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The implementation of task-based teaching in an online Chinese class through web conferencing

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ABSTRACT

From both interactionist and sociocultural perspectives on second language acquisition (SLA), learner-learner interactions provide opportunities for negotiation of meaning, which may facilitate their second language learning. There is yet a paucity of studies on learners' multimodal interaction and collaborative language learning investigating the effect of task design in web conferencing-based environments. This empirical research has a dual aim: 1) to explore how the teacher and learners use multiple modes (video, audio, text chat, voting, raised-hand function, emoticons and whiteboard) to make meaning in a web conferencing environment, and 2) to examine whether learners engage in negotiation of meaning in the completion of tasks in the web conferencing environment.

In this study, a group of elementary level Chinese students conducted two online sessions—one jigsaw task and one information-gap task - delivered by a web conferencing platform (*Blackboard Collaborate*). A mixed methods approach was adopted in that a) the teacher's and learners' multimodal interactions were recorded and analysed quantitatively in order to illustrate participation patterns, b) Varonis and Gass's (1985) model was used to identify instances of negotiation of meaning in learner-learner interactions through an interpretive analysis of the data.

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1. Introduction

The last few decades have seen an enormous growth of applying task-based language teaching (TBLT) approaches in face-to-face (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Samuda & Bygate, 2008; Skehan, 1998) and online teaching environments (Hampel, 2006; Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Rosell-Aguilar, 2005; Wang, 2007). Nowadays, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become prevalent and it attracts many researchers' attention, especially in foreign language (FL) education. Web conferencing, which combines multiple modes (such as text chat, audio and video), has been considered as one of the most effective tools for online language teaching (Hampel & Stickler, 2012; Satar, 2013; Stickler & Shi, 2013). Remarkably, there is a dearth of studies investigating the implementation of communication tasks in a web conferencing-based online classroom with a focus on the instructor and learners' multimodal interaction and negotiation for meaning (NfM) in learners' collaboration. As Stockwell (2010) points out, there is a need to investigate how TBLT be implemented in multimodal learning environments and its influence on learners' interaction.

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It is critical for language instructors to be prepared to achieve pedagogical goals through activity design and implementation in CMC environments (Salaberry, 2000) and be aware of the influence of multimodal environment on learners' interaction in online classes (Hampel & Stickler, 2012). Audio and videoconferencing applications, which combine different tools such as interactive whiteboard, shared screen, audio, video, text chat, have shown great potential in overcoming geographical obstacles to learning and in reducing isolation for distance learners (Hampel & Hauck, 2004; Wang, 2004). It has been shown that Internet-based videoconferencing 'may emerge as a viable tool for generating oral-visual interaction in distance language learning' (Wang, 2008, p. 238). At the same time, several disadvantages of using web conferencing were reported, which include (i) technical issues such as time lag and audio delays (Wang, 2004); (ii) less equality of learners' participation without teacher presence (Örnberg Berglund, 2009) and (iii) students' reluctance in using webcam in tele-tandem sessions (Telles, 2010).

As the most widely spoken language in the world, Chinese has been taught in Australian universities and schools since the 1950s. However, due to its unique nature in terms of orthography and pronunciation system, Chinese is considered a difficult language to learn by most Australian learners. Recently, an increasing number of studies have attempted to apply TBL approaches in virtual Chinese learning environments, such as 3D multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) Second Life (Lin, Wang, Grant, Chien, & Lan, 2014) and video-conferencing online setting (Wang, 2008). The present study reports on the use of a web conferencing tool – Blackboard Collaborate – for task-based interactions in the context of an ab initio Chinese language program.

2. Background of the research

2.1. Interaction and second language acquisition

During the last several decades, the centrality of interaction in second language learning has been well backed up by evidence and findings from the perspective of interactionist second language acquisition theories (Gass, 1997). Interaction is defined not only as 'the interpersonal activity that arises during face-to-face communication', but also refers to 'the intrapersonal activity involved in mental processing' (Ellis, 1999b, p. 3). Interactionist theory suggests that interaction provides learners with opportunities for NfM, which fosters L2 learning when difficulties in communication arise (Ellis, 1999a; Pica, 1994). Negotiation refers to 'communication in which participants' attention is focused on resolving a communication problem as opposed to communication in which there is a free-flowing exchange of information' (Gass, 1997, p. 107). Varonis and Gass (1985) investigated conversational interaction in a face-to-face setting and proposed a model that describes how NfM takes place between non-native speakers (NNSs). This model has been used in the present study.

From an interactionist second language acquisition perspective, it has been shown that synchronous CMC has great potential in facilitating learner-learner interaction (Beauvois, 1992; Blake, 2000; Kelm, 1992; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1996), increasing equality of participation (Warschauer, 1996), enhancing language output (Beauvois, 1995; Chun, 1994; Kelm, 1992; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1996) and contributing to NfM (Blake, 2000, 2005; Fernández-García & Martínez-Arbelaiz, 2002, 2003; Fidalgo-Eick, 2001; Keller-Lally, 2006; Pellettieri, 2000; Smith, 2003; Wang, 2006).

2.2. TBLT and interaction in synchronous CMC (SCMC) learning tasks

Derived from both interactionist theories of second language acquisition and sociocultural theory, a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach is considered to be conducive to stimulating and enabling learners' interaction and, therefore, to facilitating L2 learning (Pica, 1994, 1996; Pica & Doughty, 1985). Moreover, it can provide opportunities for learners to collaboratively work on tasks with others, which they are not able to complete by themselves (Vygotsky, 1978). Empirical evidence has supported the Interaction Hypothesis in the context of face-to-face TBLT teaching practice (Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 1994; Gass & Varonis, 1985; Long, 1983, 1985). Recently, there are an increasing calls to investigate TBLT in multimodal online learning environments (Hauck & Youngs, 2008; Stockwell, 2010).

In the last two decades, a number of researchers have focused on comparing negotiation interaction in task-based real time CMC and face-to-face discussion. Studies investigating learners' interaction via text chat show that negotiations can be commonly noticed in the process of task completion, which confirms that text-based tasks have a positive influence on facilitating learners' language learning (Blake, 2000; Pellettieri, 2000). Recently, a number of studies have shown that negotiated interaction among learners does occur in SCMC environments such as text chat (Kern, 1995), online task-based verbal discussion (Fernández-García & Martínez-Arbelaiz, 2002; Smith, 2003) and desktop videoconferencing environments (Wang, 2006).

Since no previous literature has investigated learner-to-learner negotiation interaction in task-based web conferencing environments, to the best of the author's knowledge, empirical research is needed to examine whether NfM occurs in collaborative tasks via web conferencing. If so, the pertinent question is whether there are any differences between negotiation in web conferencing and in face-to-face environments.

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