

Social presence and learner participation in a text chat

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ABSTRACT

'Integrative CALL' (Warschauer, 1996) refers to developments in language learning in this phase. The learner is placed in authentic situations where learning simultaneously involves listening, seeing, doing, participating and reflecting. This paper shares some insights into this new paradigm in language learning where the online delivery of a course gives learners more control over their own learning. Extracts of text chats from an online lesson illustrate how learner initiatives can influence teaching and learning in a synchronous online environment. It is suggested that learner participation plays an important role in developing an interesting pedagogy in the online classroom.

KEYWORDS: *Online learning, learner participation, social presence*

Introduction

E-methods are rapidly changing knowledge delivery practices around the world and have opened new avenues and challenges in teaching and learning. These challenges are faced by many instructors and learners who adapt these new methods of learning. Learners who enroll in online courses must be motivated and disciplined to participate actively in the virtual learning environment.

This paper shares some insights into e-learning through a discussion of learner participation in online tutorials for English courses¹ at the Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR), a virtual institution of higher learning based in Malaysia. UNITAR has adopted a hybrid model where courses are conducted through face-to-face and online modes. The term *learner participation* as used in this paper refers to self-directed involvement in an online lesson which is not a direct response to teacher elicitation.

It has been widely acknowledged that learner initiative to participate and to be involved is an important aspect of classroom interaction (Ellis, 1985). This initiative to participate in a virtual learning environment is equally important. In fact, it could be more important, as it is the main activity for the smooth functioning of online lessons. Pramela (2006) finds that maintaining interaction

¹ In this course students are guided through the basic communication skills needed for their personal and professional life. The conventional grammatical categories are further developed and strengthened. Practice is given in the use of forms and functions of the language in oral and written communication discourse. Written exercises are at paragraph level but with cohesive devices to link paragraphs in to a coherent whole. <http://www.unitar.edu.my/english/course/synopsis> (6/12/03).

in a virtual learning environment is difficult but not impossible. The instructor must play an active and effective role in motivating learning through adequate feedback and encouragement.

Some issues in online teaching and learning

Several scholars (Berge & Collins, 1995; Warschauer, 2000) have discussed the effectiveness and impact of virtual learning. However, many issues still remain, including the need for more research on what is actually going on when teachers and students use technology to facilitate some form of teaching and learning (Warschauer, 2000; Murray, 2000; White, 2003; Pramela, 2006). Relatedly, we need to find out more about how learners learn through this synchronous mode of teaching and learning; what does it take to be a successful online learner?

There is also some concern among educators about the nature and roles of learners' participation in online communication and learning. According to Tsang et al. (2002), learners with better typing and computer skills and prior experience in online learning participate more actively in online discussions. These learners also participate more actively if the learning activity contributes to their final grades. On the other hand, Tsang et al. (2002) also notes that the teachers' philosophy, attitudes, technical competencies, and ability to interact with learners online have a positive impact on the learners. It is the same thing with lecturers and facilitators' ability to efficiently manage the online teaching and learning situation (Abu Daud Silong et al., 2002).

One factor that is particularly significant to online learning is creating *social presence*. In the context of online communication, Mardziah Hayati Abdullah (2004) defines social presence as the ability of participants to project their physical and emotional presence. For Garrison & Anderson (2003), it means creating a climate that supports and encourages probing questions, scepticism and the contribution of more explanatory ideas. This facilitates learner involvement in the online learning environment, where the instructors and learners have to be present in the network to make the online classroom really interactive. Teacher dominance is not the issue here; instead, teachers' effectiveness in seizing opportunities to sustain communication with minimal intrusions and directions is important.

A learner's social presence, however, is not really unproblematic. For example, a learner generally becomes socially present online when he or she makes a comment through posting. In contrast, a silent online behaviour or *lurking* can be construed as an unfavourable behaviour. However, this silent behaviour can also be looked at positively because some learners who are silent may, in reality, be more engaged in the learning process. On the other hand, this is complicated by the fact that some silent learners who are probably weak or timid may not want to contribute for fear of making mistakes. Social presence, therefore, is not necessarily a straightforward concept in online learning research.

The nature of virtual interactions is also a very important matter in this kind of research (Moore, 1990; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Harasim et al., 1995). Interaction is a two-way communication among two or more people within a learning context, with the purpose of either tackling a task or building social

relations. Active learning is thus more than pressing keys; it is a social and cognitive engagement. Making comments requires the learner to pull his or her thoughts into a coherent whole, to respond to peers and to share ideas.

Zeroing in now on language learning, web experiences could provide more interactive dialogue built into the learning experience. Learners need not burden themselves with pronunciation issues or be anxious about oral communication in the target language (Kivela, 1996; cited in Sengupta, 2001). While, according to Beauvois (1998), networked-based learning shares more learner-teacher and learner-learner communication than traditional classes, there is another advantage for ESL (English as a Second Language) students, which is the opportunity for more time to think, to phrase responses and to participate (Sullivan & Pratt, 1996). Thus, since successful language use over time depends on continued language learning and development of proficiency in the second language (Little, 1996), we need to turn any occasion of virtual language use into an occasion of conscious learning.

Having briefly identified some key issues concerning virtual learning in general, and language learning in particular, this paper proceeds to illustrate how social presence and learner participation take shape in a synchronous online environment. Specifically, we attempt to describe particular types of learner participation and explain how they can possibly impact future online teaching and learning in general. All this will be done through an analysis of data from a text chat.

Methodology

The data was obtained through non-participant observations of an online synchronous tutorial, and was part of a much bigger database meant for a doctoral work on a similar topic. This online class had a total of fifteen students but not all of them participated.² After the PowerPoint presentation of the online lesson (on giving an opinion and a supporting statement) a text chat (Appendix A) followed between the online teacher and the students. An excerpt from this chat (or real-time conversation/s) would form the basis of our analysis of learner participation in this paper.

Discussion of the transcript

The online exchanges in the text chat were facilitated by a course management system called VOISS³ among students who shared the same time and electronic tools but were separated geographically. The instructor, however, also used a microphone to communicate with the students so these parts did not appear in the text chat. When giving praises for entries or contributions to the text chat, for

² In a synchronous setting, electronic interactions occur in real time. The online members of the group see their contributions appear on screen soon after they post them, and wait for prompt responses. These multi-party online conversations are interactions facilitated by networked computers between participants who share the same time and electronic tools, but might be separated geographically.

³ At the Universiti Tun Abdul Razak, Virtual Online Instructional Support System (VOISS) is the main teaching and learning tool.

example, the instructor preferred to use the microphone. Perhaps, the instructor believed this would motivate the learners to participate more actively in the text chat and, in the process, possibly enable better learning.

Nevertheless, the data gathered still clearly reveal different types of learner participation which are based on different observed behaviors as well: (1) agreeing and disagreeing; (2) showing enthusiasm; (3) correcting peers; (4) expressing opinions; and (5) correcting incorrect words used. The following section will briefly illustrate each type with sample data (L means *Learner*).

a. Agreeing and disagreeing

L5 I don't think so ... *because company nowadays they want experiance*

L8 **Thats right.** *they should*

L9 I agree *with the topic good for men.....*

This form of peer feedback did help build learner self-confidence, especially to encourage further participation in the discussion. This helped lead to better collaborative learning and social interaction among the learners and their instructors.

b. Showing enthusiasm

L3 Can I ask *about the quiz....*

L5 I want to try....*to answer the question*

L3 I want to try *about pollution ... many*

The excerpts, and many others, show how the learners were actually less shy to participate in the text chat or, in a general sense, in their own context of online learning and teaching (OLT). It was also observed that in such situations where they showed enthusiasm, the students provided longer and more interesting sentences. Indeed, the discussion structure in a virtual classroom can help even a shy and not confident learner become an active participant.

c. Correcting peers

L4 *now company only accept people who is graduat*

L1 **Ok. Who are graduates**

L5 *Boys should leran how to cook even cooking Maggi or fried eggs!*

L8 **Thats right.** *they should*

L9 **Sorry!** *Wrong spelling leran = learn*

Peer corrections were a common feature. Learners corrected their coursemates' work during the exchanges without being instructed by their instructors. This partly suggests that this kind of learner participation allowed self-initiated learning during this particular text chat.

d. Expressing opinions

L5 *I want to try about fast food. Nowadays fast food restaurant is the main target for teenagers to have their meal.*

L3 *Now days higher education is important in life*

L4 *now company only accept people who is graduat*

These examples show that even learners who were weaker in their language still expressed their views and wrote freely. This was possible because the exchanges

were conducted in a non-interrupting or non-imposing style where the instructor did not attempt to correct until they had completed their sentences.

Not only in the text chat that is of concern in this paper, but also in many others was it observed that the learners developed writing and thinking skills simultaneously as they expressed their opinions. This was possible because learners did not have the time to prepare their answers and had to respond by writing immediately. The online lessons were designed to suit online learning. In some cases, focus on errors was avoided to enable language learning to take place.

e. **Correcting incorrect words used**

- L9 I agree with the topic good for men especially fariq
 Yes I'm support boys should learn how to cook. As example at tomyam restaurant the cookers are mens. Other examples like most successful chef, chef wan
- I **COOKER vs. COOK**
- L9 oooooo.....
- L5 I want to try about fast food. Nowadays fast food restaurant is the main target for teenagers to have their meal.
- L3 **Now days** higher education is important in life
- I spelling = 'nowadays'

The above excerpts contained multiple errors but the instructor (I) corrected only one word. This shows that the instructor attempted to create a non-threatening situation to allow the students to continue their contributions online without feeling shy. The instructor played a very important role in giving feedback on answers and correction of errors and this promoted learner participation. Gulati (2004) explains that openness and allowance for errors is also an opportunity to gain insight into understanding one's own construct and can influence growth for others through participation.

Conclusion

This paper has looked briefly into the nature of learner participation in online teaching and learning through an analysis of data from a text chat. The students experienced a sense of community which, consequently, shaped teaching and learning. The L2 students were not just learning language but they were able to interact and create an ambience that supported and encouraged active learning. In other words, they established some form of social presence through good learner participation (e.g., offering feedback, expressing opinion), especially because there was, in appropriate cases, little intervention from the instructor. This is a significant positive element in improving instructional effectiveness (Gunawardena, 1995).

What all this tells us is that there is a need for students to be given adequate training before they enroll in online courses. They should be mentally ready and should have the right attitude towards the learning environment especially in language learning. How can one establish his or her social presence online?

What is good learner participation in a text chat? On the other hand, instructors should be given adequate training related to the technology and pedagogy of online learning. How does one encourage social presence and effective learner participation? Indeed, much needs to be learned and relearned about new practices in online learning, especially in the preparation of suitable online tasks that will ensure active learner participation. It is hoped that this paper, while brief and exploratory, has asked and answered some of the relevant questions.

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Appendix A: Transcription of the text chat

Input

- I Ok, let's start
- L1 Yes
- L2 Yes
- L3 Can I ask about the quiz? I just want to know howwhat type of quiz.
- L4 Isn't to day exercise c?
- L5 I want to try about fast food. Nowadays fast food restaurant is the main target for teenagers to have their meal.
- L3 Now days higher education is important in life
- L5 Yes
- I Spelling = "nowadays"
- L6 High education – we can learn more and get more knowledge. With higher education it can bright our future. We can find a better jod with higher salary.
- L4 now company only accept people who is graduat
- L1 Ok. Who are graduates
- I higher education – we can learn more and get more knowledge. With higher education it can brighten our future. We can find a better job with higher salary.
- L5 I don't think so ... because company nowadays they want experiance
- I Now companies only accept people who are graduates
- L7 It's up the company
- L8 I think the experince is important
But they still want the paper qualification apart from experiance
- I Spelling 'experiance'
- L3 I want to try about pollution ... many factory didn't care about our air pollution. They just let out all the smoke without care about the people around them. Some of them get sick because of it.
- L5 Boys should leran how to cook even cooking Maggi or fried eggs!
- L8 Thats right. they should
- L9 Sorry! Wrong spelling leran = learn
- L7 I know how to cook like a Maggie
- L9 I agree with the topic good for men especially fariq
Yes I'm support boys should learn how to cook. As example at tomyam restaurant the cookers are mens.other examples like most successful chef, chef wan
- L8 I have a brother but he is too young to cook now.
- I COOKER vs.COOK
- L9 oooooo
- I Ok, it's time to log out.
- L7 Can u send this slide to voiss pn
- I Thank you all for logging in

I = Instructor L = Learners