the topic of the post-test was different in order to avoid repetition.

The pre/post-test for the 'auxiliary/modal verbs' (see Table 1) showed that participants of both groups identified almost all of the subjunctive II forms in the pre-test as well as the post-test. In regard to the output (controlled and free production), there was little difference between the two groups. Both groups used four more subjunctive II forms correctly when transforming sentences in the post-test, but did not improve in the free production. These results were to be expected, as these forms can be memorized and do not require much practice.

Table 1. Auxiliary/modal verbs pre-/post-test

	Comprehension		Controlled Production		Free Production	
	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post
Toolbar	30/32	31/32	20/32	24/32	22/32	22/32
Non-toolbar	30/32	29/32	19/32	23/32	20/32	20/32

Note: These verbs are: haben/sein/6 modals/würde + inf.
The number of participants was eight per group. For example, 30/32 indicates that participants identified (comprehension) or used (production) 30 out of 32 possibilities (four verbs multiplied by eight participants) correctly.

The pre/post-test for the 'regular/irregular verbs' (see Table 2) distinguished between regular and irregular main verbs. The only noticeable difference between the two groups was in the controlled production part of the tests, where participants had to transform sentences using the subjunctive II form of a verb given in present tense. The toolbar group used four more regular verbs correctly in the post-tests and one irregular verb less, while the group not using the toolbar had the exact same score in the pre/post-test.

Table 2. Regular / irregular verbs pre-/post-test

	Comprehension		Controlled Production		Free Production	
	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post
Toolbar	20/32	24/32				
reg	(7/16)	(9/16)	17/32	21/32	4/8	4/8
irreg	(13/16)	(15/16)	15/32	14/32	5/8	6/8
Non-toolbar	20/32	25/32				
reg	(8/16)	(10/16)	18/32	18/32	4/8	4/8
irreg	(12/16)	(15/16)	15/32	15/32	4/8	4/8

Note: These are regular and irregular main verbs.
The number of participants was eight per group. For example, 20/32 indicates that participants identified (comprehension) or used (controlled production) 20 out of 32 possibilities (four verbs multiplied by eight participants) correctly. For free production, each participant was asked to use one regular and one irregular verb so the score is out of 8.

In order to find out if the participants using the toolbar had indeed benefitted to some degree, a second analysis was carried out to see how well the students identified and practiced the subjunctive II forms the native speakers used in the dialogues by using the identify, highlight and fill-in-the-blank function of the toolbar. The analysis looked at each message determining every subjunctive II form that had been used by a participant and if it had been used correctly. This analysis was done by hand as the tracking function of the toolbar was only 80% accurate, as the pilot study had revealed. It was done for both, the toolbar group as well as the group not using the toolbar (relying on their own knowledge of the subjunctive II to see how the native speakers used this grammatical form).

Table 3. Toolbar vs non-toolbar part one of the experiment (Dialogue 1)

	Total	Aux / Modal	Regular	Irregular
Toolbar	100/123	70/89	10/12	20/22
Non-toolbar	110/123	88/98	10/11	12/14

Note: The first number refers to the correct use of the subjunctive II, the second number to the total use of all subjunctive II forms including incorrect uses. For example, 100/123 indicates that the toolbar group used the subjunctive II forms 123 times in all of the messages in part one and 100 times out of those 123 times were used correctly.

Table 3 shows that the group not using the toolbar actually used more subjunctive II forms correctly than the toolbar group. However, these were the forms of the 'auxiliary/modal verbs' that could be memorized. The verbs requiring practice, in particular the irregular verbs, which is what VIEW had been designed for, were used more by the toolbar group and almost all of them correctly (20 out 22 used correctly vs. 12 out 14 for the non-toolbar group). The trend continued in the dialogue of the second part of the study (see Table 4), where the toolbar group used irregular verbs 13 times in total and 11 times of the 13 correctly, whereas the group not using the toolbar only used them 6 times and only half of those were correct.

Table 4. Toolbar vs Non-toolbar part two of the experiment (Dialogue 2)

	Total	Aux / Modal	Regular	Irregular
Toolbar	32/29	20/25	1/1	11/13
Non-toolbar	20/25	12/14	5/5	3/6

Note: The first number refers to the correct use of the subjunctive II, and the second number to the total use of all subjunctive II forms including incorrect uses.

In addition, the toolbar group used more 'auxiliary/modal verbs' and more subjunctive II forms overall, although the ratio of correct to incorrect use was similar to the group not using the toolbar. It is an indication that, when using the toolbar, a participant does need time to practice in order to benefit from the toolbar's functions. Furthermore, it needs to be pointed out that, compared to part one, the overall use of subjunctive forms was substantially lower in part two of the experiment.

The short questionnaire at the end of the study asked the eight participants what they thought the advantages/disadvantages using the toolbar were, about any problems that occurred, as well as their general experience using the toolbar. In general, students agreed that the online toolbar helped them identify the subjunctive II, but also said that they would not want to exclusively rely on the toolbar to study German. Sample responses were:

> It was great practice but quite technical. (Participant 1)

> I found it useful and it would be great to have other grammatical features added as well in addition to Konjunktiv II. (Participant 2)

> Good as an interactive practice tool but would not rely on it as primary learning/study tool. (Participant 3)

> I found the toolbar easy to use. (Participant 4)

> VIEW was very cool, in a unique way. While it worked it helped to highlight and identify specific portions of German, how and when to use it, it was helpful. (Participant 5)

> I liked the colour coding. I found it helpful to identify the Konjunktiv in sentences. (Participant 6)

> I found VIEW to be a neat function that really drew out the grammar we were supposed to focus on. I feel that translated into my writing however to what extent I am not sure. (Participant 7)

> I found it help keep my attention more. (Participant 8)

5   Discussion

The present study was designed to test the functionality of a toolbar while providing a variety of tasks and feedback to the learner in an online exchange setting. The research question was if learners improve using a complex grammatical form (the subjunctive II in German) correctly when utilizing technology (a toolbar) to analyze the writings of native speakers in an online forum. Results showed that learners using the toolbar improved the use of the most difficult forms of the subjunctive II – irregular verbs – to some degree when engaging in a dialogue with native speakers. Interestingly, they did not improve on the post-test, indicating that the benefit might be short-lived. It would be interesting to find out what happens if learners are given more time to practice with the toolbar, for example, for four weeks instead of two. They had been given two weeks for this study, based on the pilot project where it had been found that learners required more time to practice, but perhaps they require even more time than that. Interestingly, participants exchanged fewer messages in the second part of the experiment. It seems difficult to keep students' attention. The concept of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002) was part of the design of the toolbar. Yet, the number of times participants used they subjunctive II in the second dialogue dropped substantially in relation to the overall number of messages written. This begs the question how the design

could be changed, in particular as participants indicated in the questionnaire that they were happy with the toolbar as it was.

A general question often asked is about the sustainability of using online tools in second/ foreign language teaching (Schuetze, 2010; Stockwell & Levy, 2001). Is it really worth going through the trouble of developing a tool and creating tasks that require learners to go to a lab or spend time on their home computer/laptop? The answer to that question remains to be seen. Participants using the toolbar enjoyed having this tool as indicated in some of the answers of questionnaire, even though it was not enough to keep their attention for long. Certainly, such a tool provides an opportunity for learners to practice at home, which allows them to engage with another language outside the classroom in a constructive way. It is also clear that there are some learning gains. A general problem seems to centre around the time required with such a tool to see those learning gains materialize, especially if learners seem to lose interest after a while. Future studies should look into a long-term investigation of the trade-off between the time required to see substantial improvement in using complex grammatical forms on the one hand and using them at all on the other hand. It might also be helpful to test the toolbar with other grammatical topics beside the subjunctive II.

Notes

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Material used in class
Der Schwarzfaher (1993) [Black Rider]. Director: Pepe Danquart
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pVe8nkdF8s

Deutschkurs für Türken (2012) [German lesson for Turks]. Director: Anke Engelke
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_Pf7Lycm2E

Appendix 2

Sample questions dialogues
Dialogue1: Stell dir vor, du wärst der Ausländer in der Straßenbahn. Was hättest du gemacht?
[Imagine you were the foreigner riding the streetcar. What would you have done?].

Dialogue 2: Wir denken dass Menschen die anders aussehen nicht unsere Sprache sprechen können. Wie könnte man das ändern?
[We think that people who look different are not able to speak our language properly. How could we change that?].

Appendix 3

Sample questions pre-/post-test
Comprehension: Underline the words that are used in the Subjunctive II!
Sehr geehrter Herr Jansen,
als ich heute Morgen aufgestanden bin, hatte ich vor zu Ihnen zu kommen. Wäre meine Katze heute Morgen nicht weggelaufen, hätte ich es vielleicht auch geschafft. Ich versuchte sie wieder einzufangen, aber leider habe ich meinen Schlüssel in meiner Wohnung vergessen. Was tun? ...