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ROLE OF TEACHERS IN FACILITATING LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

Levy (1997) defines 'computer-assisted language learning' (CALL) as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning"(p.1). Computer technology has taken its rightful place as an important element of language teaching and learning. It has been reported in the literature that there are many advantages for the application of CALL. It has been further suggested that CALL activities can be created in ways that may extend the potential of the computer beyond just a 'tool' to facilitate the language learning process.

THE BENEFITS OF COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY

The relevance of incorporating computer technology into language learning has been highlighted by Warschauer (1998, p.6), among many others, who stresses that computer technology is an "essential new medium of language and literacy practice apart from face-to-face communication and the printed page". Warschauer further emphasizes that to know English well in the current era entails knowing more than the syntactic, pragmatic and lexical items of language. It necessitates knowing how to read, write and communicate

in electronic environments. Moreover, the development of literacy and communication skills in new on-line media is of critical importance in the present and future academic, social and workforce environments (Warschauer, 1999).

Various studies have reported the benefits that can be derived from incorporating the computer component into language instruction. Warschauer and Healey (1998, p. 60) have highlighted the benefits of incorporating computer technology in language instruction, which include:

1. multimodal practice with feedback.
2. individualisation in a large class.
3. pair and small group work on projects, either collaboratively or competitively.
4. the fun factor.
5. variety in the resources available and learning styles used;
6. exploratory learning with large amounts of data;
7. real-life skill-building in computer use.

As such, language professionals need to capitalize on the advantages and potential strengths that technology has to offer. However, it must be noted that no matter how advanced the capabilities of the present computer technology, they should not determine language teaching practices. Technology in and of itself cannot be the focus of the changes that are needed. As pointed out by Murison-Bowie (1993, p.6), "we need to look for ways to capitalise on the fact that technology can enable rather than dominate the process and management of learning".

Salaberry (1996) emphasises that the potential pedagogical outcomes of technological tools used in second language instruction inherently depend on a sound theoretical and methodological approach to guide their application to the language learning phenomena. Thus, second language (L2) teachers still have an important role to play in a computer-supported learning environment. Most importantly, they should be equipped with sound pedagogical and methodological

knowledge to make principle-guided decisions in their pedagogical use of technological tools.

THE FACILITATIVE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN A COMPUTER-SUPPORTED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Warschauer, Turbee and Roberts (1996) show in their study that computer networking can be used effectively to promote autonomy, increase classroom equality and help develop students' learning perspective. Armstrong and Yetter-Vas sot (1994) suggest that this empowerment occurs because of the equal learning partnership that is an integral part of the computer-supported learning environment, where the role of the teacher is less dominant, and where learners are encouraged to work responsibly and independently.

There is thus a decentralized role for the teacher in a CMC environment. The role of the teacher as an authoritative source of knowledge and expertise is transformed to that of a facilitator of learning or mere participant engaged in equal learning relationship with the learners as part of an electronic discussion (Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1997). The shift in the teacher's role affords more control, responsibility and initiative on the part of the learner in the electronic environment, providing a wider opportunity for learners to be engaged in self-generated and meaningful communication activities involving a wider range of functions and meanings.

With the vast potential of the computer in providing communicative practice and learner autonomy, what role can the teacher play in facilitating language acquisition in a computer-supported learning environment?

In the next section, I will highlight some of the usefulness of using one of the Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) platforms of on-line interaction, which is the bulletin board discussion forum. What will be highlighted is the role of the teacher in helping students enhance their inter language development through the on-

line bulletin board discussion forum.

TASK

The task for the on-line discussion forum required students to engage in a discussion forum on current and relevant social, economic and environmental issues related to the civil engineering field or profession. The discussion forum was intended to provide a context for students to be involved in authentic interactions, and consequently, in the negotiation of meaning (and possibly form) through interaction with peers and the teacher as they engaged in the exchange of views. Since the students were expected to express and argue their discussion points in a sound, articulate and convincing manner, the task would provide an opportunity for them to make their contributions both meaningful and purposeful.

THE ADVANTAGES OF USING THE CMC PLATFORM

Various studies using CMC have reported the benefits of using this medium to support the learning process. Briefly, some of the advantages of using CMC reported in the literature are that it:

- provides a more equitable platform and a less threatening forum for L2 discussion. (Sullivan and Pratt, 1996; Warschauer, 1996)
- results in a dramatic increase in participation among learners (Beauvois, 1992; KeIrn, 1992; Kern, 1995).
- results in a more decentralised role of the dominant teacher (Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1997) .
- provides possibilities for new interpersonal contacts and communicative engagements (Beauvois and Eledge, 1996; Swaffar, 1998).

- acts as a text-based medium that increases learners' attention to linguistic form (Blake, 2000; Pellettieri, 2000).
- provides personalised identification of target language errors (Kelm, 1992).
- produces improved quality language output (Chun, 1994; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1996)
- provides opportunities for reflection and close attention to and correction of contributions made (Kroonenberg, 1994/1995; Sotillo, 2000)
- Thus, CMC could be viewed as a suitable platform that has the potential of providing ideal conditions and opportunities that are facilitative of learning and conducive to interlanguage development.

THE TEACHER'S FEEDBACK

The following are some of the views given by the teacher in response to the on-line interaction task:

Providing individualized instruction
The computer can act as a tool to provide individualised instructions to a large class. By using the on-line platform, the teacher can pay closer attention to the needs of each individual learner, something more difficult to be handled in a conventional classroom environment. The teacher can interact with the students as individuals, and ask them to clarify points that were not clear, provide them with language input which they needed and correcting them when the need arises.

Thus, through the on-line forum for instance, the teacher can provide individualised language input and feedback to learners when they need help with the language.

Monitoring the students' progress
The teacher could also harness the opportunity afforded through the computer platform such as the on-line forum to monitor the

performance and progress of individual students more effectively. In this way, the teacher can keep track of individual students' problems and handle them accordingly. As such, the teacher can be reminded constantly of the students' performance with the language, the common language problems faced by the students and the consistent errors that needed explicit teaching.

Improving students' language proficiency
Interacting with students on-line through the computer provides the potential for improving students' language proficiency. As students can view their language first as they produced it, they could consequently monitor or edit their writing before sending off their assignments. The role of the teacher is to ensure that opportunities are given to improve students' language production. "The teacher could provide implicit and explicit feedback to make students more aware that errors have been made. Through the teacher's feedback, students could incidentally focus on form or the syntactic and linguistic aspects of the language in their attempt to express their ideas more clearly and appropriately. This opportunity for 'pushed output' (Swain, 1985) could be created and handled by the teacher in many ways. Through the exchange of meaning in meaning-oriented interaction and communicative exchange, the teacher could focus on form. This can result in the production of more target-like output or improvement of non-target-like features.

FEEDBACK TECHNIQUES

There are many ways in which feedback were given to students to facilitate their language performance.The teacher adopted a combination of focus-on-form techniques in giving feedback to students' non-target-like sequences. Some of the techniques are:

Repeating preceding error sequences to focus learners' attention on the incorrect form.
Example:
Teacher

Tan Wooi Ping, You wrote:

> "But it is not enough for our information if we gained it through theoretical. By theoretical, we only attend classes and hear the theories about the related topics, which are taught by our lecturer. Although we understand the theories which are lecturer said, we still do not get enough practical from it".

> Would you agree that students should first gain theoretical knowledge while they are in university? They can gain practical experience later on when they are working.

In the example above, the teacher first repeated the learner's incorrect sequence. Then, the teacher made use of implicit negative feedback in the form of a recast to provide the correct use of the word 'theoretical' and 'practical'. This was done simultaneously while seeking the learner's opinion on the issue raised.

The use of recasts as interactional feedback
Studies by Long et.al (1998), Mackey and Philp (1998) and Mackey and Oliver (2002) have shown that the use of recasts can provide significant advantages for learners who were exposed to recasts as compared to those who were not. Interactional feedback in the form of recasts seems to provide learners with data about the target language. The teacher as the more competent language user can provide feedback by reformulating the preceding non-target-like sequences, while maintaining the learners' meaning.
Example:
Student:

Teacher:

> ... Though some said we're only wasting our money just to consult them, but I think it's worthy ..

> ... What do you think of the argument that it is more worthwhile to send our engineers overseas ...

As can be seen, the teacher recast a lexical, item 'worthy' with a more suitable item 'worthwhile', while simultaneously engaging in the exchange of ideas. The teacher could also paraphrase an earlier non-target-like output, while at the same time relocating some of the earlier sentence constituents to make the forum more target-like
Example:

> Teacher: If there's more theoretical than practical, students will only know what they learn but hey will be really poor in applying it.

> Student: I agree with you that students may not be able to apply all the theories they have learnt in class.

Enhancing input in the written text by manipulating the typography such as using capital letters.
Example:
Teacher   You wrote:

> "Therefore, I disagree that male domain in civil engineering professional because female really also play an important role in future especially in civil engineering.

> Would you agree that while female engineers may play a role in civil engineering, male engineers will always DOMINATE the field? This means that female engineers will only play a secondary, supporting role and not the main role in civil

engineering profession.

Once again, the teacher repeated the sentence containing the error. He then proposed a counter argument to the learner's stand on the issue, while simultaneously providing a recast, of the incorrect use of the word 'domain' and 'civil engineering professional'. Capitalization was employed to make the correct lexical item, 'dominate', more salient. There was thus a focus on form in the exchange of meaning in this interaction.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, this study has provided some insights on the pedagogical value of using CMC in language learning, and added to a deeper understanding of the role the teacher can play in facilitating students' language acquisition. Learning opportunities can thus be created by the teacher in a computer-supported learning environment through interactions with students.

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