

Vis@vis – The Virtual Writing Workshop

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The role of writing in language acquisition

Following the concepts of constructivism [v. Glasersfeld 1998], recent research on didactics of writing or „didactics of literary acquisition“ more or less unanimously starts off from the assumption that writing constitutes an internal process of construction. During the course of their process of literary acquisition, children develop theories and hypotheses on the utilisation of written language, reject these, and construct new ones [Brügelmann/Brinkmann 1998].

Nevertheless, the didactics of literary acquisition in the mother tongue (L1) basically starts off from a different initial position than the didactics of literary acquisition of foreign languages (Ln). The literary competence in the mother tongue, for instance, always lags far behind the oral one; writers may take recourse to a much broader source of oral vocabulary competence when phrasing the sentence ([Ruf/Gallin 1998], and mostly have fewer difficulties in putting their thoughts and intentions into written words. The didactics of literary acquisition in the mother tongue focuses on aspects of the formal (orthographical and grammatical) correctness and the stylistic expression of the written text, and thus shifts the learning process from the act of writing to the process of reading or composing [Ruf/Gallin 1998].

Although it holds true that generally the same mechanisms of formation of theories and hypotheses come into effect during the processes of foreign language acquisition, writing here has also the function of constituting language. There is no oral “source of pre-knowledge” to which one might take recourse. Writing is tedious work which does not develop on its own, but needs to be supported and strengthened.

The virtual language workshop Vis-à-vis – which is presented in the following - is designed for both variations: It may be used as a basis for active and creative processes of writing in both, the mother tongue (L1) as well as for writing in foreign languages (Ln). The workshop is an instrument that intends to support the writers by either developing texts together in collaborative process or by giving editorial feedback that may be used for improvement and re-wording of the texts.

On conception of the “virtual language workshops” basic ideas of Freinet’s pedagogical theories were taken into consideration. Freinet stressed the importance of cooperation and collaboration [Kock 2006, p. 69] just as well as the importance of “free expression” and communication [Kock, p. 70]. Writing is not a pure exercise but serves communication and expression. Texts will have to be “free” in order to correspond to the interests and needs of pupils in an adequate manner [Kock 2006, p. 74].

Online-Writing vs. Offline-Writing

In the course of technical progress, and by means of the new communication and information technology, we dispose today of tools and media that facilitate the production of texts without any

printing press or lino cuts and go far beyond the limitations of class magazines. Nevertheless, these new facilities, suggested here as valuable complementation devices, should not be seen as replacement for the old traditional methods of writing and publication [cp. Laner 2008].

In the normal case, the publication of texts in online-media, e. g. in forums or weblogs, reaches any number of public readers. The demands put on the quality of texts vary according to the type of medium of publication. The spectrum may differ from linguistically floppy expressions and abbreviations in the chat and longer, but still rather careless wording in the internet forums to carefully redacted and well-formulated texts in the weblogs [cp. Project language@web]. This well-established practice of usage may not be ignored when employing on-line media in foreign language teaching. In the case of writing in forums, this implies that one might insist on the observance of rules of communication for the forum (Netiquette), but not on extreme linguistic correctness. Pupils with literary difficulties may therefore feel that writing in a forum is a rather liberating act in spite of the public character of the texts. Contrary to this, much higher demands on linguistic correctness are to be met when writing in a weblog and of course also in the Vis-à-vis as described in more details below, where it would be appropriate to apply the linguistic standards according to the respective class level and language.

In addition, the dissemination of texts via online-media opens up new opportunities and possibilities of collaboration and cooperative writing as writers may feel encouraged to set up country-crossing and language-crossing communities due to the fact that geographical and national boundaries no longer exist. With a corresponding organisation of the classes and formation of groups, this advantage may well be used during the classes of foreign language teaching by using the linguistic competence of „native speakers“ when working on texts [cp. Donath/Volkmer 1997].

It is also an indisputable fact that working on texts in an online-environment, the respective experience gained and the effects on learning implied will contribute largely to the enhancement of general media competencies and „New Literacy“ [cp. Groeben/Hurrelmann 2002], and in particular of those dimensions of media competencies that are action-oriented [cp. Baake 1997].

Advantages offered by Vis@vis

General description

Vis-à-vis is a multi-lingual Online-workshop that facilitates writing in different languages, either on one's own or together with other writers. Vis-à-vis functions on the whole without having to install any special programme, all you need is an internet browser and of course internet access.

Vis-à-vis may be configured for different sizes of groups, varying from a Vis-à-vis for one person up to a Vis-à-vis for several classes. The visibility of a Vis-à-vis may be of public character, or be restricted to a special, determined group of users. It is possible to write up comments on the texts produced in the language workshop, and then again react to the previous comments.

The system of the writing workshop accepts all entries of characters and script systems of different countries, and any number of figures and illustrations may be included into the text. In addition, the texts may also include links for downloads, to other texts or to the internet.

It is possible to set up the Vis-à-vis for different levels of security and authorisations of access. This process allows configuring Vis-à-vis with finer intermediate levels that range from completely open to hidden and closed.

In addition it is also possible to adjust several settings of Vis-à-vis during the process of current operation, e. g. possibilities for access and language varieties.

Language varieties

The act of writing is always combined with intent. A person either writes because he or she wishes to record his/her own thoughts, feelings or experience, e.g. in form of a diary or because he/she designates the text to one or more other persons, i.e. in order to have it published.

Vis-à-vis is suitable for both forms of writing. The texts produced can remain “secret” so that Vis-à-vis may be used as a diary and the secret entries are visible for the authors and moderators only. In addition, the author of a text may select co-readers and co-writers for each single text from the group of authors who – together with the moderator – are thus given the possibility not only to comment on the texts, but also intervene in the editing process. Much more often, however, Vis-à-vis is used for public writing. The texts are produced in Vis-à-vis with the purpose of being read by virtually “everybody” and – if necessary – also being commented. With Vis-à-vis it is possible to keep the text hidden up to the stage when the text has been sufficiently elaborated to be ready for publication. During revision of the text, all those with access to the hidden or “secret” text may suggest corrections or write or revise parts of the texts themselves.

In such a manner, Vis-à-vis opens up a third variety of writing: the possibility of collective writing as Vis-à-vis facilitates the mutual writing of texts by a small group of authors. In this case, the respective text produced always “belongs” to the person who initiated it and who invited the other writers for co-writing. It is also up to this person to decide on the date of publication. Once the text is published, the text may no longer be modified by other persons than he/she who originally produced the text. The right of co-writing expires upon date and time of publication.

Multi-lingualism

For Vis-à-vis users, the following languages are at their present disposal: German, English, Finnish, Italian, Dutch, Turkish and Hungarian. During the installation of Vis-à-vis, one will generally stick to two or three linguistic varieties.

A new text to be written will always be assigned to the language in which the texts are being listed. By changing over to another language, also the operating language of Vis-à-vis will change and the contents of the selected language will be listed in reverse chronological order. If one single text contains parts of text in different languages, it will have to be entered for each language separately in order to appear in the respective language listing.

The linguistic range of Vis-à-vis may be extended by new languages at any time. For this purpose, it disposes of a language file into which individual expressions and signals may be included in their translation.

Categorization of Texts

The texts produced by means of Vis-à-vis will be classified according to following different criteria:

- According to **date and time** of text production: In this aspect Vis-à-vis works similar to a weblog (Blog). Within each selected language, it is always the most recent text that goes to the first position.
- According to **language**: All texts in one language will be collected in a common listing.
- According to **subjects**: In each language, the moderator has the possibility to suggest several free-definable subjects into which a text may be classified. In addition, a text may be classified into various subjects.
- According to **„important words“**: So-called „important words“, i.e. key-words or tags may be provided to each text. It is up to the authors to decide on which and how many words they wish to add.

Authorisations

The restriction for reading and commenting facilities in a Vis-à-vis may be set according to four levels of authorisation:

- **Public**: The texts are accessible to „everybody“ for reading and for commenting.
- **Registered**: The texts are accessible to everybody for reading purposes, but registration is needed for commenting.
- **Restricted**: The texts are accessible to everybody for reading, but registration and clearance is needed for commenting.
- **Private**: Reading and commenting is possible for selected, registered users only.

Apart from registration, the production of texts requires in all circumstances also the assignment of the role of an author. Authors are the owners of their texts; they may revise and delete these, choose co-authors, hide texts and publish them.

Each vis-à-vis is being mentored by moderators who in general consist of the teaching staff of the participating classes. Moderators may choose authors for their vis-à-vis from the group of registered users; they may suggest subjects in the different languages and enter links into the list of links. Moderators are generally entitled to read any text, revise or delete it. The same applies to the comments.

Formatting facilities

Intentionally, there are only restricted possibilities for the formatting of text in order to help authors to concentrate on the contents of their texts. Apart from formatting options for letters in bold and italics, one may also choose from the usual formatting options for paragraphs: left-aligned, centred and right-aligned positioning. In addition, a view of the lists can be represented.

Existent formatting, e.g. those that were taken over by pasting and copying of different parts of text can be removed by activating the function „Delete formatting“.

The formatting in colours for text and background of text proves to be very helpful for being able to distinguish between parts of texts by different authors.

Comments

It is also possible to write comments on the vis-à-vis texts. The comments are added at the bottom of the text in chronological order and serve as a basis for text discussion. Comments may also include suggestions on possible changes or critics or appraisal of contents

Only moderators or the commentators themselves are entitled to revise or delete comments if the configuration of the vis-à-vis is set up for this option. The vis-à-vis may be adjusted in such a manner that comments are not made visible for the public before having been reviewed by the moderators.

Reading-Out Function

With the corresponding configuration it is possible in some languages to have the texts played back as an audio-file by means of an automatic text- to– language-conversion, i.e. to have them virtually read out.

The automatic conversion and generation of language is fairly exact according to the level of technical development. Pronunciation fails however, when proper names or unusual combinations of words are concerned. For learners of foreign languages it is nevertheless an interesting and helpful opportunity to have their own texts read out and wrong spelling and typing errors will very soon be made evident. Pupils with an advanced level of oral linguistic competence will find the read-out-function helpful for writing up texts.

Making preparations

Technical preparations

A Vis-à-vis will be installed upon application of a member of teaching staff for the assigned purpose. It is sensible to keep the number of co-writing classes at moderate level, keeping in mind that the recommended number should not exceed four classes in one Vis-à-vis. During the installation process, the teachers will decide on the range of languages to be used and on possible additional facilities for use, e.g. the read-out function.

Furthermore, the degree of public access has to be determined: Should the text be open to be read by everybody or should the visibility be limited to the participating classes? Also, decisions have to be made on the role of the moderator. Should all participating members of the teaching staff act as moderators or only some of them? In principal, authors could also be granted complete privacy for some texts. In this case teachers would only act as normal authors themselves, and the role of the moderator would be assigned to a non-involved person.

For the use of Vis-à-vis, teachers and pupils have to be registered as authors or moderators, and they have to be assigned with the corresponding authorisations when working in closed Vis-à-vis (“private”).

As final step of the preparation, subjects will have to be set up for each of the different languages in use. This is the task of a moderator.

Didactical Preparations

It is helpful to agree upon certain rules for writing when working with Vis-à-vis. These should be discussed before with the pupils and – if necessary – adapted to the particular situation. Another important aspect is to decide on the function that Vis-à-vis is going to fulfil. For subject-oriented writing there are other rules to be observed than when using the Vis-à-vis in the sense of the “free text” of Freinet. [Kock 2006, p. 74]. The following canon of rules by Ruf/Gallin may serve here as a basis:

1. *Subject, assignment and situation of writing arranged by the teacher are the impetus for the first version of a text.*
2. *Once the first version has been brought down to paper (possibly with the help of a cluster), it will be checked on its viability by the responses of several readers.*
3. *The author will then process his readers’ reactions into a reflection which may lead to an information concept.*
4. *Readers may help the author in his search for a suitable information concept. During this process, the author will put a stronger focus on what he really wishes to say and what he intends to bring about. (What is the intention of the author?)
Readers will try to discover possibilities already conceived in the text. (What may be achieved by the text?)*
5. *Once this receptive phase of the first version is completed, the author will decide on whether he wishes to revise his text, whether a new version is needed or if he should turn to a new subject.*
6. *If the author meets the challenge of a second version, he will decide upon an explicitly formulated information concept. With the choice of his information concept, the author disengages himself from his original writing assignment in a more or less strong manner, and now sets up for himself the requirements that he wishes to meet with his revised version and according to which his text will be finally assessed. [Ruf/Gallin 1998, p. 267f]*

In the case of collective writing one has to observe that it is the owner of the text, i.e. the person that originally produced the text and then invited the other writers for co-writing, who has the right to decide upon the completion date of the text and on the parts that are to be included in the final text. Considering the fact that Vis-à-vis only shows this person’s name in the completed and published text, it appears to be suitable to include the names of the co-authors into the text itself. Sometimes it may also be appropriate to mark the parts of the texts written by the respective author, e.g. by using a special colour. If pupils write up texts together and are only able to communicate on-line, it will be suitable to communicate on the text work via the comment function and arrange in this manner who will write on what subject and at which part in the text. An alternative arrangement might consist of agreeing on entering comments into the text, marked by special features (i.e. by using a background colouring) that might be erased again before publication of the text.

When commenting on texts it is important to stick to the most relevant rules of feedback that also correspond to the age of the pupils. These rules should be made public to the groups of writers (See the part of the exercises).

Application of Visavis

The following examples only represent a small selection from the field of application of Visavis:

Visavis for working on „Free Texts“: Following directly the concept of Freinet, it is recommended to choose as incentives for writing those subjects that have been taken up from the „Milieu“ or – in a more modern language – the environment of the child’s daily life. Children are thus enabled to express in their texts those topics and concerns that are most urgent for them right now and work on „core ideas“ [Ruf/Gallin 1998]. In order to avoid too strong limitations on the subject proposals, one general category of subject should be included in each language which children may use if they feel that their text will not fit into one of the indicated categories. This category may then simply be headed “free text” or “important for me.

Visavis as a Diary: In a long-term perspective of application, Vis-à-vis may also be kept as an online-diary. Such a diary may either consist of a collection of individual diaries or also as a joint class diary composed of a documentation of important events written by individual pupils or group of pupils in regular periods of time. Such a diary will be particularly interesting if more than one class contributes to the diary with their experience. Via the comment function questions might be asked on the text, and explanations and complementary remarks might be added. .

Vis-à-vis as a picture gallery: Vis-à-vis may not only be used for the publication of texts, but also as a medium for exhibiting pictures and discussing on these. The authors and artists may put their pieces of work online and add an explanation or description in form of a text if desired. Questions on the items, suggestions and critical remarks may then be added by the viewers by means of commentaries.

Vis-à-vis for creative texts: Vis-à-vis is particularly suitable for creative text work. Many of the examples and suggestions indicated in the module „Creative Writing“ may also be implemented with Vis-à-vis. In many possible cases of creative writing, it should not necessarily always be left up to the teaching staff to set up the guideless for work. Sometimes it might be much more suitable if pupils did this task for themselves. The pictures of the above mentioned picture gallery, for instance, might be a wonderful starting point for writing incentives. An interesting alternative could consist of writing up comments on pictures of a different class, rather than on those of one’s own. The discrepancy between the self-interpretation and the interpretation of others might give impetus to interesting discussions at the commentary level.

Vis-à-vis as a book of fairy tales: To retell fairy-tales or to make them up may be a very fascinating activity in particular within the international context as nation-specific peculiarities or differences might often open up room for discussion. In addition, pupils are given the opportunity to illustrate their fairy tales with pictures drawn on their own or reproductions or photographed scenes. .

Vis-à-vis as a specialized book: Vis-à-vis may also be employed for the mutual production of texts that are composed of a collection of specialized information on a certain subject together with picture material by pupils in small group work. By means of thematic categorization and the adding of key words in form of the „important words“ tags, a sort of specialized book on-line or a “Mini-Wikipedia“ will be produced, a valuable project that also gives room for working together with a large number of classes on one Vis-à-vis.