

DIGITAL NETWORKS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: INSTANT MESSAGING AND THE PRACTICE AND ACQUISITION OF WRITING SKILLS

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Abstract

The advance of globalization and the information technology revolution call for fundamental changes in foreign language teaching and learning. However, according to Kern and Warschauer [1], "the computer, like any other technological tool used in teaching (...) does not in and of itself bring about improvements in learning." Instead, they propose that we should "look to particular practices of use in particular contexts" so that we might be able to ascertain if the use of network-based language teaching leads to better language learning. In other words, we should describe and evaluate the social context of a specific practice of use as far as the learners, their motivation, the setting and features of their social interaction and their use of language are concerned. This paper aims to address some pedagogical issues in the use of software applications in foreign language teaching. More specifically, it attempts to examine the results of an online written interaction activity among advanced (C2) students of English as a foreign language at the University of Évora, Portugal, through Skype, a software application that allows users to communicate by voice calls and instant messaging over the internet. It also examines some of the potential benefits of synchronous conference as pointed out by Kern et al., namely: (1) encouragement of a collaborative spirit among students, and (2) enhanced motivation for language practice and, in particular, greater involvement of students who rarely participated in oral discussions [2]. Moreover, it analyses some features of language use, the role of the teacher, and the fulfillment of instructional goals. In sum, this study hopes to briefly explore the relationship between the use of computer networks and language teaching.

1. Introduction: network-based language teaching

Network-based language teaching (NBLT) refers to the pedagogical use of computers connected in either local or global networks, allowing one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communication [3]. More specifically, in a language learning context computer-mediated communication allows language learners with network access to communicate with other learners or speakers of the target language in either asynchronous or synchronous modes [4].

Particularly promising among the various forms of network-based communication are those that allow for synchronous, real-time communication, the obvious advantage being that messages are typed, sent, and received instantaneously, bringing the electronic communication exchanges from the static to the more dynamic, and thus more closely resembling oral interaction. Communication through synchronous network-based communication has even been dubbed "chatting," further underscoring its resemblance to oral interaction [5].

Kern et al. identify some of the potential benefits of synchronous conferencing compared to face-to-face class discussions: (i) increased and more democratically distributed student participation; (ii) more time to develop and refine comments – possibly leading to greater precision and sophistication of expression; (iii) encouragement of a collaborative spirit among students; (iv) enhanced motivation for language practice and, in particular, greater involvement of students who rarely participate in oral discussions; (v) reduction of anxiety related to oral communication in a foreign language; and (vi) positive effects on students' writing ability and perhaps speaking ability as well [6].

However, there are also some disadvantages of synchronous conferencing. Kern et al. noted that teacher control over class discussion was compromised, that the rapid pace of written discussion sometimes taxed students' comprehension abilities, and that although participation was more

equitably distributed than in normal classroom discussion, the coherence and continuity of discussions often suffered [7].

So, the question *Does the use of network-based language teaching lead to better language learning?* turns out not to be so simple [8]. In fact, several questions need to be addressed. Teachers and researchers who critically observe the unique registers of Internet chat sessions or on-line classroom discussions cannot help but ask about the effects on second language development. Such registers are characterized by a variety of features that do not appear in most forms of written language, such as partial sentences, invented words, and iconic symbols [9].

2. The activity

This study was based on a written interaction activity using an instant messaging service. Skype was chosen over other instant messaging services (AOL Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, Google Talk, Windows Live Messenger, ICQ) because most of the students were already members of this service. The activity was part of the subject 'English V'. Students who take this subject are supposed to have achieved CEFR level C2.

The participants in the activity belonged to three different groups: Group A (GA): academic year 2009/2010, 6 students (3 male, 3 female; 3 ERASMUS); Group B (GB): 2010/2011, 8 students (7 female, 1 male); and Group C (GC): 2010/2011, 3 students (2 female, 1 male).

As far as their written production is concerned, each group was able to produce a different amount of words. GA produced 4,485 words in 1h43m; GB, 4,315 words in 1h25m; and GC, 1,440 words in 58m.

The activity was based on different tasks set by the teacher who sometimes asked questions to the whole group, other times to smaller groups (e.g. ERASMUS students) or to individual students.

3. Some features of the activity

After a careful analysis of the texts produced, it can be concluded that four significant features were identified: the use of emotions/emoticons and acronyms, the use of informal register, students' self-correction, and problems with text cohesion.

3.1 Use of 'emotions'/emoticons and acronyms

Students have used a considerable amount of emoticons and acronyms and language which is usually found in text messages, such as:

GA:

:D , :(, :) , 8-) , ;) , |-(, :* , :P , :/
 lol, thx/thanx
 (blush), (punch), (rofl), (happy)

GB:

=) , :D , ;) , :DD , 8D , :O , :P , :-(, :@ , :)
 lol, LOL, lool, LOOOOOOOOL, lolol, LOLOL, OMG
 (rofl), (chuckle), (blush)

GC:

:D

3.2 Informal register

Another peculiar feature of the texts is the use of informal register in the choice of words and spelling:

GA:

- hi
- guys/i mean, teacher and colleagues
- okey dokey
- lovey dovey
- please tell me what the h*ll is the SQRA method!
- but you can be a dumb*ss not knowing how to do analogies

- u (for *you*)
- u 2
- hun (for *honey*)

GB:

- nope
- reaaaaaaaaaally

3.3 Self-correction

Students' self-correction occurred in five different areas: typos, syntax, confusing words, morphology, and emoticons. In the examples below, the word(s) after the slash is(are) the student's corrected version of the mistake:

a. Typos (wrong or missing key/letter, lack of space between words, missing word): 63% (19 out of 30 occurrences of self-correction)

- tat/that; lat/late; hours/ours; isboan/Lisboan
- arounf/around; smike/smoke; a/l; experienco/experience; mase/same; paly/play
- can't Ø more/fail; how Ø use/to

b. Syntax: 20% (6/30)

- you are going/are you going
- if it will not be too expensive, I am interested/not will not but would not
- work that I have present/work that I had to
- everybody at the coffee shop notice/noticed
- they probably poke my eyes out/they'd
- that's what I am will do/I will do

c. Confusing words: 10% (3/30)

- there are/they; and/an; your/our

d. Morphology: 3% (1/30)

- home town/hometown

e. Emoticon: 3% (1/30)

- D : / :D

3.4 Problems with text cohesion

According to Kern et al., synchronous online language is typically characterized by the fragmentary nature of conversation flow, the multiplicity of discussion threads, the difficulty of back-channeling to clarify one's message [10]. The following are some excerpts which illustrate some of the problems with text cohesion:

GA:

- I'm having a bit of trouble paying attention to what everyone is writing/Anyone feels the same?
- me too nuno
- yeah, nuno, me too

In the following text, the time each utterance was produced is identified on the left to help understand the type of problems suggested by Kern et al. above:

GA:

- [18:46:30] Student1: but you have a good accent
- [18:46:40] S2: in Poland nobody thinks anything bad about the portuguese people
- [18:46:41] S1: and your English is great and you know it
- [18:46:51] S1: and you'll show them!
- [18:46:55] S3: I once thought I was better an english speaker than I do now
- [18:46:55] S2: them?
- [18:46:58] S2: us?
- [18:47:06] S4: yes, I was surprised when I heard Portuguese speaking English... you speak it very good

[18:47:10] S5: in poland they know that portugal exists
[18:47:19] S6: The Polish don't think bad of us
[18:47:19] S3: the more one learns...
[18:47:29] S6: because they don't know us
[18:47:37] S5: just making fun, sorry
[18:47:47] S2: excuse me there are Polish people here!!

4. Students' feedback on the activity

Most of the comments about the activity provided by the students were quite positive, stressing that it was a fun and different way of practicing English:

- I like the unconventionality of this one (*when asked about which activity they liked most during the semester*)
- I'm digging this class, too
- this has been my favourite class cause it didn't really feel like a class
- best class ever
- i really enjoyed it!/and we practice our english so it is wonderful
- A LOOOOOOOOOOOOTTT instead of being working i'm at the coffee shop next door! :D/and we practice
- We have practiced a lot, yes... I really enjoyed it

However, there was only one negative feedback. One student referred that she "would prefer being together in the class room. This is worth [worse] than being in the telephone".

5. Some drawbacks of the activity

As the activity was conducted at the end of the semester, there was no time for students' feedback and analysis of written production. If it had been done earlier in the semester, it would have been possible to check the students' improvement in writing and oral skills. Moreover, we could verify some of the potential benefits of synchronous conferencing compared to face-to-face class discussions, as pointed out by Kern et al. [11] such as a greater involvement of students who rarely participate and some positive effects on students' writing ability and perhaps speaking ability as well. Another problem of the activity had to do with grading the assignment. There should have been another activity before grading them or setting parameters for correction.

6. Implications

This study hopes to contribute to three main areas in language learning: research, language proficiency, and language teaching pedagogy. On one hand, there is a need for research that specifically documents how online language use might or might not transfer to other dimensions of language learning, such as oral performance, syntactic complexity and grammatical development [12]. On the other hand, traditional definitions of language learning, as measured by demonstrated proficiency and control of the target language, no longer suffice as the primary knowledge base for teachers in online contexts [13]. Finally, research has also shown that sound pedagogy and not computers or networks per se is what really counts in NBLT and teachers also need to know how NBLT can constrain as well as enhance their students' language use [14].

To conclude, as Kern and Warschauer thoughtfully stated, these new technologies do not only *serve* the new teaching/learning paradigms, they also help *shape* the new paradigms. The very existence of networked computers creates possibilities for new kinds of communication. It is imperative that language students be exposed to them in the classroom [15].

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