Implementation of Computer-Mediated Communication Utilizing Web Based Video Conferencing

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Abstract

This article reports on the use of videoconferencing as a Computer-Mediated Communication tool for pedagogical purposes in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. Some of the advantages observed were heightened motivation, autonomy, and increased communication. It was found that the use of online videoconferencing was enlightening for teachers and students and could be made available for different types of classes and environments. It is suggested that web based videoconferencing has the potential to add a much needed dimension to EFL; the ability to practice speaking with native or fluent level speakers in a safe and controllable environment for a fraction of the cost.

I. Introduction

In the last two decades, the use of Computer-Mediated Communication has led to its application for EFL. In teaching and learning environment for foreign language acquisition, Computer-Mediated Communication has been utilized in numerous ways. Several studies of the use of Computer-Mediated Communication tools in EFL reveal how effective it is in offering learners the opportunity to practice what they have learned.

The slow history of English learning in Japan has revolved around the dilemma of not being able to have enough opportunities to speak with fluent or native English speakers. Practice makes perfect and any opportunity to make this available to our students is worth researching.

The rapid growth of the Internet, arguably the fastest growth of any technology in history, has caught the attention of language teachers. The number of regional and national presentations related to online language learning has expanded exponentially in recent years. Many conferences and presentations have been devoted to this theme. Yet this growing interest in computer-mediated collaborative language learning has not yet, in most institutions, been received with as much importance.

One purpose of this article is to explore the nature of computer-mediated communication by using a conceptual framework that starts with well-known theories of input and output and leads to socio-cultural learning theory. Another purpose is to examine classroom accounts of the potential that Computer-Mediated Communication (hereafter: CMC) promotes collaborative language learning, with specific reference to five features that distinguish CMC from other communication media: (a) text-based and computer-mediated interaction, (b) many-to-many communication, (c) time-and-place independence (d) long distance exchanges, and (e) hypermedia links. In some cases these accounts constitute rigorous research studies; in other cases they are teachers’ personal narratives. Because the entire field of CMC is so new, surveys from abroad of this type can help identify issues and trends that may deserve further attention and research.
It is highly important how teachers boot or reboot their students’ motivation. (Warschauer, 1997) In this day and age of media entertainment and information highways, cell phone societies and virtual social networking, teachers must be aware of how students perceive what is being taught, otherwise we are doing a disservice to their future.

Chickering & Gamson (1987) wrote the following principles of a good teacher.

1. Encourage student-faculty contact
2. Encourage cooperation among students
3. Encourage active learning
4. Give prompt feedback
5. Emphasize time on task
6. Communicate high expectations
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning

The authors added the following statement: “These principles are intended as guidelines for faculty members, students, and administrators... to improve teaching and learning. They rest on 50 years of research on the way teachers teach and students learn how students work... with one another, and how students and faculty talk to each other.” (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p.3)

In addition, one of the meaningful teacher’s roles is to find their students’ requests and preferences. Teachers need to discover the majority of desires at the beginning of the semester. According to Nunan (1984), there are four different learner types.

1. “Concrete” learners
   These learners preferred learning by games, pictures, films and video, talking in pairs, learning through the use of cassette and going on excursions.
2. “Analytical” learners
   These learners liked to study grammar, studying English books, studying alone, finding their own mistakes, having problems to work on, learning through reading newspapers.
3. “Communicative” learners
   This group like to learn by observing and listening to native speakers, talking to friends in English, watching on TV in English, using English in shops etc., learning English words by hearing them, and learning by conversations.
4. “Authority-oriented” learners
   These students liked to the teacher to explain everything, writing everything in a notebook, having their own textbook, learning to read, studying grammar and learning English words by seeing them.

In theory, autonomy may be defined as a freedom and ability to manage one’s own affairs, which entails the right to make decisions as well. Responsibility may also be understood as being in charge of something, but with the implication that one has to deal with the consequences of one’s own actions. Autonomy and responsibility both require active involvement, and they are apparently very much interrelated (Scharle & Szabo, 2000).

With this in mind, the following study attempts to shed some more light on how technology can bring about an autonomous, motivated, engaged learning environment.
II. Methods

Mukogawa Women’s University is one of the largest women’s universities in Japan. Located in Nishinomiya, Hyogo prefecture, there are 16 undergraduate departments in the University and seven departments in the junior college. Two elective classes were chosen from the Department of English for undergraduate students and Department of English Communication for junior college students for the purpose of this study. Each course had both Japanese teachers and English teachers in the Philippines. The Japanese teachers were responsible for developing course material, assessment, and achievements of general course. The Philippines teachers provided interaction and spontaneous conversation related to the material being taught. The Japanese teachers and Philippines teachers were available to make the prearrangements before the lesson via the online video system.

In this study, two courses were selected: a simultaneous interpretation course, led by an experienced Japanese teacher for undergraduate students and an English presentation course, led by a Japanese teacher and available to junior college students. Prior to the start of the course, each Japanese teacher talked with the instructors in the Philippines to define the objectives of the courses to include: issues which could be reflected upon or discussed in the context of the course material. To give students a chance to explore beyond the context of the class by allowing students to express themselves individually with personal experiences, both teachers in different countries were expressly told to encourage and to facilitate the course in ways that would encourage positive interactions using appropriate language. In addition, at the beginning of the course, the Japanese teachers told all the students the purpose of the Computer-Mediated Communication tool. Needless to say, each instructor clearly communicated to their students the goals and expectations.

Though this was the first time for almost every student to partake in a video conference, their attitude was so natural and they enjoyed the opportunity. This experience helped them in communicating freely with appropriate language usage, and cultural sensitivity. Students were expressly asked not to give out personal information that may be considered personal. This included addresses and phone numbers, email and website addresses.

Case 1  Class of Simultaneous Interpretation

50 undergraduate English majors in their senior year participated in the class. Their average TOEIC score was around 550-750 points. English speaking ability varied but the level was estimated to be intermediate to upper intermediate. The motivation levels of students were mostly high due to their strong desires to improve their English skills especially their interpretation skills from English to Japanese and Japanese to English. Most students, after completion of required computer literacy courses, had a good command of computer technology and were familiar with voice conferencing technology.

The students were assigned to choose their topic related to the cultural differences between Japan and Western countries and prepared in the previous classes. The Japanese teacher gave the Philippines teachers several themes, which the students chose prior to the conference so that they were also prepared for the conference. Several students were assigned as interpreters for their peer students, interpreting from Japanese to English or English to Japanese. This experience of video conferencing could served as good practice for the students to improve their skills of consecutive interpretation and simultaneous interpretation because the interpretation training was carried out not on textbooks or tapes but on authentic materials they could relate to.

The video conferences were recorded using a camcorder and encoded to MPEG files. The student could review
their interpretation by playing it afterward to check what was being said in the video conference and also their interpretation skills for their further study.

Case 2 Class of Basic Presentation

30 junior college second year students majoring in English enrolled in the class. Their average TOEIC score ranged between 450-650 points. English speaking ability was varied and the level was basic to intermediate. The motivation levels of students were mostly high but some of them were low. Most of the students had used the Internet and e-mail both at university and at home. The university has required courses of learning computer literacy for first year students.

This presentation class with Computer-Mediated Communication method was conducted during a normal 90-minute class-period. The students were divided into five groups of six students each. The objectives of this basic presentation class were intended to enhance students’ English communication abilities and acquire their presentation skills. The main goal of this class was to give presentations to introduce Japanese pop culture to the Philippines teacher. Each group gave a 30 minute presentation in turn using two class periods. Students were asked to write out their outline of the presentation and submit it to the Japanese teacher for content correction. In the video conference, each group of students presented their topic to the Philippines teacher who responded to questions and feedback about their individual presentation.

Most students had not given a presentation in class since elementary school. The Japanese teacher taught them the basics of presentation skills, such as voice projection, posture, and gestures at the beginning of the course. These skills were further developed throughout the course. In addition, students were told they would be using a web based conferencing program to give their presentations to one native speaking English speaker. In order to ease their anxiety about communicating via the web with teachers they have never met, the class performed mock presentations to prepare. The first presentation was for students to give information of their favorite things; such as music, movies, their hometown, etc.. After the preparatory presentations among the students, the Computer-Mediated Communication program started. The Japanese teacher asked the Philippines teacher to listen to their presentations as an audience and make comments and questions about the contents. Throughout the class, the Japanese teacher was able to to help expedite the class by remaining in contact with the Philippine using text chat. The role of Japanese teacher then slowly turned from a teacher to a facilitator by handing control of the class over to the students and a native speaker.

III. Results and Discussion

Upon completion of the course, results of a survey from the students and the Philippines teacher were collected. On the whole, the students reported that the class was student-centered, relaxed, and challenging throughout the course. They also recognized clearly the goal of the course. They collaborated with other members to have better presentations. In fact, in both classes, their attitude toward online videoconferencing was much better at the end of semester than that at the beginning of semester. It was found that the interactivity with their classmates was enjoyable and may possibly help to develop motivation to create a sense of autonomous learning.

Gorsky & Blau, (2009) wrote the following statement of teaching effectiveness.

Teaching effectiveness may be defined as how an instructor can best direct, facilitate, and support students
toward certain academic ends, such as achievement and satisfaction.

The Japanese teacher conducted several personal interviews with the students about the Computer-Mediated Communication program and felt that a teacher needs to understand how the use of technology should blend into an existing classroom environment. This is because a majority of the students in the presentation class said that it would be best if they had been offered online assignment for the video conference so that they had been more prepared for their presentation. Generally speaking, the more students are prepared for class like this video conference, the more they tend to speak up more. It proved challenging for students to show their presentation to someone outside of the class, especially a native speaker of English who is not familiar with Japanese English pronunciation.

Technology now makes it possible for us to connect with almost any part of the world for a fraction of the cost compared to just 10 years ago. This, together with advances in methodology in e-learning, shows us that language learning has shifted its paradigm to bring the world into the classroom.

The findings of this study suggest that online videoconferencing may create opportunities for more participation in classroom activities. In addition, it can be achieved without burden toward oral communication in learning language. Furthermore, the spoken and casual language used during these classes was notably useful for the students due to the lack of opportunities for them to communicate with native speakers in their daily life. Some of the students may have anxiety towards speaking in public, however, through the use of technology these environments can be tailored to their comfort level. In any event, it may be concluded from this study that there is substantial evidence to support its further development.

References


