The New 'Back to Normal': CEFR Online Interaction Activities and Strategies in German as a Second Language (GSL) Courses

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During the two years of the pandemic, online interaction activities certainly aided communication between communities, families and students, and at work. After these two years, now – in 2023 – interaction activities seem to have returned to a level of normality, but what kind of normality are we referring to? This paper intends to explore online interaction activities and strategies at a time when online interaction is no longer necessary, due to extreme external conditions, but remains a sense-making practice in German as a Second Language (GSL) courses. This point of view is based on the author's conviction that online interaction has become part of today's real-life communication in our increasingly digital world, and that students of German language courses are supposed to engage in real-life tasks during the tutorials and beyond, such as online discussions about a specific topic with their peers. In this context 'multi-modal learning' is key for a successful (language) learning process with a view to achieving digital citizenship.

Keywords: CEFR/CV, online interaction activities and strategies, multi-modal learning, real-life communication, digital citizens

1 Introduction

Interaction is central to the CEFR scheme of language use. It involves two or more parties co-constructing the discourse, encompassing oral, written, and online interaction activities (COE 2020: 70). Dedicated scales with descriptors made available for this criterion – alongside others, such as range, accuracy, fluency, and coherence – enable a qualitative and comparative description and hence the evaluation of language skills (COE 2001: 28). For this reason, interaction is also fundamental in learning.

Over recent years, and especially during the pandemic (in 2020-2021), online interaction activities have become increasingly important. This applies across the board and, therefore, also to the German GSL courses at Innsbruck university,[1] which were held online for two years. During that time, oral conversations and discussions took place, for the most part, in group chats on Zoom[2]. Since switching back to in-person classes in 2022, the new 'back to normal' now includes two in-person classes and one online class per week.

This paper will discuss examples taken from the chat threads collected over the course of two semesters, with a total of 35 students, in B2/B2+ courses during the 2022 summer semester and in B1/

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1. Vorstudienlehrgang der Universität Innsbruck [University Preparation Programme for the Supplementary Examination in German]: https://www.uibk.ac.at/weiterbildung/ulg/vorstudienlehrgang-deutsch/index.html. en (accessed 28 September 2023)
2. Zoom Video Communications, Inc. https://zoom.us

B1+ courses during the 2022-23[3] winter semester. By applying the CEFR/CV scales for online conversation and discussion (COE: 84-86) the interaction strategies used by learners: turn-taking, co-operating and asking for clarification (COE 2020: 70) will be analysed. This happens through the prism of action research, a concept geared towards a personal process, from the tutor's perspective, of evaluating changes, and reflecting upon outcomes, in order to improve and/or renew one's own didactic approach (Schart 2021). This process takes in the students' opinions on their personal experiences as learners, compiled through an anonymous survey. With this in mind, final considerations will focus on the concept of multi-modal learning (COE; Wilden 2021) based on real-life communication (Feick and Rymarzyk 2022), which may lead to the students' acquisition of skills for actively participating in digital society, and thus pave the way for students to become digital citizens (Frau-Meigs et al. 2017).

2 Online Interaction

According to the CEFR/CV, "[o]nline communication is always mediated through a machine, which implies that it is unlikely ever to be exactly the same as face-to-face interaction." (COE 2020: 84). However, over recent years, online interaction activities have become paramount. This applies to all domains: personal, public, occupational and educational (COE 2020: 191). And yet, what does it take to communicate within a digital space, and to become digitally literate?

2.1 Digital literacy

According to Ollivier (2018: 8), digital literacy results from the interplay of three main sets of competences: technology literacy, meaning-making literacy and interaction literacy (see figure 1). This means being both a digital consumer and a digital agent (Ollivier 2018: 12). The former is able to select and (critically) use digital devices and resources, as online dictionaries for instance, the latter is able to function within a digital space, by being active on social media for example or by developing and creating digital resources (Ollivier 2018: 9-10). Having access to new technologies and digital resources is certainly a prerequisite for the possibility to engage in online conversations, and to be technologically literate. This happens through a digital device, such as a desktop computer, laptop or tablet, a (stable) internet connection, with a webcam and a videoconferencing service as a communication channel.
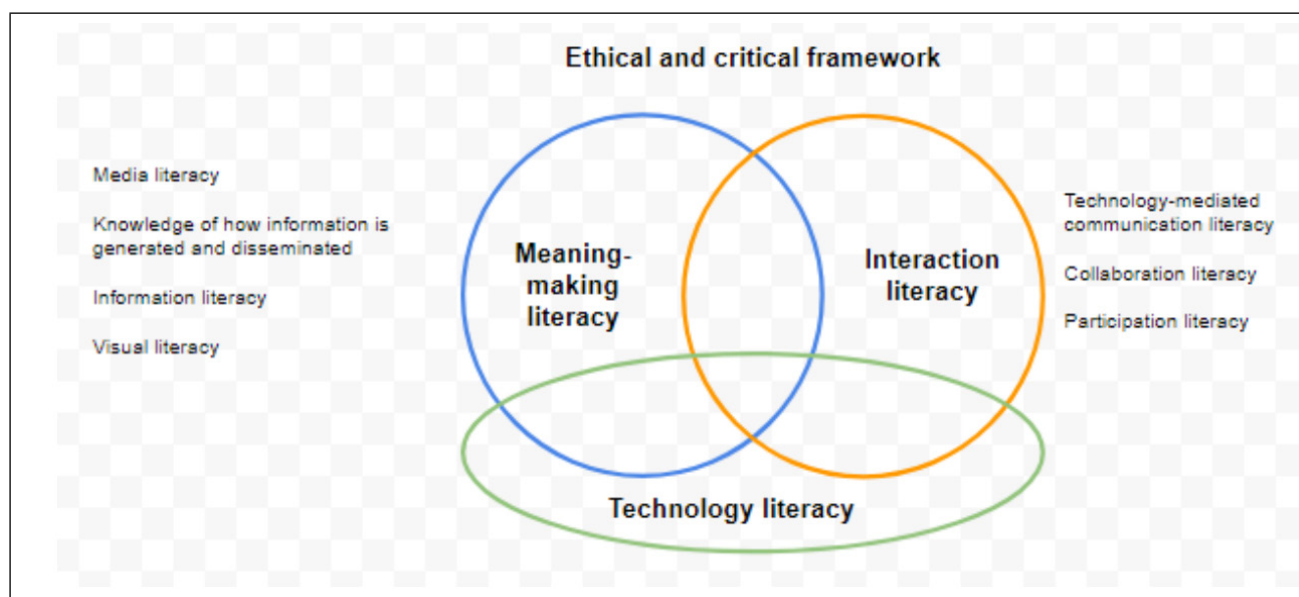

Figure 1. Digital literacy (Ollivier 2018: 8)

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3. All the threads were anonymised or partially deleted, depending on the students' consent to use the content by using 'ST' for 'student' and added numbers.

The meaning-making literacy focuses on the construction of meaning and on the knowledge of how information is generated and disseminated. According to the UNESCO's Prague Declaration (UNESCO 2003), the ability to "identify, locate, evaluate, organize and effectively create, use and communicate information to address issues or problems at hand" is "key to social, cultural and economic development of nations and communities, institutions and individuals."

In Addition, interaction literacy can be defined as "the ability to exchange and collaborate efficiently and appropriately while using all the available technologies at hand" (Ollivier 2018: 10). With this in mind, we now consider a possible application of this intertwine of literacies.

2.2 Implementation of the GSL courses

Our GSL courses at Innsbruck university were held online for four consecutive semesters during the pandemic (2020-2022). This situation required the provision of a virtual classroom with remote access through a digital device with a webcam and a communication channel, which in our case was Zoom. During these tutorials, many students decided to keep their webcams switched off, be it for personal reasons or for technical reasons (to maintain their internet connection), while keeping their microphones turned on. However, due to the individual learning environments with a variety of background noise, we opted to mute all microphones, unmuting them individually when needed. The result was a collage of black tiles, with only a handful of visible faces—and a frighteningly silent setting. As a result, two main questions had to be addressed: Why would students hide behind their devices and how would this backdrop enable students to engage in conversations and discussions?

To respond to the first question, it can be observed that many younger students often are regarded as 'digital natives' known for their ability to use new technologies, however their practices may have a limited scope, mainly for social exchanges. They might be 'tech-comfy', i.e. they use technologies for private purposes, but not 'tech-savvy', i.e. they cannot simply transfer these skills to different contexts, such as their professional or educational environments (Ollivier 2018: 12). A certain personal insecurity due to the (new) educational and/or professional setting, in the context of a university language course, could be a reason for their hiding.

As to the second question, I opted for one of the available features on Zoom, which was the group chat window (breakout rooms). The idea was to engage in conversations and discussions on a given topic, as would have been the case for in-person tutorials. Before a given group discussion began, students were asked to reflect on a specific topic in small groups (breakout sessions), engaging in oral discussions with their peers. In this case, the necessary files were made available for download through the university's OpenOLAT platform[4]. After completing their tasks, the students would return to the main session and start a discussion in the group chat by presenting their ideas and questions. However, this approach brought with it a number of new complications: the students' contributions appeared simultaneously not sequentially as would have been the case in an in-person discussion, and they were not spoken but written, which led to a form of "speaking in writing" (Pramstaller 2022: 105). This means, "writing much as you would speak, in a slowed-down dialogue" (COE 2020: 70). In written interaction the language used is similar to oral language, and there is a certain tolerance of error and confusion, and producing a carefully structured, accurate text is less of a priority (COE 2020: 81-82).

Since switching back to in-person classes in 2022, the new 'back to normal' now includes two in-person classes and one online class per week (with the same group of students). I decided to continue with the chat interaction activities during certain online tutorials, using the MatrixChat feature of the university's OpenOLAT platform as a chatroom[5]. With this setting in mind, let us now consider the strategies used by learners.

4.   https://www.uibk.ac.at/de/ecampus/werkzeuge/openolat/
5.   MatrixChat is an opensource chat system with end-to-end encryption for communication between employees, students, project groups, etc.

3 (Online) Interaction Strategies

In the CEFR/CV, three descriptors are available for interaction strategies: "Taking the floor" ("Turn-taking"), "Co-operating" and "Asking for clarification" (COE 2020: 71). These strategies, however, do not only apply just to online interaction, but to all interaction activities: oral, written, and online. This is a crucial point, as all three interaction activities are part of our everyday lives, and involve interplay in our real world, which is becoming increasingly digital.

Exploring online interaction strategies means starting from the global scales proposed by the CEFR/CV. For the purposes of this paper, the following descriptors apply (COE 2020: 85):

B2	Can engage in online exchanges between several participants, effectively linking their contributions to previous ones in the thread, provided a moderator helps manage the discussion.
B1	Can post a comprehensible contribution in an online discussion on a familiar topic of interest, provided they can prepare the text beforehand and use online tools to fill gaps in language and check accuracy.

However, as the CEFR/CV (COE 2020: 87) indicates, there are certain requirements for successful online interaction, such as "the need for more redundancy in messages", "the need to check that the message has been correctly understood", "the ability to reformulate in order to help comprehension and deal with misunderstandings", and "the ability to handle emotional reactions".

3.1 Turn-taking

This scale is concerned with the ability to take the initiative in discussions. From my point of view, this includes one key aspect: "initiating, maintaining and ending conversations" (COE 2020: 88). As we can see from examples (1), (2) and (3), students tend to initiate a conversation using an emoji or a salutation as icebreaker, before starting the actual discussion related to the given topic.

(1)[6]	ST2	😄
	ST3	😎

(2)[7]	ST3	Hallo [Hello]
	ST5	👋
	ST7	Hallo [Hello]

(3)[8]	ST3	hi [Hi]
	ST7	hallo [Hello]
	ST2	Hallo an alle [Hello everyone]

Subsequently, for the purpose of getting involved in the discussion, students used key elements and phrases for speech, such as *Es geht um* [It is about]; *Zum Thema... kann ich sagen, dass* [With regards to this topic, I can say that]; *Aus meiner Erfahrung kann ich nur sagen, dass* [Based on my experience, I can

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6. Example (1): Gruppenchat_B2 B2+_Thema Gleicher Lohn für gleiche Arbeit?_06.04.2022
   [Group_chat_B2 B2+_Topic Equal pay for work of equal value?_06.04.2022]
7. Example (2): Gruppenchat_B2 B2+_Thema Konflikte/Streit_29.03.2022
   [Group_chat_B2 B2+_Topic conflicts/arguments_29.03.2022]
8. Example (3): Gruppenchat_B2 B2+_Thema Was Männer und Frauen wirklich wollen?_03.05.2022
   [Group_chat_B2 B2+_Topic What men and women really want?_03.05.2022]

only say that], which are relevant functional chunks to initiate a conversation, and which were part of our tutorials (see examples (4), (5) and (6)).
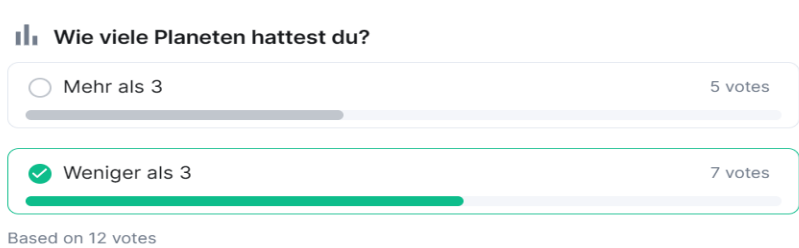
(4)[9]	ST12	Es geht um das Thema "Einkommenungleichheit" [It's a matter of 'inequality of income'.]

(5)	ST10	Zum Thema "Was Frauen und Männer wirklich wollen" kann ich sagen, dass beide sich mehr auf Arbeit als auf Familie konzentrieren. Der Grund dafur ist, dass heute alles sehr teuer geworden ist. Sie brauchen unbedingt Geld und haben Angst, wenn nr ein Person alles übernimmt.
	ST9	👍 1
		[With regards to the topic 'What men and women really want' I can say that both focus more on work than on family. The reason for this is that nowadays everything has become more expensive. They absolutely need money and are scared if only one person takes care of everything.]

(6)	ST11	Aus Maeiner erfahrung kann ich nur dazu sagen, dass eine Erwerbsarbeit fur eine Familie nicht genug ist. Manner und Frauen sollen beide arbeiten.
		👍 1
	ST9	[From my experience I can only say that one income is not enough for a family. Both men and women should have a job.]

In order to keep a conversation going, students posed direct questions to their peers, who then replied by commenting to that post, by adding an emoji, by posing questions themselves – as shown in example (7) – or by expressing their general approval on the ongoing discussion in general (see example 8).

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9.   Examples (4), (5) and (6): Gruppenchat_B2 B2+_Thema Was Männer und Frauen wirklich wollen?_03.05.2022 [Group_chat_B2 B2+_Topic What men and women really want?_03.05.2022]

(7)[10]	ST32	Musik ohne Worte ist meiner Meinung nach effektiver. Sie können beispielsweise Musik von Ramin Djawadi und Hans Zimmer hören und genießen.
	ST34	👌 1
		[From my point of view music without words is more effective. You could listen for example to Ramin Djawadi's and Hans Zimmer's music and enjoy.]
	ST33	| Musik ohne Worte ist meiner Meinung nach effektiver. Sie können beispielsweise
		| Musik von Ramin Djawadi und Hans Zimmer hören und genießen.
	ST32	Ramin Djawadi ist auch einer von mein Liebliengster Künstler (edited)
	ST33	😍 1
		Game of Thrones Arbeit war unglaublich
		[Ramin Djawadi is also one of my favourite artists
	ST34	The work of game of thrones was unbelievable]
	ST33	| Ramin Djawadi ist auch einer von mein Liebliengster Künstler
		Wow kennst du Ramin?
		[Wow you know Ramin?]
		| Wow kennst du Ramin?
		naturlich wer nicht???
		[Of course who doesn't???]

| (8) | ST23 | Ich freue mich über diese interessante Diskussion 👍 |
| | | [I'm happy about this interesting discussion] |

In addition, to keep the conversation going, a student started a survey on their own initiative, and by doing so, they had every single peer engaged into the discussion. They decided to explore the available features in MatrixChat themselves, a process soon after imitated by one of their peers, addressing another question to the group, as we can see in examples (9) and (10).

(9)[11]	ST25	📊 **Wie viele Planeten hattest du?**
		⭕ Mehr als 3 5 votes
		✅ Weniger als 3 7 votes
		Based on 12 votes
		[How many planets did you get?
		More than 3
		Less than 3]

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10. Examples (7) and (8): Gruppenchat_B1 B1+_Thema Musik und Emotionen_18.01.2023
    [Group_chat_B2 B2+_Topic Music and emotions_18.01.2022]
11. Examples (9), (10), and (11): Gruppenchat_B1 B1+_Thema Umweltschutz_30.11.2022
    [Group_chat_B2 B2+_Topic Environmentalism_30.11.2022]

(10)	ST31	
		[Have you ever heard about 'eco-bricks'?
		yes
		no]

Moreover, another student decided to insert a picture in reply to a previous post. This picture was either taken from the internet or from their personal pictures on their laptop, as it was not available in MatrixChat, thus exploring other available features and contributing to the ongoing discussion.

(11)	ST21	Um das gleiche Protein zu bekommen, das ich aus ein paar hundert Gramm Fleisch bekommen kann, muss ich ungefähr ein Kilo Gemüse essen..
	ST19	😂 1
		[In order to get the same amount of protein, which I can get in some hundred grams of meat, I need to eat about one kilo of vegetables..]
	ST25	
	ST31	

Keeping a conversation going goes hand-in-hand with the strategy of co-operating, which will be discussed in Section 3.2. In addition, it is worth noting that "turn-taking" is also part of "pragmatic competence", since it is, according to the CEFR/CV, "a crucial part of discourse competence" (COE 2020: 129). Pragmatic competence exploits the learner's knowledge of the principles of language use in the (co-)construction of text (COE 2020: 137), which requires co-operation. As far as ending a conversation was concerned, it was necessary to ask a final question and/or to officially end the discussion in the role of tutor, as none of the students in any discussion would post final comments or conclusions whatsoever to the topic, preferring to await instructions.

3.2 Cooperating

This strategy concerns collaborative discourse moves intended to help a discussion develop (COE 2020: 88). As conversations and discussions require collaboration in a group, i.e., "thinking in a dynamic co-constructive process", a key aspect in doing so, from my point of view, is scaling in the area of mediation described as "Facilitating collaborative interaction with peers" (COE 2020: 90). There is, for instance, verbal approval, shown in example (12) and (13) (*Ich stimme dir zu* [I agree with you]*; Stimmt* [Right]*; genau* [Exactly]). There are also cases of self-correction, even if the error in question was merely a typo (*wütde würde**), as example (14) shows, or a grammar mistake of the relative pronoun (*der das* [that masculine] [that neuter]), which would have been easily comprehensible in any case in this context (example 15).

(12)[12]	ST8	| Es ist wichtig, dass die Beide Partner im Gespräch genau zuhören.
	ST9	Ich stimme dir zu :)
	ST8	🙏 1
		[It is important that both partners listen carefully during a conversation.
		I agree]

(13)[13]	ST9	| Ich stimme dir zu :)
	ST2	Stimmt, Tip 3 vom Video „zuhören" immer gut funktioniert
		[Right, advice no. 3 'listen to others' from the videoclip always works]
		| Stimmt, Tip 3 vom Video „zuhören" immer gut funktioniert
	ST8	genau, außedem funktioniert ‚zusehen auch ganau . Man versteht viele Gefühle von sein Partner oder seine Partnerin.
		[Exactly, moreover 'watching' also works. You understand many of your partner's emotions.]

(14)[14]	ST11	Ich wütde un meinem Land in die 60 Jahre reisen. Ich würde gerne das Land kennen, das wir hatten, bevor die Diktatur alle Kultur un intellektuellen ausgelöscht hat.
		👍 1
		würde*
		[I would travel back in time in my country in the 1960ies. I would like to know the country we had before the dictatorship eradicated all the culture and intellectual. would*]

(15)	ST16	| Aber wenn man genauer anschaut, dann sieht man, dass sich z.B. die Sklaverei | sehr in diesem Zeitraum reduziert und dann bäuerische Wirtschaft wurde folglich | etabliert.
		Und das Mittelalter ist ein langer Zeitraum, der ungefähr 1000 Jahre dauerte
		das*
		👍 1
		[And the Middle Ages are a long period of time, that lasted about 1000 years that*]

This means that it was important for them to communicate clearly, to ensure that they were understood by their peers and to fuel the discussion with potentially comprehensible and communicative content. Example (16) shows a sequence of interactions, starting with a serious statement about work and family, about how men and women in our society cope with their everyday life. One student agrees by giving a 'thumbs up gesture indicating approval' which is considered to be 'a popular means of quickly

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12. Example (12): Gruppenchat_B2 B2+_Thema Konflikte/Streit_29.03.2022
    [Group_chat_B2 B2+_Topic conflicts/arguments_29.03.2022]
13. Example (13): Gruppenchat_B2 B2+_Thema Konflikte/Streit_29.03.2022
    [Group_chat_B2 B2+_Topic conflicts/arguments_29.03.2022]
14. Example (14) and (15): Gruppenchat_B2 B2+_Thema Zeitreisen_07.06.2022
    [Group_chat_B2 B2+_Topic Time travel_07.06.2022]

and earnestly expressing approval' (Emojipedia 2023). Then another peer commented on the post by starting off with a serious statement *Ich denke, die Aufgabenteilung ist der beste Weg.* [I think the division of tasks is the best way] before immediately making a joke *Zum Beispiel sollen Frauen kochen und wir Männer essen...* [For example, women should cook and us men should eat] adding a 'face with a big grin, widely used to show something is funny or pleasing' (Emojipedia 2023). The prompt reaction of another peer with 'a face with a big grin and rolling on the floor laughing' generates a reaction on the part of the first student who posted the first comment in example (16), who adds two 'faces with a big grin, widely used to show something is funny or pleasing'. This in turn gave rise to a reaction from another student, who reinstated a more serious tone with the comment *Da möchte ich widersprechen, Ich finde Männer kochen besser als Frauen.* [I disagree. Men are better cooks than women], garnering a 'thumbs up'. This sequence clearly shows the ability of a group of students to discuss a given topic both seriously and not-so-seriously, by choosing appropriate words, structures, comments and combinations of emojis.

(16)[15]	ST10	ZumThema" Was Frauen und Männer wirklich wollen" kann ich sagen, dass beides ich mehr auf Arbeit als auf Familie konzentrieren. Der Grund dafür ist, dass heute alles sehr teuer geworden ist. Sie brauchen unbedingt Geld und haben Angst, wenn nur ein Person alles übernimmt.
	ST9	👍 1
		[With regards to the topic 'What men and women really want' I can say that both focus more on work than on the family. The reason for this is that nowadays everything has become more expensive. They absolutely need money and are scared if only one person takes over everything.]
	ST3	Ich denke, die Aufgabenteilung ist der beste Weg. Zum Beispiel sollen Frauen kochen und wir Männer essen 😂
	ST8	😂 1
		[I think splitting up chores is the best way. For example women should cook and men should eat..]
	ST10	❘ 😂😂
	ST11	Da möchte ich widersprecheIcnh, finde Männer kochen besser als Frauen
	ST9	👍 1
		[I would like to disagree, I think men are better cooks than women.]

3.3 Asking for clarification

This strategy deals with taking action in an interaction in order to "indicate whether one is following or not, and to ask follow-up questions on certain points, to check comprehension" (COE 2020: 89). As we can see in example (17), a student is interested in knowing more about a peer's contribution by asking a direct question *Warum Computer?* [Why computer?] together with a 'thinking face' emoji intended to 'show a person pondering or deep in thought. Often used to question or scorn something or someone, as if saying *Hmm, I don't know about that*.' (Emojipedia 2023). By imitation, another peer just used the same emoji, which can be interpreted as posing the same follow-up question as their peer without writing out the full question.

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(17)[16]	ST22	| Ich muss weniger Zeit Computer verwenden
	ST34	Warum Computer? 🤔
	ST31	🤔 1
		[I must spend less time at the computer
		Why computer?]

(18)[17]	ST22	|bis jetzt gab es 2 Musik aber ich glaube es wird erhöhen :))
	ST34	Welche?:)
		[Up to now there have been 2 songs but I think he will increase.
		Which ones?]

(19)[18]	ST3	|zum Beispiel sind Frauen bereit, für niedrigere Geld zu arbeiten und glücklicher zu sein.
	ST14	Äh was? Nein Frauen sind nicht glücklich wenn sie niederiger Gehalt bekommen!
		[Er what? No women are not happy if they get a lower salary!]

Such spontaneous reactions can be associated with "Plauder-Chat" [Chit-Chat], which is a text-based form of chat communication widely known and used in everyday life (Spitzmüller 2009: 80). Almost all the examples cited include emojis or emoticons, images or other codes to "make the message convey tone, stress and prosody, but also the affective/emotional side, irony, etc." (COE 2020: 85), which is an important part of online interaction as a "multi-modal phenomenon". Example (20) clearly shows the ability to use irony in a conversation, which requires linguistic competence as well as the necessary soft skills.

(20)[19]	ST33	| Ich höre gerne Rihanna's pour it up, wenn meine Freundin nicht in der Nähe ist. :p
	ST22	warum darfst du nicht hören .D
		[I like to listen to Rihanna's pour it up when my girlfriend is not around.
		Why are you not allowed to listen to it]

4 Discussion

The following discussion is considered in terms of action research – a concept geared towards a personal process, from the tutor's point of view, of approaching challenges, creating innovation, evaluating changes, and reflecting on outcomes, which then lead to enhanced outcomes in terms of one's own didactic approach and implementations (Schart 2021). Based on the idea that both the attitude of, and observation by tutors have a significant impact on what takes place in the classroom (Gerlach

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16.   Example (17): Gruppenchat_B1 B1+_Thema Umweltschutz_30.11.2022
      [Group_chat_B2 B2+_Topic Environmentalism_30.11.2022]

17.   Example (18): Gruppenchat_B1 B1+_Thema Musik und Emotionen_18.01.2023
      [Group_chat_B2 B2+_Topic Music and emotions_18.01.2022]

18.   Example (19): Gruppenchat_B2 B2+_Thema Gleicher Lohn für gleiche Arbeit? 06.04.2022
      [Group_chat_B2 B2+_Topic Equal pay for work of equal value?_06.04.2022]

19.   Example (20): Gruppenchat_B1 B1+_Thema Musik und Emotionen_18.01.2023
      [Group_chat_B2 B2+_Topic Music and emotions_18.01.2022]

2021: 40), the reflection on the process and the adaptation of course materials, teaching methods and teaching goals – with the aim of achieving high-quality teaching and learning – have a significant role to play. With this in mind, we now have a look at the students' perspective on their experience with online discussions in MatrixChat compared to in-person oral discussions, as both groups have had the possibility to compare the two formats.

4.1 The students' point of view[20]

Generally speaking, both student groups mainly preferred the in-person format over to its online counterpart. A number of students considered chatting to be *langweilig* [boring], *ich bin im Online Unterricht abgelenkt* [I get distracted during the online tutorials], *oft fühlte ich mich nicht so konzentriert* [I often felt unable to focus]. However, there are certain elements worth considering within the scope of this paper, as Figure 2 and Figure 3 show:
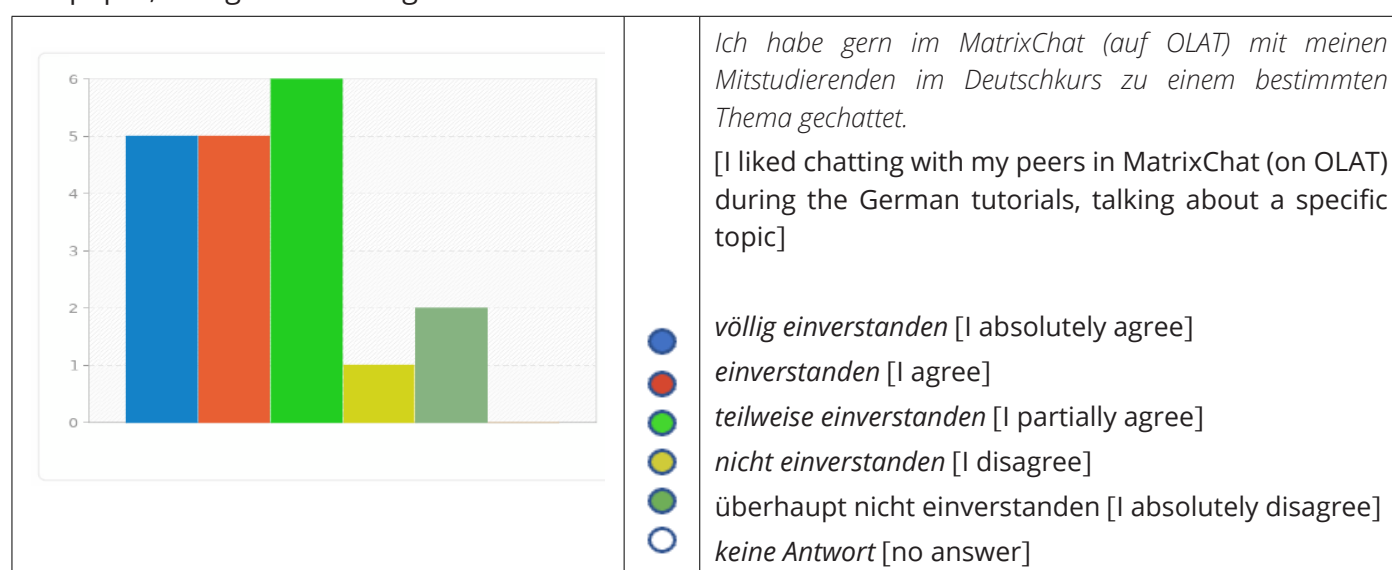
Ich habe gern im MatrixChat (auf OLAT) mit meinen Mitstudierenden im Deutschkurs zu einem bestimmten Thema gechattet.

[I liked chatting with my peers in MatrixChat (on OLAT) during the German tutorials, talking about a specific topic]

● *völlig einverstanden* [I absolutely agree]
● *einverstanden* [I agree]
● *teilweise einverstanden* [I partially agree]
● *nicht einverstanden* [I disagree]
● *überhaupt nicht einverstanden* [I absolutely disagree]
○ *keine Antwort* [no answer]

Figure 2. Chatting with my peers

	Warum (nicht)? [Why (not)?]
(21)	*Mann konnte schriftlich erklären was sprachlich nicht möglich war* [It was possible to explain in writing what was not possible linguistically]
(22)	*Es ist eine neue Art zu lernen* [It is a new way of learning]
(23)	*Das ist bequem* [It is convenient]
(24)	*Es ist ersichtlich, dass wire in gute system haben während des Kurses, das macht es sehr Praktisch* [It's clear that we do have a good system in our language course, which makes it very useful]
(25)	*Hier könnte Man viele Technology sehen.das war sehr interessant und toll* [Here we had access to loads of technology. This was awesome and very interesting.]

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1. 20 Limesurvey, anonymous online questionnaire with about 20 multiple-choice and open questions in total, summer semester 2022 and winter semester 2022-23

(26)	*weil man etw sagen kann, ohne andere zu unterbrechen*
	[Because you can say something without interrupting others]
(27)	*Einfach um was aufzuschreiben, was wir uns merken müssen und manchmal ist es hilfreich, die Möglichkeit zu haben, etwas aufzuschreiben was alle sehen können (oder nur bestimmte Menschen wenn man den Chat so einstellt).*
	[Easy to write something down that is worth remembering, and sometimes it's helpful to have the options to write something down that everyone can see (or only certain people, if you choose this option in the settings]

When asked about their perception of chatting with their peers during the German tutorials, most – though not all – of the students stated that they liked doing so. As we can see in example (22), one student explained their view of chatting a new way of learning. What elements can actually be considered to be new? One student stated that by conducting a written – rather than oral – discussion it was easier to explain things (example (21)). This is an interesting point, if we consider that the student in example (27) also talked about the advantages of "writ[ing] something down". This means that the possibility of writing can offer a sort of "scaffolding" (Gibbons 2003: 249), made available by the technology deployed for online discussions, for the students to use in a written discussion. Another significant aspect is the idea of avoiding interrupting others in discussions (example (26)), which can be considered part of the 'soft skills' necessary for maintaining a respectful, successful discussion.
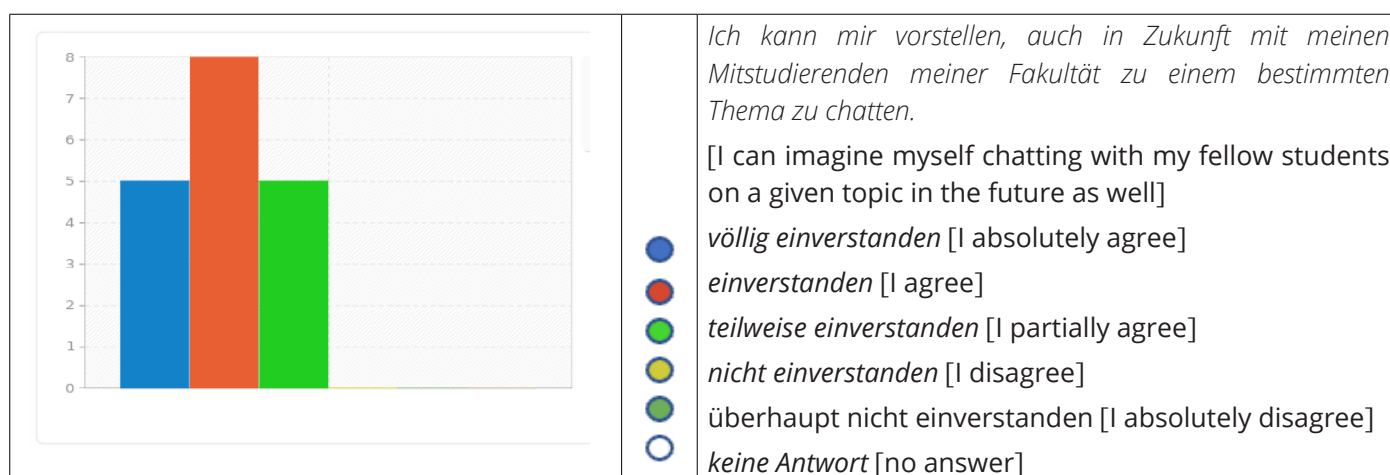

Ich kann mir vorstellen, auch in Zukunft mit meinen Mitstudierenden meiner Fakultät zu einem bestimmten Thema zu chatten.

[I can imagine myself chatting with my fellow students on a given topic in the future as well]

völlig einverstanden [I absolutely agree]

einverstanden [I agree]

teilweise einverstanden [I partially agree]

nicht einverstanden [I disagree]

überhaupt nicht einverstanden [I absolutely disagree]

keine Antwort [no answer]

Figure 3. Chatting in the future

	Warum (nicht)? [Why (not)?]
(28)	*Ich vergesse manchmal Wörter wenn ich im Unterricht spreche.aber wenn ich beim chatten ein wort vergesse, suche ich im internet*
	[Sometimes I forget some words when I talk during the classes, but when I forget a word during chats, I look it up on the internet]
(29)	*Ich habe gute Sätze oder Wörter von anderen gelernt*
	[I have learned effective sentences or words from others]
(30)	*Es ist gut, weil ich die Wörter nachlesen kann. Nicht nur einmal hören, denn vergessen*
	[It is good, because I can re-read the words, rather than just hearing them once and promptly forgetting them]

(31)	*Ich habe zu viel Spaß beim Chatten und machmal ist Chatten praktischer als Reden.*
	[I have had lots of fun while chatting and sometimes chatting is more practical than speaking]
(32)	*Ich bin einverstanden, weil ich es nützlich sehen*
	[I agree, because I see it as useful]
(33)	*Es hat gut funktioniert, weil alle ihre Meinung schreiben können. Nicht*
	nur ein paar Leute.
	[It has worked out well, because everyone can express their opinion in writing, rather than just some people.]

When asked if they believe they will chat with peers in the future, too, the students largely agreed. They also talked about the possibilty of using the dictionary for their posts (see example (28)), which is exactly what the B1-descriptor for online interaction strategies states (see Section 3). Example (30) confirms once again that the written form of the discussion may facilitate understanding of the conversation, as posts can be read twice if needed, in order to help comprehension. Finally, examples (29) and (33) focus on the importance of learning from/with others – which is exactly what (online) interaction in language courses, as well as in real life, is about.

4.2 Real-life communication

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have clearly permeated our daily lives, and equally, online chatting has established itself in the mainstream of everyday communication. This means that real-life communication is based on the use of technological interactions (Wilden 2021: 157). In addition to messenger use for private reasons, online chat-based communication has also found its way into the professional sphere, as the websites of various service providers offer various contact options for customers. Apart from the possibility to communicating by phone (speaking) or by email (writing), a so-called 'chatbot' feature is now increasingly common. This is a virtual assistant that is available in a chat window for frequently asked questions (e.g., by AXA Versicherung Österreich or Hypo Tirol Bank AG).[21] The internet and mobile provider Magenta also offers a chat window called 'community', where customers can engage with other customers in an online discussion in the chat.[22] GSL students usually open a bank account in their place of study, buy a new SIM card for their mobile phones and might take out insurance policy. Therefore, students might most likely be engaging with these kinds of websites or work in these fields themselves in the future.

On the one hand, this means that students are already accustomed to communicating via chat, and the ability to "engage competently and positively with digital technologies (creating, working, sharing, socialising, investigating, playing, communicating, and learning) is defined as 'digital citizenship' (Frau-Meigs 2017: 11). On the other hand, however, knowing how to use ICTs in an effective, efficient, and safe way is "no longer sufficient to be an effective citizen in a technology-rich society" (Frau-Meigs 2017: 39). Rather, this new phase requires "attitudes that support positive connection with others", which represent one of the key elements for developing digital fluency (Frau-Meigs 2017: 40) and "socio-relational and emotional competences" (soft skills) for effective participation in our digital society (Frau-Meigs 2017: 39). This is the reason why multi-modal learning is key.

4.3 Multi-modal learning

The CEFR concept of learners being a "social agent, i.e., members of society who have tasks […] to

21. AXA-Versicherung Österreich https://www.axa-assistance.at/; Hypo Tirol Bank AG https://www.hypotirol.com/

22. Magenta https://www.magenta.at

accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action" (COE 2001: 9), implies now, more than 20 years later, being also "multi-modal" (COE 2020: 84). This capacity of acting in diverse contexts (Wilden 2021: 162) is based on the concept of multi-literacies (Cope and Kalantzis 2009). The prefix 'multi' refers to various aspects: on the one hand, it concerns the variety of possibilities of meaning-making, such as representation and negotiation of meaning in written, oral, visual, auditory, tactile, gestural, and spatial forms. On the other hand, the prefix also denotes the variety of cultural, social, and professional contexts in which literacy is applied (Wilden 2021: 160-161). Moreover, as we have seen in section 2.1, the intertwine of digital literacies are key to today's effective communication. As a consequence, this diversity should be taken into account in preparatory courses, in part because learners' ability to act as a social agent can only be fostered if it corresponds to the current zeitgeist. The concept of multi-literacies refers precisely to the ongoing, global changes that co-occur with the changing times (Cope and Kalantzis 2009: 165). Finally, considering the effectiveness of multi-modal learning in language courses, we have seen that it is certainly in line with today's real-life communication, and therefore referring to real-world tasks that involve "real-world processes of language" (Ollivier 2018: 26). However, conducting a survey among students in a given time in the future to reflect retrospectively if and to what extend these kinds of tasks have helped them with their (online) communication, could certainly be a desideratum of research.

5 Conclusions

Changes in social life and in interpersonal communications in everyday life, at work, and at university are among the innovations that are subject to change over time. This phenomenon also includes those changes that led to new teaching and learning conditions in 2020 due to the pandemic. In this initially unfamiliar setting, learners' interactive communicative competence, expressed through active participation in social processes by means of language, continued to be the focus of GSL courses, since the development of interactive learning processes was then – as it remains today – one of the main tasks of a GSL tutor (Schart 2021: 37). In this light, three important insights can be gained at this point. First, students have demonstrated that they are able to use interactive strategies for successful conversations, even under newly created conditions – taking the floor, co-operation and asking for clarification (COE 2020: 81-82). Second, successful interaction requires a "holistic integration of different aspects" (COE 2020: 90) in order to make communication work. As communication nowadays takes place through digital devices, students of all subjects, including students of GSL courses, are increasingly becoming digital citizens, which means they should be "participating actively and responsibly (values, skills, attitudes, knowledge, and critical understanding) in communities (local, national, global)" (Frau-Meigs 2017: 12). Third, with this in mind, it is crucial for GSL tutors to focus on sense-making practices aligned with 'the new normal' of today's reality.

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7 Biography

Kerstin Pramstaller has been a senior lecturer in German as a Second/Foreign Language (GSL/GFL) at Innsbruck University since 2019. She has also been a lecturer in German at the language centre of the Free University of Bolzano-Bozen (Italy) since 2017. She has been a member of the board of examiners for bilingual exams (German/Italian) at the Amt für Landessprachen und Bürgerrechte, Dienststelle für Zwei- und Dreisprachigkeits prüfungen, Bolzano-Bozen (Italy) since 2014. Her research interests currently lie in the fields of gender linguistics, linguistic landscapes and digital teaching and learning.