

Interactive challenges in Online Student Participatory Language Learning through Closed Social Network

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ABSTRACT

Learning does not take place in a vacuum. According to Cottone (2001), learning is an interactive rather than an individual process. It involves exchanging of ideas, negotiating and sharing of decision making together. It is a far cry from the classroom situation in the past when the all-knowing lecturer provided details to the students who then merely imbibed the knowledge in wholesomely and unquestionably. The paradigm shift in learning has encouraged students from just being passive learners into becoming active participants responsible for their own acquisition of knowledge while lecturers now take a backseat and act only as facilitators to oversee progress made by their students. Through such online learning, students interact with group members to learn from each other and also from their lecturers when the need arises. Similarly, online learning in language courses has seen students engaging themselves in language tasks. There is no denying the benefits accrued from students' online collaborative activities (Roberts,2005) and in the expansion of students' opportunities in distance learning (Schrum, 2000). However, lecturers need to initiate studies on how its online learning beyond classroom context has hindered satisfactory participation of students in online language courses through closed social network.

Keywords: Social Presence; Perceived Learning; Student Satisfaction;
Online Community

INTRODUCTION

Learning does not take place in a vacuum. According to Cottone (2001), learning is interactive rather than an individual process. It involves exchanging of ideas, negotiating and sharing of decision making together. It is a far cry from the classroom situation in the past when the all-knowing lecturer provided details to the students who then merely imbibed the knowledge in wholesomely and unquestionably. The paradigm shift in learning has encouraged students from just being passive learners into becoming active participants responsible for their own acquisition of knowledge while lecturers now take a backseat and act only as facilitators to oversee progress made by their students. Through such online learning, students interact with group members to learn from each other and also from their lecturers when the need arises. Similarly, online learning in language courses has seen students engaging themselves in language tasks. There is no denying the benefits accrued from students' online collaborative activities (Roberts, 2005) and in the expansion of students' opportunities in distance learning (Schrum, 2000). However, lecturers need to initiate studies on how its online learning beyond classroom context has hindered satisfactory participation of students in online language courses through closed social network.

Problem Statement

A lot of research has been carried out on the advantages of online learning but not much has been carried out on the challenges faced by language learners in online learning activities. In the case of distance learning study conducted by Garland (1993), student perceptions were taken of their situational, institutional, dispositional, and epistemological barriers to persistence in learning. Schilke (2001) made further improvements on Garland's model by taking into consideration the technical factor. Until recently, research study has seldom been carried on closed social network such as Edmodo to identify how to engage learners in such online language activities. Traditional face to face language learning activities have long been adopted in classrooms and some students feel more actively involved when they participate in classroom activities. At the extreme end, students can also engage in the public social network such as Facebook to carry out online learning. Using this social media as a platform for online learning, the students may find learning advantageous to them in respect to them having more freedom, fun and control. (Irwin, Ball, Desbrow & Leveritt, 2012) In this study, the focus is not so much on the merits of online learning but on the thorough investigation into the challenges that confront students in online language learning through closed social network.

Significance of the study

Song, Singleton, Hill and Koh (2004) has stressed on the importance of students' outlook in their online language learning. What lecturers assume to be best practices in online closed social networking may not be construed as an effective learning approach by students themselves. In fact, quite contrary to favourable acceptance of online learning, some students may in fact view such online group discussions as impediment to learning. As such, lecturers should be proactive and initiate own investigation into the frustrations and barriers faced by online language learners. By knowing students' dislikes and hesitation in online social networking, lecturers can increase learners' participatory language learning. Jeffrey, Milne, Suddaby and Higgins (2012) found that

students' involvement in the online environment precipitated higher levels of students' language activities online. This study is significant as it gathers information from students about their challenges they face in using Edmodo to carry out online learning tasks in their English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. It also takes into account the students' recommendations for improving online EAP language learning course.

Objectives of the Study

1. To determine the overall perceptions of students on online EAP language learning course?
2. To identify the interactive challenges for the student participatory in the online term paper discussions in EAP language learning course?
3. To list and discuss the students' recommendations for improving interactive online term paper discussions in EAP course?

Limitations of the Study

1. It does not take into account comparison of interactive challenges faced by students of online learning between public and closed social network.
2. It has also not taken into account the significance of means between students encountering interactive challenges in online discussions with interactive challenges during face to face discussions with lecturers.
3. The study is restricted to just one campus and similar study may have to be carried out to confirm results in other institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interactive online learning in closed social network

Bonk (2004) emphasized the need for better online courses. Students have expected a higher level of results from learning and involvement in online participation with their peers and lecturers than from the traditional face-to-face classroom learning context. In fact, students may not interact with their group members during online discussions due to several barriers. In Edmodo, a closed social network, lecturers can monitor students' progress in their academic participatory discussions while completing their term paper in the EAP course and also provide privacy and less distractions among group members (Stroud, 2010).

Constructivist Learning Theory

The advent of Web 2.0 has made possible the constructivist model of learning between the student as an individual with the group members and lecturer in the class (Gunawardena,, Hermans, & Richmond, 2009) . Vygotsky (1978) defined Zone of Proximal Distance (ZPD) as one where the distance between actual learning with guidance from experts takes place and another where learning hardly happens without collaboration with more knowledgeable peers and lecturer. Web 2.0 social network sites such as Edmodo enable participatory online learning through such cooperation and collaboration.

Student Participatory Language Learning

Online learning offers another avenue for participatory language discussions among students and lecturer beyond classroom contact hours. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), student engagement remains as one of the learning outcomes in interactive discussions. Kuh (2003) established that students gain more knowledge with constant study and practice after completion of their course. However, Roberts and McInnerney (2007) reported some students being either antagonistic or not bothered with online collaborative learning and discussions.

Edmodo as Closed Social Network

Edmodo serves as a closed social network site for outside classroom activities. Students are able to communicate with their lecturers and other group members to discuss their assignments and class topics (Geron, 2011). The two inventors, Borg and O'Hara in 2008 decided to provide an educational platform strictly for classroom learning without users facing any distractions and privacy issues as found in public social networks (Condon, 2011). However, in this study, students still have reservations when it comes to interactive online learning especially when they participate in group discussions. In order to improve student participation in online learning through closed social network site such as Edmodo, a quantitative and qualitative study were carried out to find out from the students' perspective the interactive challenges they face when they participated in online learning.

METHODOLOGY

86 part three diploma students taking the compulsory English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course were surveyed to collect input of their participatory online language learning in the closed social network. The qualitative data in this study was collected through interviews with students to probe further their interactive challenges they face so as to confirm and triangulate findings. Students' background information was required in the first section while students' overall perceptions towards the EAP course were needed in the second section. The second section consisted of seven 4-point Likert questions ranging from 1 Strongly Disagree to 4 Strongly Agree preference. Besides that, students had to state their frequencies of using Edmodo in the course, decide on whether online learning was more challenging than face-to-face learning and also on whether it had assisted them in engaging more actively in online language learning activities. They were also given opportunities to recommend ways to further improve online discussions through Edmodo. Both the questionnaire and interview questions were adapted from Song, Singleton, Hill and Koh (2004) and Capdeferro and Romero (2012) respectively.

Prior to the questionnaire and interviews being administered, students were briefed on Edmodo closed social networking applications and how to use this social learning networking tool for classroom discussions among group members. During the EAP course, students had to discuss online with their group members on how to produce a term paper of a selected topic 450-700 words based on their own initiative and armchair research study. As students had to work on a tight time schedule and had problems to meet each other after class, the lecturer suggested Edmodo as a private and secured social learning network for peer collaboration among all group members in the class. Close monitoring, feedback and assistance could also be offered to

students interacting and discussing issues pertaining to the term paper assignment. A simplified scheduled time frame akin to a Gantt chart in actual research was also shown to students as guidelines to adhere and track their own progress in term paper completion. The weekly task completion is displayed below as follows:

- Week 1: Providing broad topic for term paper through brainstorming, clustering, free writing and open reading
- Week 2: Broad/ Narrow and Focussed Topic
- Week 3: Writing of Thesis Statement using parallelism construction of 3 main points
- Week 4: Providing three different types of reference sources
- Week 5: Writing introductory paragraph and inserting in-text citations
- Week 6: Paraphrase sentences lifted from printed/electronic sources
- Week 7: Submission of outline
- Week 8: Review of outline and feedback
- Week 9: Submission of first draft
- Week 10: Review of draft and feedback
- Week 11: Submission of final paper

After the final submission of the term paper, the students were instructed to fill in a survey questionnaire. Later on, they were also interviewed. From the responses given by these students, researchers prepare the data given in the form of open-ended questions in the questionnaire as well as students' responses through interviews with them. These two approaches made it possible for them to express their challenges interacting in online language learning activities. In open ended questionnaire survey, quantitative measures have been used by counting on the frequency in which students talked of the significant different interactive challenges they encountered in online language learning activities. Similarly, input taken from taped conversations conducted through interviews with students were analysed and interpreted according to the types of challenges and comments made on them.

FINDINGS

Findings from the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data gathered from the online language learning study are presented below.

Table 1 Evaluation of Edmodo in EAP course

1	How often do you utilize Edmodo in EAP course?					
	Frequently	83.7%	Seldom	16.3%	Never	0
2	Has Edmodo as an interactive social networking site benefitted you?					
	Yes, definitely	53.5%	Not sure	46.5%	No, waste of time	0
3	Having online group discussions through Edmodo is more challenging than face-to-face group discussions?					
	Yes, definitely	64%	Not sure	20%	No	16%

Table 2 Hindrances in online closed social networking

		1. Strongly Disagree (SD)	4. Agree (A)				
		2. Disagree (D)	5. Strongly Agree (SA)				
	Interactive challenges in Edmodo	SD (%)	D (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	SD
1	Negotiation problems. Conflict in reaching consensus.	2.3	20.9	44.2	32.6	3.09	.78
2	Limited display of emotions and non-verbal cues.	0	39.5	53.5	7.0	2.7	.6
3	Commitment imbalance.	7	48.8	37.2	7	2.44	.73
4	Too formal and academic setting.	11.6	27.9	41.9	18.6	2.67	.92
5	Communication difficulties and misunderstandings.	4.7	51.2	37.2	7	2.47	.7
6	Lack of instructor's support orientation	9.3	46.5	34.9	9.3	2.44	.8
7	Unshared goals and task fulfilment	11.6	65.1	20.9	2.3	2.14	.64

DISCUSSIONS

The overall perceptions of students on online EAP language learning course

83.7% of the respondents frequented Edmodo for online discussions as they were assessed for participation. This is in sharp contrast to only 16.3% for occasional/seldom usage and nil percentage for zero participation. However, only 53.5% attested to Edmodo benefitting them through interactive academic learning but a slightly lower 46.5% still felt uncertainty over its beneficial outcomes derived from the interactive discussions although no student opposed Edmodo as detrimental to interactive social networking. About 64% of students surveyed

responded that taking online courses were probably more challenging than taking face-to-face courses; 20% of the respondents were not sure while 16% disagreed.

The challenges for the students in the online EAP language learning course Negotiation problems

According to the data, almost 80% of the respondents ($M=3.09$, $SD=0.78$, where 1=strongly disagree and 4=strongly agree) agreed that negotiation problems posed the greatest challenge to online language learning. Only 2% of the respondents strongly disagreed that they had no issue negotiating with group members. Most of the students agreed that they had no problems understanding the language task delegated to them during the initial stage. However, they were confronted with problems when they tried to implement the task. Quantitative analysis from the open ended questions in the survey questionnaire generated conflicting ideas and approaches which were supposed to be ideal breeding grounds for successful group discussions led to discord and stubborn refusals to accept other views among group members. Kreijns, Kirschner, Jochems, & Buuren (2004) noted that poor quality of negotiation and communicative skills during group discussions were detrimental to achieving mutual respect in achieving their common objective.

During online group discussions, the lecturer merely acted as a facilitator to monitor the progress of the language activity carried out. Students lamented that lecturers should also be 'more helpful' and involved instead of just allowing students themselves to make major decisions especially when they were still quite newly exposed to writing term paper. In fact, input taken from interviews with some students concurred with Petride's (2002) study that they wanted immediate correct responses. They felt that face to face discussions in the class would have addressed their problems especially when there would be a tendency of lecturer's intervention. In addition, students wanted their lecturer's assistance in constructing paraphrased sentences, in-text citations and references according to American Psychological Association (APA) format. Members need to motivate and mediate with each other in overcoming their conflicting differences of opinion (McManus & Aiken, 1995)

Limited display of non-verbal cues and emotions

Even though there were none who strongly disagreed that this feature with the limited display of non-verbal cues and emotions, the study surprisingly showed a high percentage of students agreed (53.5%) and strongly agreed (7%) that body language and facial expressions were important forms of communication. This study concurred with the findings by Tienne (2000) on the advantages of interactive online discussions. Qualitative study through students' interviews positively confirmed students' preferences for face-to-face discussions over online discussions. Therefore, face-to-face discussions presented serious challenges to online language discussions. Some students recommended more interesting features to express emotions and feelings as found in Facebook.

Academic and formal setting

Almost 60% of the respondents felt that submissions of their postings were too formal. They felt that academic writing during discussions inhibited them from participating in ‘ natural ‘ conversation like how they expressed themselves in Facebook. One of the students remarked ‘ We can’t used contractions and short forms like BTW, OMG and ha!ha! to indicate laughter – it’s so not like me!’ This formal and academic setting has contributed to low interactive discussions (Guzdial & Carroll,2002) which can prolong such discussions in completing their term paper. As a way out of this boredom, students suggested badges (merit points in Edmodo) be given for various positive effort shown in online learning. Extra bonus marks can also be added for excellent performance in term paper quizzes and well-developed points during discussions so as to overcome the rigid formal setting.

Communication difficulties and misunderstandings

Approximately half of the students agreed that they encountered online communication difficulties resulting probably in misunderstanding among group members. When interviewed, some members stated that they were dissuaded from participating in discussions because they were usually shut out from more dominant group members in decision making. If students were left alone, Murphy (2004) noted that such ‘feelings of being left out’ or ‘discouraged from participation’ would eventually result in complete non-collaboration. The situation could worsen when the lecturer might misinterpret this passive behaviour as anti-social when in actual fact, these students were side-lined by their respective group members. As noted in the findings by Kim, Liu & Bonk (2005), some students also similarly indicated in open-ended survey and interviews with them their preference for face-to-face learning over online learning. Students questioned the liberal freedom given for conducting and decision making in online discussions but on the other hand, they could not choose their own group members. They rationalised that they could avoid ‘feelings of being an outsider’ as they could relate closer to their own selected group members rather than the ones imposed on them by the lecturer.

Other interactive challenges in online student participatory term paper discussions

There were also other interactive challenges in online student participatory discussions such as commitment imbalance (44%), lack of instructor’s support orientation (43%) and unshared goals and task fulfilment (23%) which also posed interactive challenges to students during online term paper discussions. Nevertheless, such challenges were not so significantly serious as to hinder participation in online term paper discussions.

CONCLUSION

The study has demonstrated that online language learning has benefitted students. They are receptive to the idea of having discussions among group members in order to complete their term paper together in the EAP course. However, they do encounter several barriers which serve as challenges to successful interactive engagement.

Unlike Facebook which is a public social network, students considered closed social network such as Edmodo to be devoid of facial expressions, hand gestures and body movements. All these non-verbal cues are important for interactive discussions. However, when considering

privacy issues and trust acceptance, students relatively preferred Edmodo over Facebook for conducting interactive discussions (Liaw, Lim, Er, Ong & Rasaya Marimuthu, 2012). During the interviews, some students requested that more interesting applications such as those found in Facebook be available in Edmodo so as to engage more students in participatory online discussions. They also wanted a more active role of lecturer in providing views to their online discussions instead of just a mere spectator or facilitator.

It has to be mentioned that this study is by no means thorough. Much more can be done to explore other dominant factors apart from social interactive challenges. They may be in the form of technical, content and time management challenges. Further studies need to be carried out in future to ascertain students' reactions and feedback of online learning in a closed social network.

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