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Flexible learning activities fostering autonomy in teaching training

RITA KUPETZ AND BIRGIT ZIEGENMEYER
English Department, University of Hannover, Königsworther Platz 1, 30167 Hannover, Germany
(*email*: *Rita.Kupetz@anglistik.uni-hannover.de*)

Abstract

The flexible use of digital recordings from EFL classrooms as well as online communication with teaching experts are two promising ways of implementing e-learning in the context of initial teacher training. Our research focuses on how to blend these elements efficiently with the different theoretical and practical content layers of an introductory course "Teaching English as a Foreign Language" to foster the development of critical, reflective thinking of prospective teachers of English and to empower the learners. In this paper we discuss the concept of autonomy as a course strategy and argue that enabling a student to take responsibility and to make informed choices is the main route to an autonomous learner. We introduce and analyze learning activities such as working with multimedia-based case stories that include video episodes as situational anchors and conducting an einterview. These learning activities are two formats that integrate elearning and contact learning in a directed, interactive way to foster the learner's autonomy. The study is a follow-up of a pilot study on blended learning in a teacher training course and was conducted as action research in the 2004/05 winter semester. It combines qualitative and quantitative research methods and integrates multiple perspectives on the teaching and learning scenarios.

1 Introduction

Autonomy has been a goal of teacher training for some time. The central issue considered in this paper though is the potential of a blended learning arrangement for developing autonomy. In the context of initial teacher training, integrated interactive elearning and contact learning are fundamental. Two promising applications in this context are the use of digital recordings from EFL classrooms as well as online communication with experienced language teachers, which can both be flexibly used. Digital classroom recordings and e-interviews are formats that blend e-learning and

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contact learning in a directed, interactive way to empower the learner and foster his/her autonomy. A pilot study (Kupetz & Ziegenmeyer, 2005a) has shown that a blended learning approach can support the integration of declarative and procedural knowledge, thus supporting the learner when he/she constructs professional knowledge and skills.

Our current research focuses on how to blend these activities efficiently with the different theoretical and practical content layers of an introductory course "Teaching English as a Foreign Language". The way of blending is task and goal specific, as illustrated in Figure 1. A student may come up with questions when observing a video recording dealing with vocabulary in the English classroom. She could read a text about theoretical issues of vocabulary learning and gain theoretical knowledge in this field which she might then relate back to the teaching scene. Hopefully she would develop procedural knowledge in this learning loop. Furthermore, she might consult an expert in the e-interview about her experience with teaching vocabulary. At a later stage of the course she might apply this knowledge when designing a mini-practice for teaching vocabulary and carrying out this mini-practice at school. This would also contribute to the development of professional skills.

2 Learner autonomy in teacher education

Several models of professional education have been discussed in the context of teacher training. Two of the central issues are understanding the knowledge base of language teachers and bridging the "gap" between theory and practice (Freeman & Richards, 1996; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Richards, 1998; Wallace, 1991).

> We now recognize that learning to teach is affected by the sum of a person's experience, some figuring more prominently than others, and that it requires the

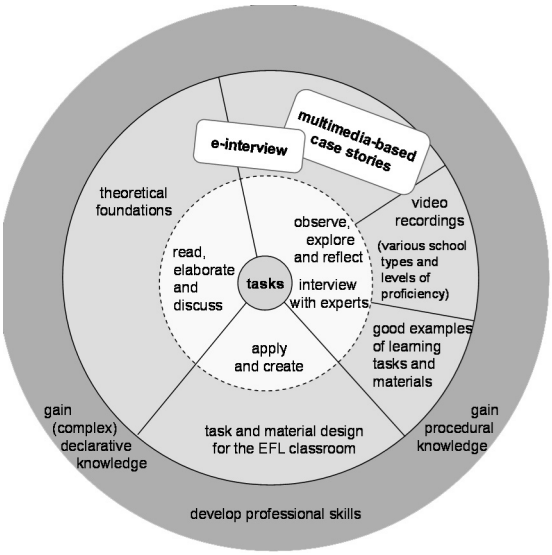


Fig. 1. Design of task-centred blended learning modules (2nd ring: types of tasks, 3rd ring: materials and activities, 4th ring: goals).

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> acquisition and interaction of knowledge and beliefs about oneself as a teacher, of the content to be taught, of one's students, and of classroom life. We therefore have to acknowledge that the process is a socially negotiated one, because teachers' knowledge of teaching is constructed through experiences in and with students, parents, and administrators as well as other members of the teaching profession. (Freeman & Johnson, 1998:404)

For our courses we follow Wallace's (1991) reflective teacher training approach that aims at providing input on two main levels: *received knowledge* and *experiential knowledge*, which might to a certain extent also be developed by the observation of practice. Wallace points out that it is essential for teacher training to have a phase during which the students become aware of their experiences as learners and reflect upon their styles and strategies. Furthermore, he argues that various modes of teaching and learning should be integrated in teacher training courses, to raise the trainees' understanding of learning and to provide a rich learning environment which the trainees might use later on in their own teaching. Two important aims of the reflective approach to teacher training are "to empower teachers to manage their own professional development [and] to enable teachers to be more effective partners in innovation" (Wallace 1991:166).

2.1 Empowerment – responsibility – make informed choices – autonomy

We base our study on the claim that a student teacher who develops autonomy in teacher education is better prepared to support his/her learners in becoming autonomous learners (Van Esch *et al*., 1999). Thus teacher training should offer opportunities to support the development of autonomy. Regarding learner autonomy we are confronted with the two roles of the target groups: the prospective foreign language teacher at school and the student teacher in teacher education.

Developing Student Autonomy in Learning (Boud, 1988a) is a significant book as it situates this approach in a wider context. It shows that the concept of autonomy is not new. In fact, it can be traced back to Ancient Greece, where the political context was based on a self-governing state (Boud, 1988b). In the 1980s the myth of education in the 21st century was seen as follows: "The new assumption about the purpose of education ... is that it is to produce autonomous *lifelong* learners" (Knowles, 1981:4).[1] Learners are supposed to develop skills of self-directed inquiry. Knowles' vision is "that the tertiary educators of that era will be primarily educational brokers with responsibility mainly for linking autonomous learners with appropriate learning resources" (Knowles, 1981:5). He underlines that it is a challenge for (tertiary) educators to make the transition from teaching to learning. Boud points out the common elements of good practice strategies to achieve autonomy: "the goals of developing independence and interdependence, self-directedness, and responsibility for learning" (1988a:8). Furthermore, he distinguishes between autonomy as a goal and as an approach to

1 Lifelong learning, see Faure Report 1972, adapted by the UNESCO as a blueprint for edcational change, see Knapper (1988: 92)

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education. Little summarizes the concept of learner autonomy as a special instance of a general human need and capacity:

> [I]n formal educational contexts, learners are autonomous when they set their own learning agenda and take responsibility for planning, monitoring and evaluating particular learning activities and the learning process overall. The practice of learner autonomy thus depends upon, but also develops and expands, the learner's capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action. (Little, 1999:77)

Cotterall (1995) presents philosophical, pedagogical and practical reasons for why we aim at autonomy. First of all we contend that it is the right of the learner to make choices. Secondly, learners who have a say in program design feel more secure and learn more effectively. Thirdly there is a growing demand in our society to learn independently without a teacher. Cotterall believes that "autonomy is principally fostered by means of dialogue about learning" (1995:220). Furthermore, she states that "autonomy as a goal cannot be realized until it is translated into the structure of the programme" (1995:220). Hermes (2005:341) argues that autonomy is not to be taught theoretically but needs to be achieved by experiential learning. Thus autonomy is a course strategy and concerns the entire curriculum, its materials, tasks and learning arrangements, with dialogue between teacher and students being especially important. We argue though that the empowerment of the learner by enabling him/her to take responsibility by making informed choices is the main route to an autonomous learner (Kupetz, 2001:53).

Porter *et al*. state that using learner diaries "promote[s] autonomous learning, encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning and to develop their own ideas" (1990:233). We use semi-structured learner diaries as cognitive tools in teacher training to encourage our students to reflect upon their findings and insights and to make connections to their own learner history and learner beliefs about teaching and learning foreign languages.

2.2 Autonomy and a constructivist learning environment

Wolff (1994) claims the theoretical foundation for autonomy is found in constructivism. We agree and follow a moderate constructivist approach which is less focused on

Table 1 *Characteristics of educational technology promoting autonomy (adapted from Knapper 1988:94f.)*

involves problem-solving activities
encourages active learning
is motivating and relevant
is flexible
is collaborative
integrates knowledge from different fields
avoids embarrassment to students
involves a dialogue about learning
responds to individual differences
encourages: taking responsibility by making informed choices

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sequences of instruction and more concerned with the design of a rich learning environment. Lefoe points out that constructivist theories influenced by cognitive psychology gave more attention to "the learning process and a greater degree of autonomy and initiative was given to the learner" (Lefoe, 1998:454). Wilson deals with the design of rich learning environments and defines them as "a place where learners may work together and support each other as they use a variety of tools and information resources in their guided pursuit of learning goals and problem-solving activities" (Wilson, 1996:5). Furthermore, he underlines that the students have control and that the teacher has the role of a facilitator (Wilson, 1996:6f.).

A rich learning environment is similar to the concept of *Resource Based Learning (RBL)*, developed and implemented, for example, by the Introduction to Tertiary Teaching (ITT) Department at the University of Wollongong, Australia. It "conceptualises RBL as an active learning process in which a major component of learning is a set of educational materials specifically designed to support the learner in achieving learning objectives within their own learning context" (Bell, 1997:62). The learning environment is supposed to be "flexible enough to adapt to the experiences, needs and circumstances of the learners in their own time and their own pace with choice as to how they will approach the structure of the curriculum presented" (*op. cit.*:62).

Knapper (1988) views the potential of technology for developing a lifelong learning strategy as key to autonomy. Considering the time when Knapper's text was published we have to acknowledge its far reaching implications. He outlined "characteristics of educational technology in terms of criteria for lifelong learning" (Knapper, 1988:94), which still can function as a checklist for developing technologically enhanced learning environments today (see Table 1).

Table 2 *Data elicitation during the 15-week course*

Week	**Data elicitation methods**
week 1	1st online questionnaire (mainly closed items, adapted from the pilot study)
weeks 2-7	1st guided learner diary (reflections and comments on TEFL knowledge and insights as well as on classroom recordings as a learning tool)
week 5	self-study phase with a case story on "Vocabulary acquisition in the EFL classroom" 8 participants, log-file analysis, moderated discussion or interview
weeks 8-14	2nd guided learner diary (reflections and comments on TEFL knowledge and insights as well as on a mini-practice and an einterview as learning tools)
after the course	2nd online questionnaire as course evaluation (mainly closed items, adapted from the pilot study)
after the course	structured interview with the moderators of the e-interview

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Table 3. *Selected items of the course evaluation*

Item	Statements in the questionnaire (students were asked to rate their agreement with each statement: 1 strongly agree – 5 strongly disagree)
Activities and knowledge construction	a. The activity has supported me when studying TEFL topics. b. The activity has supported me to connect the various topics.
Activities and broadening perspectives	a. The activity has encouraged me to think about learning English at school less from a pupil's perspective. b. The activity has supported me to reflect upon my previous knowledge and ideas about learning English at school based upon my experience of being a pupil at school. c. The activity has supported me to adopt a teacher's perspective on learning and teaching English at school.
Functions of digital clasroom recordings in a TEFL methodology course	a. Classroom recordings are very illustrative examples from teaching practice. b. Working with classroom recordings provides insights into classrooms and teaching practice which are close to live observations. c. Classroom recordings encourage reflection. d. When working with classroom recordings theory was applied to an example. e. Working with classroom recordings helps me to review my theoretical knowledge with regard to sample situations from classroom teaching. f. Working with classroom recordings helps me to understand theory better. g. Working with classroom recordings helps me to see theoretical links.

3 Research design

The study was designed as a follow-up study of a pilot study about blended learning in a teacher training course carried out in the 2004 summer semester (see Kupetz & Ziegenmeyer, 2005a). Our research design represents an action research approach as both authors were involved as teacher or tutor as well as researchers.

3.1 The institutional and curricular context

Our current research was carried out in a German introductory TEFL course in the 2004/05 winter semester. The goals of the course were to gain knowledge about fundamental TEFL issues, to gain a teacher's perspective on learning English, and to gain competence in observing and reflecting upon teaching languages based on

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theoretical frameworks. The group of participants was comparable to the student population from the pilot study in the 2004 summer semester. The course involved 53 participants who were students at university in their first phase of German teacher training. They were 22.6 years old on average; 73% were female and 27% male. 73% were in their 3rd semester, although on average they had studied for 3.9 semesters.

77% of the students took part in the voluntary online survey at the beginning of the course which asked about their learning experience in terms of working with classroom video recordings. Some students had previous experience with observing lessons as part of their teacher training. 34% of the course participants had already observed lessons at school, usually during their first four-week teaching practice. 24% had already been to another course where classroom video recordings were presented, analyzed or discussed.

3.2 Research aim

We seek to design and test flexible tasks as well as learning arrangements that foster learner autonomy in an introductory course for prospective EFL teachers. We assume that flexibility and variety are crucial for the delivery of the materials in general. Thus in this paper we aim at describing the task-specific potential of the activities for encouraging and promoting autonomy both as a course strategy and as a goal.

3.3 Research questions

As we consider autonomy a central *course strategy* (see section 2) we ask whether the blended learning approach of the course offers appropriate opportunities and learning resources to learn autonomously and thus to develop the learner autonomy of prospective teachers of English and the student teachers in teacher training. We have formulated our research questions as:

- Does the blended learning approach encourage active learning and the students' self-reflection?
- Can the activities "conducting an e-interview" and "working with digital classroom recordings" foster autonomy?

3.4 Research methods

Our action research approach uses a set of data elicitation methods that had been developed to combine qualitative and quantitative data for the pilot study. Only a few minor modifications to the questionnaires and the schedule for the data elicitation during the course were necessary for the main study. For example, the various parts of the learner diaries were rearranged in two instead of three diaries. This made it easier for the students to decide when, how often, and to what extent they wanted to reflect on their learning processes. Table 2 gives an overview of the data which were collected throughout the course.

Data from the questionnaires were analyzed and compared to the results from the pilot

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study using statistical methods. In this paper we mainly concentrate on two items that help to evaluate the task-specific potential of the learning activities for encouraging and promoting our students' autonomy both as learners and as prospective teachers of English. The first item in Table 3 describes an activity's potential for supporting the students' construction of knowledge related to TEFL methodology as it is perceived by the students themselves. The second item in Table 3 takes into account that activities that encourage the students to broaden their perspectives on teaching and learning situations need to enable the students not only to become aware of, reflect upon, and integrate their previous experiences, i.e. perspectives, but also to consider and include new perspectives of the same situation.

The pilot study also led to a preliminary set of five qualitative categories related to the students' perceptions of the learning potential of digital classroom recordings in TEFL: *understanding theory better, relating theory and teaching practice, learning from examples, broadening perspectives, and developing guidelines for students' future teaching* (see Kupetz & Ziegenmeyer, 2005a:190 for a brief description of these categories). In the main study we asked the students in the course evaluation to rate the relevance of these different functions to their individual way of learning about TEFL methodology. They were given a number of statements which represent different aspects of the item "Functions of digital classroom recordings in a TEFL methodology course" (see Table 3). The self-study phase with multimedia-based case stories will not be discussed in detail in this paper but will be analyzed in depth in an ongoing dissertation.

4 Development and use of flexible learning activities

Our understanding of TEFL methodology includes three interrelated steps: 1) together with our students we take issues from EFL classroom contexts, 2) discuss and reflect upon them theoretically at university, and 3) use what is learned in the EFL classroom. We aim at providing authentic tasks which are based on video recordings taken from real classroom settings. Digital video recordings as well as e-interviews used as didactic tools in teacher training can support a closer and eventually more reflective relationship between theory-driven and practically-oriented aspects of teacher training. Furthermore, both activities integrate interactive e-learning and contact learning . In a "case story" the tasks are both authentic and problem-oriented as we show a video episode from a teaching context where a teacher has to make a decision and develop a strategy. We stop the presentation at a crucial point and then the learners are encouraged to construct their individual solutions in a low-risk setting, e.g., they develop their own strategies and present them either in the seminar, possibly as a mini-practice or post them at our online course platform. Ideally the students can additionally discuss their solutions with the teacher of the recorded teaching episode in an einterview on the course platform.

4.1 Conducting an e-interview

4.1.1 Goals

The e-interview format virtually connects students with experienced language teachers. The goals of the e-interview were similar to the goals of the e-interview activity that had

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been part of the previous course in the pilot study. Firstly, it offered the course participants a link to an expert at school to promote an exchange about theory and practical teaching. Secondly, it gave the students the opportunity to use an asynchronous discussion forum, and, thus, to develop their media competence.

4.1.2 Task design and management

The contact to the experienced teacher of English, whom the students "got to know" through watching a video recording of one of her English lessons was established via the online discussion forum that was a component of the course's blended learning environment. Three students who volunteered as moderators were expected to take the responsibility for and lead the forum discussion.

In the pilot study we were dissatisfied with the participation of the group. Thus we introduced an introductory group activity in class in which the course participants developed a catalogue of topics and formulated questions for the teacher. The moderators revised, reorganized and scaffolded these questions for the einterview. After the online discussions they summarized the findings of the interview, formed some hypotheses about language teaching and posted them on our learning platform. They then reported on interesting aspects of the e-interview in class. In sum, conducting an e-interview consists of a number of sub-tasks and processes as outlined in Figure 2. Those components in Figure 2, which are printed in italics, illustrate the potential for knowledge construction and thus autonomy.

4.2 Working with digital classroom recordings

4.2.1 Goals

Incorporating video and related technology into teacher training programmes has been a

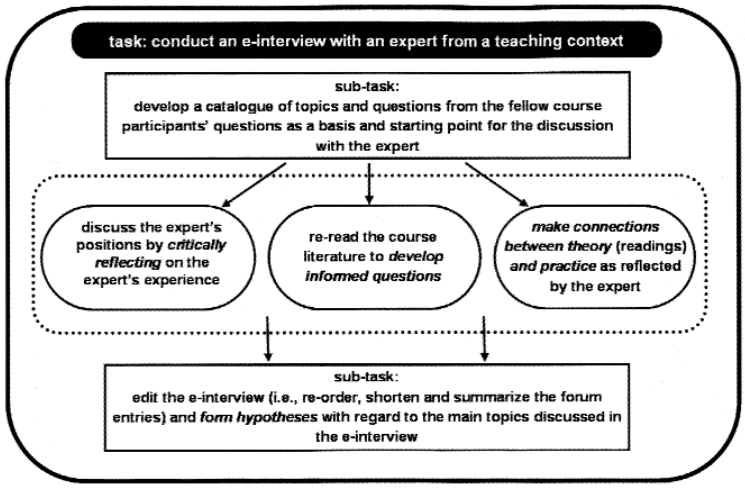


Fig. 2. Process components of an e-interview (knowledge construction in italics).

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valuable activity for many years. Yet with the emerging understanding of a need for more constructivist, individualized, situated, and reflective orientations in teacher education, working with classroom recordings becomes an even more promising learning activity that offers multiple ways and perspectives of looking into classrooms, and does not only bridge the "gap" between theory and practice. Brophy's anthology of findings from research and good practice gives a comprehensive overview of the state-of-the-art in this field (Brophy, 2004a; see also Reusser, 2005; Welzel & Stadler, 2005). New technology helps to collect, edit and combine video with other elements related to a teaching episode such as texts, graphics, and audio documents, but what is more important it helps to integrate video more easily into courses. Several programmes for videography, for example, can synchronize a video stream of a classroom recording with a transcript of the classroom communication. In addition, time-coded comments can be added to specific episodes. Web-based environments and the technology of streaming video make material more accessible in blended learning environments (see, for example, Annenberg Media, 2003; The Open University, 2002; Siebold, 2004, Kupetz & Ziegenmeyer, 2005b).

Classroom recordings offer an opportunity to relate theories of teaching and learning English to the practice of teaching and learning English. Episodes of varying length from recorded EFL teaching situations can be flexibly integrated into course sessions at university. They provide material for shared observation of EFL classrooms and experienced teachers in action as well as a starting point for reflection and analysis:

> [M]uch more than other technologies, videos convey the complexity and immediacy of teaching with a richness that approximates that experienced by observers actually present in the classroom. Also, [...] the use of video meshes well with ideas about situated learning, connecting theory with practice, case-based learning, and other theoretical orientations to teacher education that have become popular in recent years. (Brophy, 2004b:x)

Using classroom recordings in teacher education can help students to reflect on their theory-based knowledge about TEFL issues and experiences related to their individual learner biographies. Research suggests that "[v]ideo-cases are representations of classroom events that can function as anchors for reflection and professional growth because they allow viewers to examine all the dialogue, actions, emotion, gestures, nuances, and body language – the complexity of a classroom environment" (Stephens, 2004:77). Watching per se does not foster our students' autonomy; however, processing video recordings as situational anchors within the framework of a case-based pedagogy might be a suitable starting point for problem-solving activities. Additionally, the students are encouraged to reflect on their own experiences as learners of English and possibly gain a better understanding of classroom interactions from a teacher's perspective.

> [W]atching video affords the opportunity to develop a different kind of knowledge for teaching – knowledge not of 'what to do next', but rather, knowledge how to interpret and reflect on classroom practices. (Sherin, 2004:14)

In the pilot study we have shown that for our students in a TEFL course at university,

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classroom recordings are a well-accepted and useful component of contact learning and elearning. Their learning potential is especially promising with regard to the following two levels of teacher knowledge: firstly, they support an understanding of planning lessons and reflecting upon them in the context of fundamental TEFL issues, and secondly they help the students to broaden their perspectives and see lessons increasingly from a teacher's perspective as well. The question is, however, to what extent individual learning styles and/or the level of a learner affect how a learner works best with the video material; for example, which path is chosen, either theory first and the recorded teaching practice second, or vice versa. Our goal for working with digital classroom recordings in a TEFL course at university thus focuses on designing suitable tasks that gradually guide students to more and more autonomous learning from and with classroom recordings. Prospective teachers are encouraged to become involved in a variety of contextualized problem-solving tasks related to these recordings.

4.2.2 Task design and management

Classroom recordings were integrated into the majority of sessions throughout the semester. They were usually presented by the teacher herself, using a laptop and a data projector. The video recordings introduced students to problems from real-world classrooms which could be explored from different perspectives. Frequently, these included both the pupils' perspectives and the teacher's perspective on an English lesson, either collected in questionnaires or during an interview after a lesson (this idea is adopted from Richards' [1998] outline of a "three-way-observation"). Watching a recording was combined with a variety of tasks for observation and analysis, depending on the specific function of the selected recording in the class session. Selected functions of digital video recordings in the context of this course were:

- making students aware of specific aspects of TEFL methodology,
- confronting students with "typical" or "unexpected" teaching practices,
- illustrating teaching practices,
- discovering theoretical positions from literature in real classroom situations, and
- using theoretical positions for the critical reflection of sample scenes.

Once during the course, material related to the topic of "Vocabulary acquisition in the

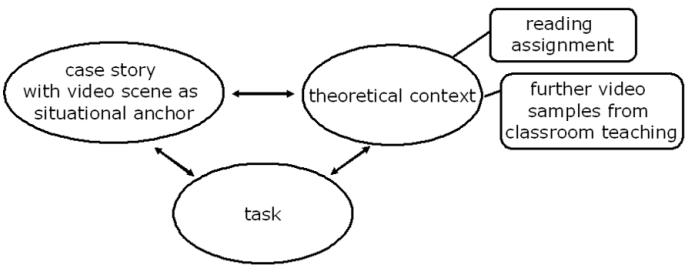


Fig. 3. Basic elements of a multimedia-based learning module.

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Table 4. *Perceived potential of the activities for relating the course to "practice"*

Question: Was the activity useful for relating the course to "practice"?			
	very/quite useful	**partly useful**	**little/not useful**
conducting an e-interview	57%	31%	12%
working with digital classroom recordings	92%	4%	4%

Table 5. *Student roles in the e-interview*

Patterns of involvement in the einterview	**Percentage of students**
discursive-productive	16%
discursive-receptive	65%
no participation	19%

EFL classroom" was provided for self-study as a multimedia-based case story (Ziegenmeyer, 2005). Multimedia-based case stories offer not only direct insights into authentic classroom interaction but also numerous links between scientific knowledge and the complexity of teaching and learning situations. The learning concept is based on theories of situated learning in multimedia-enhanced learning environments and the use of case-based pedagogy in teacher education. Complex anchors are constructed as multimedia narratives from real foreign language teaching situations. The case stories offer access to their components through hypertext structures and support manifold perspectives on the underlying teaching and learning problems; thus, learners are encouraged to get involved in contextualized problem-solving tasks fostering their autonomy (see Figure 3).

For the case story "Vocabulary acquisition in the EFL classroom" this case story approach combines exploring fully transcribed video recordings as situational anchors from EFL classrooms with study materials related to the teacher's lesson preparation and to the recorded lesson itself. The embedded video recordings introduce students to problems from real-world classrooms, which can be explored from different perspectives. Apart from the products resulting from the lesson, both the pupils' comments and the teacher's reflections on the lesson are also integral parts of a case story. The potential of this self-study approach was tested with volunteers who worked with the material in order to prepare for a course session.

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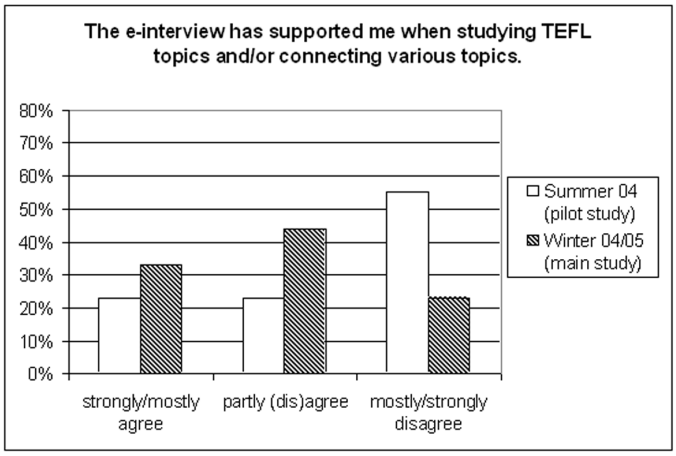


Fig. 4. The students' perception of the e-interview (here: focus on TEFL contents and knowledge construction).

5 Results

5.1 Evaluation of the learning activities

In this section we will present the students' evaluation of the learning activities from the second questionnaire of the main study (n=26) to produce a descriptive framework of the students' perception of the course activities for the discussion of our research questions. The following diagrams compare the results to those from the pilot study.

E-interviews used as a learning tool in teacher training and classroom recordings presented as multimedia-based case stories led to a closer and possibly more reflective relationship between theory-driven and practically-oriented aspects of teacher training. 92% of the students strongly or mostly agreed that working with the classroom recordings contributed to relating the course to "practice". 57% perceived the e-interview as a strong link to "practice".

5.1.1 E-Interview

Participation in the e-interview shows two patterns of involvement with different degrees of involvement: discursive-productive *versus* discursive-receptive. Although only 16% of the students actively took part in the online discussion with the expert, 65% of the students read through the forum entries although they did not write contributions themselves.

We compared the students' perception of the e-interview in the main study in the winter semester with that from the preceding pilot study in the summer semester (see Figure 4). In the main study the e-interview was perceived as supportive by 10% more students than in the pilot study. One in three students felt or felt strongly that the e-interview had supported them when studying new TEFL topics and/or when connecting various topics. Furthermore, the number of students who did not feel supported by the e-interview task decreased from to 55% to 23%. We assume that this is a result of their

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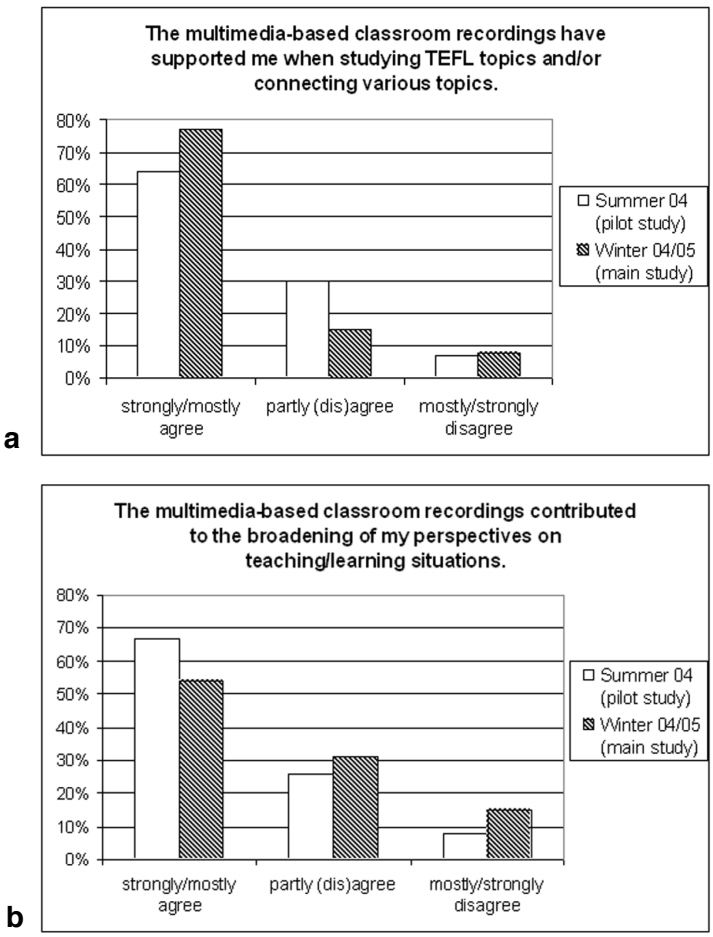


Fig. 5. The students' perception of the multimedia based classroom recordings (a. focus on TEFL contents and knowledge construction, b. focus on broadening perspectives).

increased involvement during the first phase of the einterview when all course participants were invited to develop questions for the e-interview.

In our last study we claimed that the effectiveness of the e-interview depended on the participants' roles or rather their degree of involvement in this activity. From the students' diary entries and the interview with the moderators we know that this study supports our claim as the moderators developed their confidence in using the electronic media (media literacy) and in the knowledge gained, grounding it both in theory and in practice as it was reflected by the teacher.

5.1.2 Digital classroom recordings

According to the online survey after the course the majority of students (77%) strongly or mostly agree that working with video recordings from teaching practice helps them to understand TEFL topics and/or to make connections between various topics. The results

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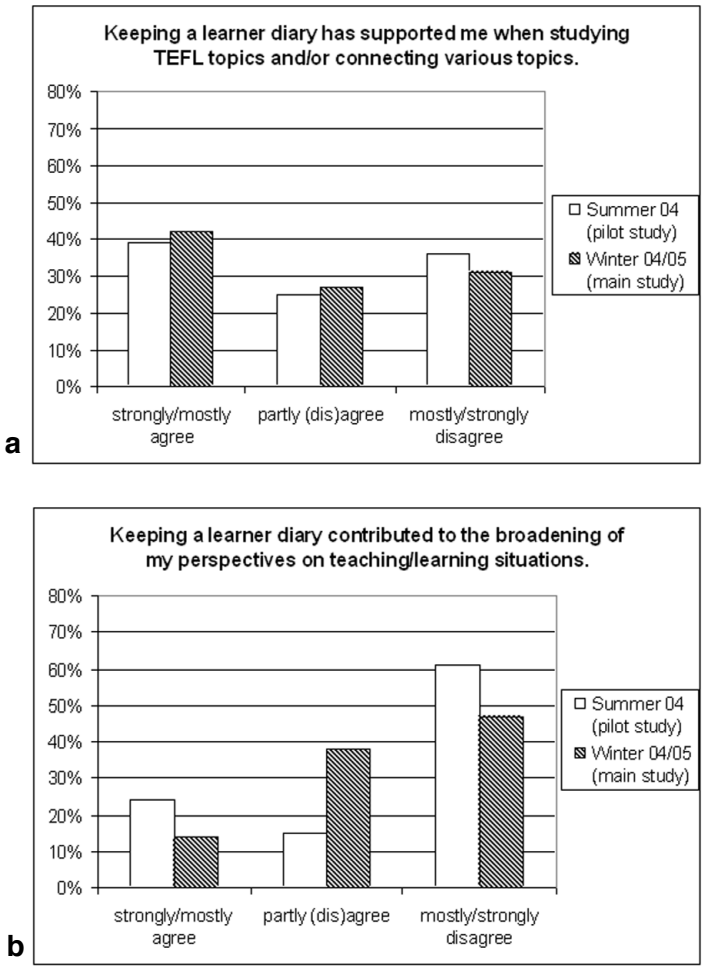


Fig. 6. The students' perception of the semi-structured learner diaries (a. focus on TEFL contents and knowledge construction, b. focus on broadening perspectives).

in Figure 5 display also that working with classroom recordings is perceived by half of the students (54%) as helpful for broadening their perspectives on teaching and learning situations. There are no major changes in the students' perception of the classroom recordings with regard to these two general dimensions compared to the evaluation of this activity in the pilot study.

In the course evaluation the students were asked to rate a number of functions associated with working with digital video recordings of classroom situations and related materials. The results in Table 6 display that the students perceive the various functions of classroom recordings differently. On the one hand, at least some episodes from classroom teaching are, for example, perceived by most students as illustrative examples of teaching English at school. On the other hand, it is less clearly perceived by the students that some video episodes were integrated into the course to help the students see theoretical links, as only 65% of the students mostly or strongly agree to this statement.

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Table 6. *Students' perception of selected functions of digital video recordings*

Functions of digital classroom recordings	**M ean score (1 strongly agree–5 strongly disagree)**	**Percentage of students who mostly/strongly agree**
illustrate exemplary teaching practice	1.46	92%
provide insights into classroom teaching close to live observations	1.77	81%
encourage reflection	1.92	81%
provide an example for the application of theory	1.92	81%
help a student to review his/her theoretical knowledge with regard to sample situations from classroom teaching	1.96	81%
help a student to understand theory better2	157	73%
help a student to see theoretical links	2.42	65%

5.1.3 Learner diary as a cognitive tool

The course evaluation shows that about 40% of the students feel supported by keeping a learner diary when studying TEFL issues, more so when making connections between various topics. However, only some students agree that keeping a learner diary helps them to broaden their perspectives on teaching and learning situations.

5.2 Hypotheses

The whole experience of the course confirms that autonomy is an overall course strategy rather than a single task or technique, which enables the learner to make informed choices on

1. how to define and solve TEFL problems
2. how and when to use the rich learning environment, which is resource based and flexible.

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The e-interview provides a discursive way of learning. It presupposes grounding knowledge in theory and offers an opportunity to check or verify it with the expert. The moderators form a team and construct knowledge in the dialogue among themselves and with the expert by asking questions. The other course participants broaden their knowledge by reading the dialogue. Thus all of the students work autonomously in a task-specific and a role-specific way.

Classroom recordings can be presented as problems from teaching practice. The function of tasks for working with the material can vary considerably, from viewing examples that illustrate theory to reflecting on theory in terms of higher order thinking processes. Tasks that enable and challenge this kind of cognitive involvement promote autonomy.

Our blended learning concept for this introductory course which combines integrated interactive elearning and contact learning scenarios , though, offers instruction and scaffolding as well, albeit more so at the beginning of the course than at the end. Thus, autonomy is potentially being developed during the semester as part of the course strategy. We assume that this strategy does not only relate to a single course but that it is relevant for teacher training as a whole. Furthermore we conclude it could function as good practice for a teacher training concept that is theory based and practically oriented.

6 Discussion

The moderators of the e-interview developed their motivation for dealing with the course-related theoretical issues autonomously as they wanted to come up with informed questions for the expert and interesting findings for the course participants. The moderators, for example, re-read the course literature to come up with insightful questions. These questions represent autonomous learning (Hermes, 2005:350). The revision of the interview for publication on the platform in the form of hypotheses made further knowledge construction possible. Furthermore, the moderators became a team, divided labour at times, negotiated content and insights gained, and critically reflected upon this experience both in their diaries and in the final interview. This reflection is another aspect of becoming autonomous (Hermes, 2005:353). The other course participants followed the discussion, getting involved receptively.

In this course (in contrast to the pilot study course in the 2004 summer semester) we aimed particularly at interesting participants in the e-interview by starting from and discussing their questions. Thus, they followed the discussion, read the summaries and hypotheses; however, they did not participate actively. Later they explained there was no need to do so as the moderators had done a good job communicating their questions. Furthermore, considering the busy schedule of the students it is acceptable that they followed the discussion and learned by taking in these findings. Interestingly enough, the students went back to the platform when preparing for the final test, reinforcing the knowledge they had constructed. This self-initiated way of using the rich learning environment shows that the students took responsibility for their learning and is an example of the flexible delivery of the material. In sum, we argue that an einterview activity potentially has the following characteristics of educational technology promoting autonomy (see Table 1 in section 2.2):

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For everybody:

- Is motivating and relevant
- Integrates knowledge from various fields
- Is flexible
- Taking responsibility (receptive)

Additionally for the moderators:

- Taking responsibility by making informed choices (productive)
- Involves problem-solving activities
- Is collaborative
- Encourages active learning
- Integrates knowledge from various fields with a special focus on theory.

We observed role-specific and task-specific ways of working autonomously, especially in the context of knowledge construction mediated in discourse which is specific for our field of teacher training. In addition to the discourse in class or on the course platform, keeping a semi-structured learner diary is perceived by the students as another valuable form of course-related discourse. It helps the students to reflect upon their processes of learning and supports a "dialogue about learning" (Cotterall, 1995:220) with oneself or with the teacher/tutor who provides individual feedback on student entries in the learner diaries; thus, keeping a learner diary fosters autonomy.

Classroom recordings when presented as problems and multimedia-based case stories encourage active learning as students are encouraged to reconsider theoretical positions they have studied when reflecting upon teaching practice. Analyzing and discussing classroom recordings is especially motivating and relevant for the students with regard to relating the course to teaching practice (92% strongly or mostly agree, see Table 4).

The activity does not integrate knowledge from different fields but rather, as we suggested, from different though crucially interdependent learning spaces of teacher education with their specific methods and media as well as different theoretical and practical content dimensions (see Kupetz & Ziegenmeyer, 2005a). When working with video recordings, students in an introductory course especially perceive classroom scenes as lively illustrations of the theories they read about and discuss. Understanding more complex links between theory and practice is more difficult for the students; thus, functions like "understand theory better when reflecting on video scenes" or "getting into theoretical issues with the help of video scenes" are less clearly perceived by the students.

Our approach avoids embarrassing the students as we do not show and discuss scenes taught by the students themselves but scenes taught by various teachers usually unknown to the students. Thus it is easier for the students to distance themselves from what they see and to criticize aspects of the video scene openly. Responding to individual differences is often difficult during classroom viewings. However, when students work with multimedia-based case stories individually, a flexible approach to the material that takes into account individual learning styles and the specific knowledge and experience of a learner is possible (see Ziegenmeyer, 2005).

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7 Further research

Our research now focuses on a comprehensive qualitative analysis of individual students' interactions with sample learning modules. We think that this will contribute to a better understanding of the potential of video episodes as situative anchors to foster problem-oriented approaches and of learning about TEFL methodology with multimedia-based case stories. Our future work will also include the development of further elearning activities for integrated interactive elearning and contact learning in teacher training using web technology. Being part of the *eLearning Academic Network Lower Saxony* initiative (ELAN), we will design and test more teaching problems as multimedia-based case stories. We will also work on a flexible delivery mode, for example, distributing multimedia-based learning modules with problems from classroom teaching on CD-ROM or on our faculty's intranet.

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