

Supporting Chinese speaking skills online

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Abstract

Chinese is considered a difficult language to learn by most Western learners, yet recently more and more people are learning Chinese, and increasingly teaching is delivered online. Due to the nature of Chinese and the complexity of online learning, research has not yet produced sufficient information on students' and teachers' interaction during synchronous online sessions.

This exploratory study investigates interaction in synchronous online Chinese tutorials with a focus on the different elements employed by the teacher and students to support online speaking development. It highlights the gaps between teacher intentions and student perceptions of online interactions and describes how skilful use of online technology and multiple modes can bridge these gaps. The study uses a combination of qualitative methods (observation, stimulated recall and thematic analysis) and multimodal transcription supported by some quantitative methods (comparison of frequency).

The findings are interpreted from a socio-cultural perspective, taking into account the differences between English and Chinese in terms of language and learning culture. Recommendations are made to improve the online teaching strategies and task design, specifically for improving Chinese speaking skills in synchronous online environments.

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1. Introduction

In the UK, Mandarin Chinese was identified as a language important for strategic and political reasons by Lord Dearing (Dearing and King, 2007). Responding to this evaluation, an increasing number of Chinese courses is offered across all educational sectors. At the Open University the first Mandarin Chinese course, 第-步 (Dì yī bù: "First Steps"), was introduced in 2009. This paper will report on research undertaken during the first year of the course.

The Open University is a distance teaching institution where language courses are taught through the use of carefully structured materials ("tutorial in print" (see Rowntree, 1997)) with the support of a personal tutor. Over the past few years an increasing number of elements of teaching has been moved online, to virtual learning environments and synchronous online tutorials, offering the opportunity for immediate tailored feedback and spontaneous spoken

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interaction. Students' learning is now supported by Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as well as face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers.

This article focuses on multimodal interaction during online synchronous Mandarin tutorials, on teacher intention and student perception of the teaching taking place, and on the way multiple modes are used to engage students in online interactions. The research was undertaken to identify the skills required for teaching Chinese online.

The resulting pedagogical recommendations about, for example, the combination of different modes in online environments, the engagement of learners in online interaction, task design and instructions, and the focus on cultural elements, are intended to support the training of online language teachers. On a more methodological level, the exploitation of multimodal transcription for the analysis of online interaction will contribute to the growing knowledge of online language learning and teaching as well as inform online teacher training by suggesting the most skilful use of online environments.

2. Background of the research

This study takes a socio-cultural perspective on language learning (Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Learning takes place when the learner actively engages with new elements and adapts her/his perspective in interaction with peers, advanced peers and, possibly, but not necessarily, teachers. This means that learning is a social and collaborative process. In this perspective, online language learning can be viewed as an activity mediated both through the means of technology and through the foreign language (Wertsch and Tulviste, 1992).

The current study is located on the cusp of two highly current aspects of language teaching: online teaching in multimodal spaces; and the evolving area of teaching Chinese in technology assisted and online environments.

2.1. Language learning in multimodal online contexts

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the use of computers in language teaching and learning has become commonplace (Bax, 2003; Liu et al., 2003). Over the past years, the use of spoken online communication has increased; this has resulted in a noticeable move of online language learning from taking place in predominantly written environments to multimodal environments (see e.g. Stockwell, 2007). Desktop audio- or video-conferencing or audio-graphic environments with a focus on visual input to support language learning are now easily available (e.g. Skype, Elluminate, FlashMeeting, WebCT, NetMeeting, DimDim, etc.). That the combination of different modes can aid learning has been shown by Kress and Jewitt amongst other researchers (Jewitt et al., 2001). In the pre-internet era, texts investigated by researchers encompassed mainly spoken and written modes, and to some extent in multimodal discourse also images as an element of text that contributed to making meaning in context. In online environments, modes are more complex and sometimes more difficult to distinguish (Hampel, 2003). New media communication skills expand modes to incorporate up to five distinct elements, including verbal, visual, musical, cinematal and procedural (Pinkard and Austin, 2010). These new media and new modes of communication also require the ability on part of the students to decipher and use them effectively and critically, i.e. digital literacies (Goodfellow, 2011). In this article we are referring to the most apparent modes in the synchronous audio-graphic environment *Elluminate*, i.e.: speaking, pre-loaded written text, synchronous writing (textchat), pre-loaded images, synchronously drawn images and potentially a video image. The modes also include procedural elements, such as yes and no indicators (tick and cross), emoticons (smiley face, confused face, clapping hands, thumbs down) and a hand raising symbol, which can be used as substitutes for gesture, facial expression, and body language, and interaction with the screens (Illustration 1).

The multimodal learning environment allows users to choose the mode or combination of modes most suited to his or her learning preferences (Stickler and Hampel, 2010), and demands that the teacher be skilled in the multimodal support of online language learning (Hampel and Stickler, 2005).

Although this is still an under-researched area, direct comparison of teaching sessions online and in a face-to-face setting has shown the influence of technological affordances on the patterns of communication (Heins et al., 2007; Stickler et al., 2004, 2007), and consequently, the differing needs of teacher skills and training (e.g. Wang et al., 2010).

As Hampel and Stickler (2012) have shown, there is still a paucity of research which examines the impact on interaction of using video, audio and text in an online language classroom and analyses such multimodal communication. In our specific case, the usual limitations of second language (L2) learners in constructing or co-constructing meaningful dialogues are exacerbated in two ways: firstly, by the relatively low level of language competence of beginner learners,

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