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Effect of English language proficiency on learner engagement in communities of inquiry

Bio data

Dr. Phuong Tran, Lecturer at Waseda University, has taught English and self-directed learning courses in Austria, Japan and Vietnam for over ten years. Her research investigates the development of learner autonomy through social interaction and networking in language learning settings. She has written a number of academic articles and book chapters in applied linguistics.

Abstract

In educational settings, social networking may be thought as being closely related to concepts such as teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence as a part of communities of inquiry (CoI) (see Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison et al., 2010; Swan & Shea, 2004), and how these relate to learner engagement in both the community itself and in tasks and activities that are the object of discussion in the community. Furthermore, learners' learning outcomes can be implied through engagement which is considered as a multidimensional concept that comprises cognitive, behavioural, social, and emotional dimensions (see Philp & Duchesne, 2016). As in current research from Stockwell (2019), how to maintain active participation in language learning tasks depends on what task engagement is. The types of engagement among second and foreign language learners in the classroom or outside of class may be different according to the level of proficiency, which forms the main focus of the study.

Conference paper

Introduction

The purpose of the study is to explore the similarities and differences of learner engagement between students with low and high proficiency levels of English through social networking with the assistance of teacher presence, and to determine how social networking and teacher presence can encourage task engagement according to the level of learner proficiency outside of class. The guiding key scientific question for the project is (a) whether the interaction by the teacher with different types of learners through social networking can promote different types of engagement in tasks outside the classroom, and (b) whether there are any differences and similarities in types of engagement among learners of English. With the advances of digital and powerful online tools with which learners can construct their understanding of content through guidance and support from peers and instructors, the venue potentially serves the educational community well (Meskill, 2013), as well as with the continuous increase of using

multimodalities for language teaching, which increase educational opportunities. However, there has been little research on how these uses support student engagement in instructional activities (Kozlova & Zundel, 2013), especially support on different types of learner proficiency with different types of engagement.

Moreover, throughout my recent studies, there are three main terms worth noticing, which lead to my currently proposed project: (1) in terms of the role of teacher presence, based on the theory of Community of Inquiry (CoI) (Garrison et al., 2000), teacher presence had all three elements including social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. From the findings, the first element is the teacher's social presence having the same categories as the theory suggested consisting of open communication, group cohesion and affective expression. The teacher's role is to start the conversation, balance the interaction and give encouragement to the whole class. Similarly, the second element is the teacher's cognitive presence with the same characteristics mentioned in CoI including triggering event, exploration, integration and resolution. The teacher encouraged students by raising questions, exploring their strengths and weaknesses and trying to figure out a solution for students' learning. The last element is the teacher's teaching presence including design and organization, facilitating discourse and direct instruction, however, we added one more characteristic to the original theory: reminder. The teacher showed her experiences and skills in guiding students on how to do the tasks in general, giving feedback and corrections as well as advice. The teacher also showed her humble side as a reminder, simply in promoting task engagement among learners. (2) With regard to the role of online social interaction, as mentioned in Tran (2018), there are three main roles of social interaction. The first role is as 'a social community discussion tool' (p.) where learners can have friendly conversation and discussion with the instructor and group members. It is called a 'social tool' because of its features which allow unconstrained dialogues among interlocutors. Considering the low proficiency level of English of participants in the study, this free and easy interaction may have served as a motivating medium for them to use English in a non-threatening environment. Also, they can feel a sense of belonging to a group that they can share their learning with. The second role is as 'teacher-to-student reporting tool.' The teacher can use this social interaction as a tool to share their expertise, for example, sending extra materials, giving instructions and guidance, sending reminders and announcements, providing feedback and advice, and so on.

Although this may raise some arguments as creating this online social interaction tool outside of class means the teacher has to dedicate their time for students outside class time as well. This could be a time consuming burden, however, the good side of this setting is that it would serve as a fundamental stepsfor students to build their habits of learning outside of classroom which may ultimately lead to autonomous learning behaviour. The third role is as a 'student-to-teacher reporting tool.' The students use this online platform to communicate with the teacher, report what they have done outside of class or seek advice in a friendly way. (3) As regards impacts on task engagement, Hong (2008) claimed there is a close relationship between teachers' language use and students' engagement levels in the classroom. In my studies, the teacher's language use is present even outside of the classroom through the online social interaction tool, leading to nearly three times the level of student engagement in the designed tasks as well. Moreover, Van den Branden (2016) emphasized that the teacher plays a major role in motivating students through well-designed tasks that are both challenging and closely matched to their needs. In this sense, the teacher in my studies organized the listening tasks and vocabulary tasks for students in listening classes. The teacher also acknowledged the need to involve students through tasks that are strongly suitable and achievable with her support outside of the formal classroom setting.

As described above, the purpose of the research project is to identify the ways in which teacher presence through social networking can be used to enhance out-of-class learning by English learners of different proficiency levels, and to figure out whether there is a

relationship between the types of engagement and the types of learners with different proficiency levels of English. Research to date has been able to identify the existence of different types of teacher presence (Lee, 2014; Tran, 2018) as well as different types of engagement in the language classroom (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). However, there is very little research on understanding the relationship between teacher presence and task engagement, and the comparison of types of engagement among different levels of learners, which is believed to help teachers foster appropriate task engagement according to learner levels outside of class and lead to successful teaching and learning outcomes.

This is a significant advance beyond previous research which was only able to specify that social, teaching, and cognitive aspects can occur through social interaction in common learning communities, but this does not provide sufficient insight into how this knowledge can be applied to classroom practice. In other words, although there has been research determining that the role of the teacher is crucial in facilitating learning outside of class, there has been no published research thus far that explores different aspects of the teacher including social, teaching and cognitive presence through online social interaction. The project seeks to explore the potential techniques that teachers may be able to try through online social interaction with students, to determine: (1) How do low-level proficiency learners perceive social, teaching and cognitive presence of the teacher through the interaction? (2) How do high proficiency learners perceive the social, teaching and cognitive presence of the teacher through the interaction? (3) What impact does this presence have on out-of-class task engagement among learners with different levels of proficiency and ultimate learning goals?

Data collection methods will be based on the methods that were previously adopted by Tran (2016, 2018), but will go beyond this in order to specifically compare the differences and similarities among low- and high-level proficiency learners with different types of engagement in online interaction through social networking. The study will be longitudinal in nature, consisting of a quasi-experimental method across two intact beginning English classes at a university in Japan with a total of around 55 participants, and two intermediate English classes at another private university in Japan with a total of around 55 participants, totaling 110 participants. The study will be carried out in two phases, the first of a more exploratory nature in 2021, and the second seeking to validate the results from the first phase in 2022. The selection of social networking tool for the classes is LINE for Japan, which is used by 100% of the learners in the classes the researcher has access to, and from previous study by the researcher is the preferred tool of learners.

Phase 1

For low proficiency learners of English

The teacher supported the learners with teaching, social and cognitive presence through the designated tool to assist the learners in engaging in English vocabulary and listening activities outside of class. Learner training on how to study with the vocabulary app and listening website were provided in class and using the tools throughout the research period. Data were collected through discourse analysis of the tool interaction logs to track what types of engagement the learners have in the interactions with class and individual preference. The logs enabled the teacher to figure out the trend of types of engagement in the tool interaction in terms of cognitive, behavioural, social, and emotional dimensions of engagement, and to see if this trend continued across the 15-week research period. In addition, weekly quizzes were conducted across the research period to compare engagement with outcomes from the quizzes to explore any potential correlation. On conclusion of the project, learners were administered a post-treatment questionnaire to see if they noticed the different types of engagement, and their reflections on their own engagement. Interviews were conducted with learners focusing

on four different aspects of engagement, including cognitive, behavioural, social, and emotional to further explore their survey responses. The results were then collated to create a taxonomy of engagement types with a view to providing the teacher with specific learning strategies depending on the engagement types that low proficiency learners possess for promoting tasks outside of class.

For high proficiency learners of English

The teacher provided learners with support with teaching, social and cognitive presence through LINE to assist the learners in engaging in presentation contents and listening activities outside of class. Data were collected through discourse analysis of the tool interaction logs to track what types of engagement the learners have in the interactions with a common class group, small groups (4-5 members for each group) and individual interactions. Learner training on what to do with their presentation and how to study with the listening website were provided in class and through LINE across the research period. The logs enabled the teacher to figure out the trends of types of engagement in LINE interaction in terms of the cognitive, behavioural, social, and emotional dimensions of engagement, and to see if this trend continued across the 15-week research period. In contrast to the low proficiency group, in the high proficiency group, data on the content of small group presentations were analysed, and how they engaged with their presentation projects through LINE interactions outside of class were collected to explore any potential correlation with the interactions with peers and the teacher. On conclusion of the project, learners were administered a post-treatment questionnaire to see if they noticed the different types of engagement and their reflections on their own engagement. Interviews were conducted with learners on four different aspects of engagement including cognitive, behavioural, social, and emotional to further explore their survey responses. The results were then collated to create a taxonomy of engagement types with a view to providing the teacher with specific learning strategies depending on the engagement types that high proficiency learners possess for promoting tasks outside of class.

Phase 2

Data collection methods were mostly conducted in the same way as Phase 1, but the questionnaire and interviews conducted at the end of this phase explored whether the type of interactions had an impact on not only their types of engagement in the activities, but also on their attitudes towards the materials, towards learning English, and towards the communities of inquiry. In addition, data collected from Phase 1 were analysed using contrast analysis to compare the types of engagement for two different categories of learners to determine the differences and similarities in types of engagement and their correlation with task engagement. Low proficiency learners will not be assigned into small groups for their projects; however, high proficiency learners were required to work on their presentation projects, which is one of the main differences in the tasks assigned. The results were analysed to determine whether there were differences and similarities in how the learners interacted with one another, how they engaged with the task, and their view the learning environment. This resulted in a list of specific strategies that the research project identified as promoting task engagement depending on learners' level of proficiency and attitudes towards learning English outside of class through social networking.

In order to achieve the target results as well as identify perceptions of social networking, usage, attitudes and task engagement, surveys were distributed for all participants (*N*=110). Along with the pre- and post- surveys, the study also collected interview data with the post-treatment focus group, vocabulary engagement logs, quiz scores, and analysed all the LINE interactions in both individual and group chats.

After collecting data from the two phases, contrast analysis was used to analyse the

differences and similarities among Vietnamese learners of English and Japanese learners of English. The results were analysed to determine whether the culture that learners belong to affects types of engagement, and this resulted in a list of specific strategies for promoting task engagement with different types of learners.

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