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Online collaborative note-taking strategies to foster EFL beginners' literacy development



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of online collaborative note-taking strategies on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) beginners' literacy development. Fifty-two EFL beginners enrolled in literacy instruction to learn how to read texts (up to 350 words) and write the main ideas by using collaborative note-taking strategies. They were separated into a control group ($N=26$), which received paper-based instruction, and an experimental group ($N=26$), which received online instruction. The results indicate that the EFL beginners in the experimental group made greater progress than those in the control group as they actively utilized the online collaborative note-taking strategies available to comprehend the texts, and more particularly, in clarifying and reflecting on their own and their peers' reading and writing difficulties. In contrast, the beginners in the control group had few or no opportunities to collaborate with peers in sharing notes, nor did they explicitly observe their peers' learning process by checking log files, or save peers' important words, leading to little literacy improvement. Online collaborative note-taking strategies facilitate EFL beginners' literacy development to construct new language knowledge through text decoding (note-taking), text encoding (writing main ideas), and text discussion (collaborative interaction).

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1. Introduction

Literacy, which goes beyond the skills of encoding and decoding texts, focuses on the interactions between reading and writing as learners play the roles of readers and writers to explain the texts (Kern & Schultz, 2005). To foster literacy development, students are not only expected to use their prior knowledge to decode words and understand how the words relate to surrounding words, but also asked to elaborate text information in written forms, such as taking notes, writing main ideas, and writing summaries (Boscolo, Ariasi, Favero, & Ballarin, 2011; Grant, Wong, & Osterling, 2007). These tasks for literacy development are not easy for most students, particularly for those who study English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at a beginning level. Most EFL beginners encounter reading and writing difficulties when literacy instruction mainly focuses on vocabulary mnemonic and grammar explanations (Sheu, 2003). In other words, EFL beginners still need to develop effective strategies to foster their literacy development, such as taking notes (Chiu, Wu, & Cheng, 2013). With the rise of computer technology, online collaborative note-taking strategies can help students share and compare their notes with peers in order to supplement missing information and clarify important ideas when reading and summarizing texts.

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Studies, which have emphasized EFL beginners' use of note-taking strategies in collaborative learning to foster their literacy development, are limited. First, only few studies have investigated how EFL beginners start to build literacy through sharing notes with their peers in a computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) environment (Gleason, 2005; Wright, Fugett, & Caputa, 2013). Yet learning to explain texts by reading and writing at the same time is important in literacy development, specifically in collaborative interaction to improve reading comprehension and writing skills (Wright et al., 2013).

Second, most annotation tools are individual programs, such as *Paragraph Annotator* (Lo, Yeh, & Sung, 2013), or built-in annotations provided by online systems, which do not allow students to observe their peers' note-taking strategies, nor to interact with peers by providing and receiving useful suggestions, let alone to document important words in their personal log files. Students using these annotations to take notes online are unable to observe their peers' note-taking strategies, interact with peers by providing and receiving useful suggestions, or document important words in their personal log files. Finally, few studies have examined the benefits of reviewing notes and vocabulary after reading and summarizing a passage (Kiewra, 1985; Kobayashi, 2006). Reviewing and re-reading notes facilitate beginners to recall more text information and help to reconstruct their new language knowledge from reading and summarization (Di Vesta & Gray, 1972).

In the context of EFL reading, Taiwanese EFL beginners often have difficulties connecting meaning to words contextually (Lo et al., 2013) and writing main ideas for summarization. To help EFL beginners facilitate their literacy development, online collaborative note-taking strategies in this study focus on the interaction between peers for sharing notes and summaries to clarify missing or unclear text information. The EFL beginners in this study were asked to perform three roles in the CSCL system, including note-takers, summarizers, and feedback providers. When the EFL beginners were encouraged to act as note-takers, they made hypertext annotations, such as underlining topic sentences, highlighting important sentences, and looking up unknown words by using online dictionaries. Afterwards, they assumed the role of summarizers, writing the main ideas in each paragraph. Finally, the EFL beginners collaboratively provided their peers with useful suggestions and comments to revise hypertext annotations and the main ideas from their texts, as they played the role of feedback providers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Online collaborative note-taking strategies

Note-taking is an effective strategy to facilitate student learning when “attending to the lecture, locating targets in long-term memory, holding and manipulating the attended information in working memory, encoding ideas into long-term memory, and transcribing relevant notions” (Kiewra, 1988, p. 41). Students are often asked to take notes individually in class; however, they may misunderstand or uncomprehend the teacher's explanations while quickly taking notes during lectures (Chiu et al., 2013). With the rapid development of computer technology, many studies have shown that online collaborative note-taking helps students when they compare and share notes with their peers' notes (i.e., AbuSeileek, 2011, 2008; Kauffman, Zhao, & Yang, 2011; Lo et al., 2013; Roy, Brine, & Murasawa, in press; Türk & Erçetin, 2014). Sharing notes with peers allows students to supplement any missing information and emulate note-taking habits for enhancing literacy development (Faust & Paulson, 1998).

In addition to comparing and sharing notes online, reviewing notes helps students recall more information as they immediately read their notes after class (Di Vesta & Gray, 1972). In other words, note-takers not only have to comprehend the text they read and write, along with their personal annotations, but they also need to reorganize and restructure existing knowledge, by storing and integrating the important information in the reading and writing process (Makany, Kemp, & Dror, 2008). AbuSeileek (2011) proposes that students be required to use online dictionaries to clarify multiple meanings of difficult words, while decoding texts. That is, online collaborative note-taking strategies and online dictionaries facilitate students in reorganizing paragraphs into more structured information for reducing cognitive loads (Makany et al., 2008) and enhancing recall from working memory (Kauffman et al., 2011).

When students decode important information and review online notes to improve reading comprehension, writing main ideas is also vital to enhance their literacy development (Chiu et al., 2013). Summarizing main ideas is a useful reviewing strategy for students to identify ideas and clarify the logical relationships across paragraphs (Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996). When summarizing, students are required to focus on key ideas and organize important concepts to make connections between new ideas (Friend, 2000).

2.2. Literacy development through collaborative note-taking strategies

In literacy development, students are required to decode unstructured information within each paragraph by selecting key ideas (Piolat, Olive, & Kellogg, 2005), annotating important elements into their long term memory, and writing the main ideas (Kiewra, 1988). Genlott and Grönlund (2013) have indicated that students are encouraged to engage in interactions and collaborations with their peers to foster literacy development, especially for EFL beginners who need scaffolds in learning to read and write. Muis, Ranellucci, Trevors, and Duffy (2015) also confirm that collaborative learning can foster students' literacy development as they provide and receive useful peer feedback online.

In other words, students are encouraged to construct new language knowledge through text decoding (note-taking), text encoding (writing main ideas), and text discussion (collaborative interaction). Collaborative learning is a social interaction

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