Video conferencing and multimodal expression of voice: Children's conversations using Skype for second language development in a telecollaborative setting

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how voice is expressed in a telecollaborative project using Skype to connect two groups of primary age English language learners across two countries. Voice is understood as the ways in which language and other semiotic means are used for communication (Blommaert, 2008). This theoretical view frames the qualitative study into how voice is expressed materially involving tools such as verbal language, body language, technology, and the spatial and temporal dimensions within which the children's conversation happens. A methodology for analysing the video recorded data was developed using Scollon and Scollon's concept of geosemiotics. This method of analysis investigates how language is materially assembled through interaction with others in the physical world. The study shows that telecollaborative conversations create particular conditions which affect the ways children express their voice. The implications discussed in the conclusion have the potential to initiate wider discussion in the context of early childhood education and language learning concerning the importance of a multimodal perspective on how children express voice to support their communication when using video conferencing.

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1. Introduction

The technologies now available to many schools facilitate the creation of partnerships between language learning classrooms across different countries, allowing students to experience learning in a different way to previous generations. Teachers are, therefore, challenged to forge new skills in language lessons by embedding intercultural dialogue and the development of children's use of information and communication technology (ICT) (Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, 2006; Department For Education, 2003). This means moving their practice beyond delivering face-to-face lessons in the classroom by incorporating computer-mediated communication. This can be done through telecollaboration, which Belz (2003) describes as involving 'the use of Internet communication tools by internationally dispersed students of

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language in institutionalized settings in order to promote the development of (a) foreign language (FL) linguistic competence and (b) intercultural competence' (68).

However, the use of communication technologies in education is changing the way we learn, and so our manner of viewing the classroom and how it operates must change too (Dicks, Flewitt, Lancaster, & Pahl, 2011; Levy, 2009; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996). As computer-mediated conversations are becoming a part of children's learning experience in the classroom it is important to explore what the implications are for how children communicate in this environment. Online sites allow for different ways of interacting with a much wider community of learners and experts who can be in dispersed locations. An integral part of this shift in approach is the idea that children have a need to express themselves in a range of contexts and thus must be supported to learn with a sense of agency.

To explore this further, the concept of voice was employed within a social semiotic framework to find out more about how children communicate in an online telecollaborative setting using video conferencing technology. Conversations took place in Skype between students from two primary schools in different countries who are second language (L2) speakers of English.

2. The research questions and an overview of the literature

To address children's use of voice in synchronous online conversations, the present study examined the following first research question: *How is voice experienced and expressed in a video conferencing environment?* This study begins with the supposition that voice conceptualises the way in which people produce meaning during online exchanges and, in particular, in video conferencing environments. We define voice as the ways in which 'people use language and other semiotic means in attempts (…) to make themselves understood by others' (Blommaert, 2008, p. 427). The individual character of a person's voice is transmitted through the choices they make over which signs highlight and portray those aspects about themselves that they wish to express. For if the speaker's voice 'is to become significant to others, he [sic] must mobilize his activity so that it will express during the interaction what he wishes to convey' (Goffman, 1959, p. 40). However, the process of voicing our ideas is complex and unpredictable because what is expressed is not necessarily perceived or understood. Reaching a shared understanding with others requires negotiation through dialogue, making the expression of voice an inherently social process (Bakhtin, 1986).

Interlocutors build on each other's ideas in order to get things done in the social world. Consequently, voice is seen materialistically as the conversion of socially meaningful resources into socially meaningful action. For a speaker's voice to carry meaning it must communicate something to others and therefore be intrinsically dialogic, incorporating elements of addressivity and responsivity to others in conversation (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 105).

However, despite the important role played by voice in the everyday activities in educational and online environments, the literature makes little mention of how children use their voices to express themselves in video conferencing conversations. This qualitative study of online conversations between primary age learners, therefore, sets out to capture the interaction between communication means (such as language, gaze, gesture or artefacts), producers and users of those communications and the immediate context. It considers the children's expression of voice to be a multimodal accomplishment and shows how a multimodal perspective can help structure the analysis of children's voices as they engage them through the video communication service Skype.

A second, related research question asked: *What effect do the affordances of Skype have on how voice is expressed?* This question explored the ways in which the online environment mediates children's voices. Both Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1986) believed that the development of mental functioning in the individual is the result of learning conversations with others. Like Vygotsky, Goffman (1981) describes how the way in which people use the tools at their disposal (their bodies and other material means) in the presence of others supports collaboration with them. The distances that are maintained between people, the way in which gaze is used, the clothes that are worn, the responses they anticipate, how they interact with the physical spaces where people live all contribute to what they wish to say. People's bodies and objects from the material world become tools which, alongside verbal speech, can be used to signal the type of social role they are assuming and the actions that they will take. Communication in a conventional classroom happens face-to-face and is mediated through a range of semiotic tools including tasks, physical settings, institutional and cultural assumptions, time frames and language. By incorporating the use of internet voice communication, the material that we use to make meaning through interaction online is further expanded to include technology (Lamy & Flewitt, 2011). Kern (2014) observes that how we communicate in this environment is dependent on the ways in which our voice is mediated. The hardware and software through which ideas are expressed filter and transform communicative activity influencing the choice of how best to convey those ideas (Hampel, 2014). This study follows the view of Develotte, Guichon, and Vincent (2010) that Skype video conferencing software provides a new cultural tool that potentially restructures the way in which voices interact through a whole range of meaning making resources in new situations (see also Guichon & Cohen, 2014).

The final question was: *What role does voice have in helping children think together?* It explored how primary age L2 learners' voices engage to make meaning in this environment. As mentioned above, a view of development through child-led activity takes as its premise an understanding that learning happens through interaction with others. That learning is achieved in communication between contemporaries and across generations is of particular significance in language development as language is both the medium for learning and the focus of study (Hauck & Youngs, 2008). Interacting in meaningful contexts that build on young language learners' lived experiences, home languages and cultural frameworks helps them to flourish as the potential for drawing on different meaning making resources is expanded (Spencer, Falchi, & Ghiso, 2011).