

Interactional Patterns Of Teacherless Online Community Of Language Learners

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ABSTRACT: Opportunities for interaction have been identified as a main contributing factor for successful learning of a second or foreign language. New learning theories and the advent of technology have affected the nature of interaction in language classes. One of the latest learning theories encouraging interaction is Sociocultural Theory. Lately this theory has been applied into language learning. The theory believes that novices can learn more when they learn through interaction with more knowledgeable peers than when they learn by their own. Considering the important role of interaction this study investigated the interactional features of successful and unsuccessful online communities of language learning. The findings revealed distinguishing patterns in terms of the response time and sense of belonging among others. Successful communities seem to have a shorter response time and a higher sense of belonging

Keywords: *Interactional Patterns, Online, Language*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Online interaction has caught the attention of many second language teachers and methodologists. Voluntary online discussion is one type of the online interaction in which learners are placed in a community with interactive purposes while teacher keeps a low profile to let them have free discussions without feeling being supervised. Although this area of study is rather new, there is a large body of research dedicated to this area. However considering the importance and the broadness of this field, the research in this field is still sparse. Thus the researcher was motivated to initiate this study to contribute to the previous studies by identifying some features of voluntary online communities which is a recently introduced subject.

2.0 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

As will be discussed in the Literature Review, the theoretical views and research on second language acquisition have consistently highlighted the importance of interaction for language development (Vygostky, 1978). This orientation towards interaction has made second language classes more interactive. However, attempts to get students to interact have not always been successful especially in online voluntary teacherless communities as a result of the lack of obligation for members to participate regularly.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

As discussed before, in this part there will be a detailed review of one of the latest learning theories called Sociocultural Theory. Sociocultural Theory is not only a second language

learning theory and can be applied in almost all other fields of education. Thus, this part can be beneficial to all other students in other fields in their future research.

3.1 Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural Theory as one of the latest learning theories is based on a new view of learning development. This theory was initially introduced by the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978), based on the Soviet Union political and social situation influenced by Marxism at that time. Marxism emphasizes socialism and encourages sharing and cooperation. Vygotsky incorporated these elements into his theory. Human development, from a Vygotskian perspective, is seen mainly as mental development such as language, reasoning, and thought. These developments result from interaction with other people in the society and the resultant knowledge represents shared knowledge by the people, i.e. culture. Sociocultural theory basically considers learning and cognition development as a social rather than an individual phenomenon.

The most fundamental psychological concept of SCT is that the human mind is mediated. It means that human mind will develop depending on tools which permit them to change the world. These tools are either physical such as books, computer, etc., or symbolic such as art, music, and above all language. This mediation is categorized as external (that occurs first) and internal (that happens later). At first, external mediation occurs, when a child receives assistance and support from an expert (e.g. mother). Later, internal mediation will happen when a child applies his/her own resources to perform that function without assistance. Thus, during the development period, external mediation extends to internal mediation.

Language is the most important of all symbolic tools since language helps human beings change their relationships around the world through interaction. For Vygotsky, language plays a paramount role in learning because it gives children opportunities to think in new ways and gain new cognitive tools for making sense of the world. Language in SCT is actually viewed as first language development. However, Vygotsky's theory of learning was later extended to show how a second language is acquired in collaboration and interaction between L2 learners and other speakers.

3.2 Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Acquisition

Second language acquisition approaches applying SCT initially appeared in the mid-1980s (Frawley and Lantolf, 1985). Frawley and Lantolf began to explore the potential relevance of SCT to L2 learning. Lantolf (2000) provides a new term for this new extension to SCT as 'Sociocultural SLA' (Ellis, 2003).

Drawing from Vygotsky (1978), Lantolf (2000) explains that L2 learning is made up of three types of mediation; (1) mediation by others in social interaction (called other-regulation); (2) mediation by self through private speech (called self-regulation); and (3) mediation by artifacts like technology (called object-regulation). Language learning starts from object-regulation, when learners face objects in the environment; then extends to other-regulation, when they learn how to control the objects to learn language with the assistance of others; and finally extends to self-regulation when they are capable of independent functioning.

Some researchers have assumed that the learning necessarily involves expert-learner interaction, in which the expert transmits ability to the learner through interaction. However, Swain and Lapkin (2002) conducted studies on learner-learner interaction and showed that this type of peer interaction can be also effective. Thus, in second language acquisition, learner-learner interaction can also be employed effectively.

In this research Sociocultural Theory and particularly SLA Sociocultural Theory was used as the conceptual framework for investigating learner-learner interactions.

As discussed earlier, SCT explains how learning develops through social interaction. As illustrated in Figure 1, general Sociocultural Theory led to the application of this theory in different fields such as second language learning (Lantolf, 2000). This was followed by the notion of communities of practice (CoP) with characteristics and features required for collaborative learning through social interaction as discussed by Vygotsky. The following section will discuss the features and different types of communities of practice in detail.

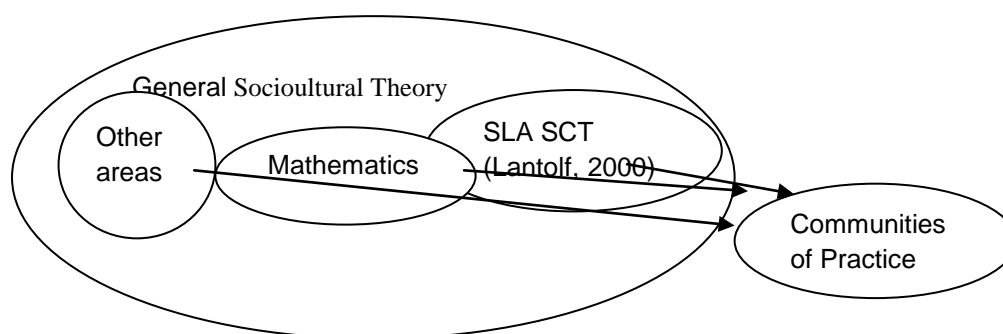


Figure 1 Application of Sociocultural Theory in different learning domains

3.3 Community of Practice

Sociocultural Theory, as introduced by Vygotsky (1978), encouraged the creation of learning communities with the same features and characteristics as societies (Brook and Oliver, 2003). To achieve this goal, a definition of such communities was required in the first place. Thus, the term, Communities of Practice (CoP) was coined by Lave and Wenger (1991). The use of the term CoP was initially used to refer to a “set of relations among persons, activity, and world” (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

One of the features of community of practice is its members (Wenger, et al. 2002). Members of CoP are those who join the community while they are fully aware of the community objectives and help one another to achieve those objectives. These members consist of experts and novices in respective fields.

In the field of education, members’ identity and belonging to the community are considered as essential factors in creating a community (Wenger et al., 2002). Wenger and his colleagues emphasized that each community should build a sense of belonging and give identity to its members. They believe that transferring of information and skills to the members of community occurs only when there is a sense of belonging to the community among members.

Community of practice can be of different types as a result of various factors especially the advent of the Internet technology. The following section will discuss these types of CoP and their subcategories.

3.4 Face-to-face and Online Community of Practice

CoP can be categorized as face-to-face or online CoP. Face-to-face communities are those in which the members group in a community to have face-to-face discussions and interactions to solve problems, while online/virtual communities are formed as a group of online members joined together to learn via interacting and using the Internet technologies (Johnson, 2001). The emergence of online/virtual communities dates back to the 1960s; however, they have gained popularity during the last few years because of the widespread accessibility of the internet to the public and the advantages of online communities to facilitate learning.

One of the special features of online communities is that they are not limited to time zones and geographical locations. In other words, online communities can be defined as a group not separated by space and time.

Face-to-face communication, such as conventional L2 language classes, has its own benefits such as non-verbal clues which facilitate interlocutors' interaction. However, it also has its own limitations and disadvantages such as turn-taking and time- and place-dependency, which limit members' opportunities to interact. For instance, in conventional L2 classes, the students have to attend the class in the same place and at the same time and then, due to the limited class time, not all of the students will have equitable opportunity to participate in the class interaction. However, online interaction provides opportunities for language learners to be engaged in social interaction free from time or location limitations.

In terms of time, online communication can take place in two different modes; asynchronous, in which there is some delay in when the message is sent, received, and answered and synchronous, in which communication takes place in real time.

3.5 Asynchronous and Synchronous CMC

One of the main characteristics of an asynchronous online discussion is that interaction does not take place in real time, as opposed to synchronous CMC in which interaction takes place in real time. Shank and Cunningham (1996) state that, asynchronous communication allows for more time to work on a reply, which may prompt a more in-depth understanding of the information and more thoughtful responses.

It should be noted that there is no actual and clear border distinguishing synchronous and asynchronous communications and they are best regarded as being placed on a continuum (Smith, et al., 2003). Face-to-face (F-T-F) conversations represent the synchronous end of this continuum while traditional post-office letters may represent its asynchronous end (Figure 2).

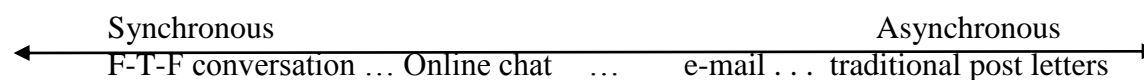


Figure 2 Time-based division of communication

In online asynchronous discussion forums, teachers' and students' roles vary based on the mode of the online communication. Mazzolini and Maddison (2003) found that the teacher's role in asynchronous discussion forums can vary from being the 'sage on the stage', to a 'guide on the side'. Based on the teacher's role, asynchronous CMC is divided into two types; teacher-based and teacherless CMC which will be discussed below.

3.6 Teacher-based and Teacherless Asynchronous CMC

This section explains the characteristics as well as advantages and disadvantages of teacher-based versus teacherless CMC.

3.6.1 Teacher-based CMC

Some scholars believe in the necessity and effectiveness of teacher-based online discussions. They believe that the teacher as an exclusive leader should direct participants' interaction as well as their activities (Salmon, 2000; Palloff and Pratt, 1999). Based on this function the teacher acts as a cheerleader, and attempts to motivate students to go deeper and further with the material. The teacher's involvement is often assumed to encourage students' participation (Kearsley, 2000). However, teacher-based CMC also has its disadvantages.

In teacher-based CMC, the teacher is the authority and is responsible for all the learning process. The teacher is the one who designs the pedagogical curriculum and directs the individual's interactions to achieve those predetermined objectives and the students are assessed by the teacher based on their postings. In other words, participation in the discussions is compulsory and the students have to join the online discussions to meet part of the course requirements. This may create a stressful environment in which the students only do the assigned tasks in order to get good marks or to avoid the teacher's punishment and the authentic nature of the interaction may thus be lost.

3.6.2 Teacher-less CMC

In a teacherless CMC, the teacher actually exists but his/her presence is not observed by the students. Joining the community is not compulsory and the tasks or topics of discussion are based on the students' interests. This leads to the creation of an environment in which the discussions are controlled by the students and are based on the students' interests, and in which the stress level is at a minimum level. Mazzolini and Maddison (2003) found that topics started by teachers on average ended up with shorter discussion threads than the topics left to the students to initiate. Another advantage of such a learning context is that it provides an environment conducive to authentic interactions among learners rather than learner-teacher interaction which usually dominates teacher-based CMC.

However, one of the disadvantages of teacher-less interaction is that most of the members do not participate in interactions as a result of the voluntary nature of this environment.

While teacher-based CMC provides opportunity for equitable participation among all learners, teacherless CMC lacks this advantage because participation is not compulsory and not assigned by anyone. This problem led us to examine how teacherless online discussion can be better facilitated by involving more learners in learner-learner interactions.

4.0 RESEARCH SETTING AND SAMPLES

This research was conducted in MyLinE environment and the samples were 20 teacherless discussions from MyLinE.

MyLinE is a multidisciplinary asynchronous language learning resource established by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). Members are the university students all over

Malaysia. The members can have access to the resources by inserting their usernames and passwords which are recognized by their universities. Since MyLinE is a twenty-four hour learning resource, members can log in to MyLinE at any time.

MyLinE includes main categories of learning activities such as Lounge, Resources, ELSP, Competition and World of Challenges. Each category comprises different subcategories. This research studied only one of the categories, namely Lounge, which is an interactive learning environment for the learners. Lounge is made of these subcategories; Students Guiding Students, Special Interest Groups, Creative Corner, Movie Review, Book Review, Teacher Forum, Student Forum, Correct My English, and Read and Respond.

In Lounge, there are many topics of discussion, which are either teacher-led or teacherless. Teacherless discussions are made up of different topics based on the members' interests. In other words, each student can initiate a topic in any field to be read, commented on, and answered by others.

Samples of the study included 10 discussions from MyLinE in which the members only responded to the main topic not other members as well as 10 discussions in which there was also interaction between other members. The former group was considered as non-sustained or unsuccessful communities while the latter was considered as sustained or successful communities. Then the interactional patterns across these two groups were investigated.

5.0 FINDINGS

The findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

- A large number of DTs are not successful in establishing interaction among members. In these DTs which were called as non-sustained DTs in this study, each member only participated once meaning that there was no interaction between members, while only in few DTs members interacted with each other and participated more than once. These DTs were called as sustained DTs. Thus it can be said that in sustained DTs, members feel belonged to the community more than in non-sustained DTs.
- In sustained DTs members responded each other's postings more quickly than in non-sustained DTs which might be as an encouragement while in non-sustained DTs long response time could be a discouraging factor from establishing interaction among members.
- The number of participants and the nature of the topics were not determining factors in increasing the interaction among members. Based on the analyses it seems that the number of participants and the nature of the topic do not affect participation among members.

5.1 Pedagogical Implications of the Study

From the study, the following recommendations are made to increase interaction among users in teacherless online language learning environments such as MyLinE. These recommendations can be used by moderators, teachers and all those who would like to implement and manage online interaction among language learners.

Based on the findings, one of the effective features was the short average response time, which plays an encouraging role in creating more participation in DTs. Thus moderators

are recommended to provide answers within the shortest possible time, which based on the findings in this study may not be longer than four or five days.

Moderators are also recommended to follow the DTs and try to interact with different members to increase the sense of belonging among them. This can be done by asking for further information, asking for clarification, etc. to encourage more participation.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

The objective of the study was to identify interactional patterns of teacherless ESOL online communities and their members, which was successfully achieved. However, because of the small sample size – 10 sustained and 10 non-sustained DTs one should be cautious in generalising the results to the whole MyLinE population and DTs as well as to other online language learning communities. Furthermore, since not all the sample DTs examined carry all of the features identified, other features could also have been identified if more samples had been investigated.

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