Exploring the Pedagogical Use of Social Learning Platforms in Tasks of Self-Editing and Peer-Assessment for Enhancing English Writing Competence among Elementary ESL Learners

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the pedagogical potential of social learning platforms for supporting English as Second Language (ESL) learners at the elementary school level in Hong Kong to enhance their English writing competence through the tasks of self-editing using Google Drive and peer-assessment using Edmodo in everyday English writing classes. An empirical research which combines qualitative and quantitative methods is planned to investigate the process and impact of the designed technology-supported pedagogy in the real classroom environment. Two classes of Grade 4 ESL learners will be invited for a two-month trial teaching period. One class will be randomly selected as the experimental class for the arrangement of drafting and self-editing their English writings using Google Drive on their own, and then working in pairs to peer-assess writing compositions with feedback provision through interaction on Edmodo; while the other class as the control class to undertake the same learning tasks without the use of social learning platforms. The empirical research will conduct attainment tests, content analysis of student artifacts, questionnaire surveys and semi-structured focus group discussions to investigate the impact of the designed technology-supported pedagogy on the achievements, processes and perceptions of learners in the development of English writing competence through self-editing and peer-assessing the writing products. This study will contribute to pedagogical innovations in the use of social learning technology for the effective development of high-level linguistic knowledge among elementary ESL learners.

Keywords: English, writing, self-editing, peer-assessment, social learning platforms

1. Research Motivation

School education in the twenty-first century puts a growing emphasis on learner-centered learning through the meaningful integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), especially the free digital resources online, with practical pedagogies for classroom learning (Halse & Mallinson, 2009; Säljö, 2010). In language subject area, there is an advocacy of research into the process and impact of using ICT in language classrooms in elementary schools, especially for the development of high-level linguistic knowledge, as this learning stage is critical for young learners to build foundation for the long-term development of linguistic intelligence (Andrews et al., 2007; Richards, 2009).

Elementary schools in Hong Kong have put a decade-long effort on the pedagogical integration of ICT into the delivery of English as Second Language (ESL) curriculum, as English language is not the native language of the majority of student population. The use of ICT is considered helpful to provide young ESL learners with various types of affordances for the effective development of high-level linguistic knowledge such as writing competence (Hegelheimer & Fisher, 2006; Zhao & Lai, 2008). The ESL research community over the world has made continuous effort to research into the use of emerging technology of social learning platforms such as Goggle Drive and Edmodo in elementary schools (Andrews et al., 2007; Hegelheimer & Fisher, 2006). In view of the long advocacy that self-editing and peer-assessment are potential pedagogical approaches for ESL writing classrooms, the

research delineated in this paper is motivated to explore a technology-supported pedagogy which integrates the approaches of self-editing and peer-assessment with the technology of social learning platforms for the development of English writing competence in elementary ESL writing classrooms.

2. Research Issue

This study aims to explore the pedagogical synergy of self-editing and peer-assessment with social learning platforms for supporting elementary ESL learners to develop English writing competence.

In ESL writing curriculum, self-editing by individual learners is an important step in student writing tasks. According to Jones (2008) and Woo, Chu, Ho, and Li (2011), there are in general four categories of writing revisions that learners can be made in self-editing tasks. The first type is meaning-preserving changes, which refer to primarily syntactical or lexical changes without altering the original concepts in the text, such as additions and deletions. The second type is formal changes, which refer to changes involving conventional copy-editing operations, such as those in spelling and grammar. The third type is macrostructure changes, which are changes premised on formal changes, altering the global meaning and summary interpretation of the text. The fourth type is microstructure changes, which are changes premised on meaning-preserving changes, slightly adjusting or elaborating existing text without affecting the overall interpretation of the text. According to Liu and Sadler (2003) and Woo et al. (2011), the writing revisions made by learners in the self-editing process are reciprocally related to the feedback that they gained from peer-assessment tasks.

Peer-assessment, which is premised on the social learning theory, refers to the process that learners timely interact with peers to exchange ideas and collect feedback on their learning products, and so as to actively construct target domain knowledge and manage their learning progress (Roberts, 2006; Topping, 2005). In the field of ESL education, the pedagogy of peer-assessment is often implemented in writing lessons across different grades with a great flexibility for classroom implementation, in terms of group size, member ability, etc. Learners in peer-assessment activities are usually asked to review and comment different aspects of the writings produced by group members, such as the language use and content scope (Shih, 2011; Xiao & Lucking, 2008).

Social learning platforms are emerging web-based tools specific for educational use. They are websites with interface layouts and communication functions similar to those in social networking sites, but with user groups and interaction contexts limited for designated communities within schools for pedagogical purposes (Ghamrawi & Shal, 2012; Solomon & Schrum, 2007). These platforms provide affordances that support learners across different grades to conveniently share and store multimedia resources, and easily exchange and track discussion ideas within restricted groups of teachers and learners for learning purposes anytime, anywhere. They are therefore considered potential to help learners to achieve active, constructive and interactive learning when appropriate subject topics and pedagogical designs are selected in classroom teaching (Halse & Mallinson, 2009; Säljö, 2010).

3. Research Plan

Based on the literature review on the pedagogy of self-editing and peer-assessment as well as the technology of social learning platforms for educational purposes, a technology-supported pedagogy is conceptualized with a goal of forwarding the use of ICT for fostering elementary ESL learners to develop English writing competence. The social learning platforms Google Drive and Edmodo will be used in this study, as they allow teachers to conveniently manage the logistic arrangement of grouping learners for compositions allocation without the constraint of classroom seating plan. The designed technology-supported pedagogy arranges learners to draft and self-edit their English writings using Google Drive on their own; and then work in pairs to peer-assess writing compositions with feedback provision through interaction on Edmodo. This involves four types of learning and teaching activities in sequence: (i) individually working on short writing and self-editing under the selected theme; (ii) individually working on peer-assessment, with a tailor-made peer-assessment form on the social learning platform; (iii) collaboratively working with partners on explaining and reflecting on the peer-assessment results through the use of the social learning platform; and (iv) individually working on writing refinement based on the feedback collected.

The proposed research will be an empirical study which will adopt both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the process and effectiveness of the technology-supported pedagogy designed. An elementary school that has rich experience in ICT in education will be purposefully sampled in Hong Kong as the partner school. Two classes of Grade 4 students, each consisting of around 30 students with similar learning ability, will be selected from the partner school for a two-month trial teaching period. The two classes of learners will be randomly assigned to the experimental group and the control group. The two-month trial teaching period will consist of three theme-based writing units, of each will last for one week. This will amount around nine 35-minute lessons. With the need to embed the trial teaching into routine school curriculum, the English teachers of the sampled classes will take charge of the classroom teaching throughout the trial teaching period.

For the experimental group, learners will draft and self-edit their English writings using Google Drive on their own; and then work in pairs to peer-assess writing compositions with feedback provision through interaction on Edmodo. The learners will be exposed to four types of learning and teaching activities as designed for the target pedagogy under investigation. For the control group, learners will be exposed to the four types of learning and teaching activities as same as the ones in the experimental group, but without the use of social learning platforms.

Four research questions are made for the empirical research:

(i)   What are the achievements of elementary ESL learners in English writing tasks with the process of self-editing and peer-assessment using Google Drive and Edmodo?

(ii)   What are the characteristics of writings revisions among elementary ESL learners in the process of self-editing when using Google Drive in English writing tasks?

(iii) What are the characteristics of feedback provision among elementary ESL learners in the process of peer-assessment when using Edmodo in English writing tasks?

(iv)   What are the perceptions of elementary ESL learners toward the use of Google Drive and Edmodo for supporting self-editing and peer-assessment in English writing tasks?

4. Research Methods

The proposed research will adopt four methods to investigate the effect of the designed technology-supported pedagogy. First, all students will sit for identical pre-test and post-test (Creswell, 2012) before and after each of the three writing units, respectively. The nature of pre-tests and post-tests will be English grammar tests for measuring learners' level of accuracy in English grammar usage. The test papers will be adapted from the instrument designed by Yin, Sims, and Cothran (2012) to include a series of questions that assesses learners' knowledge of English grammatical topics to be involved in the three targeted writing units. Second, a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013) of student artifacts will be conducted with all learners at the end of each of the three writing units, respectively. The writing products (i.e., the 100-word English writing compositions) of all learners before and after each writing unit will be analyzed with two emphases: the accuracy in English grammar usage and the appropriateness of language expression. Each content analysis will focus on the overall quality, syntactic maturity and sentential complexity of writing compositions among the learners (Chan, Tsui, Chan, & Hong, 2002; Ortega, 2003; Tompkins, 2012). The differences in the test results and writing quality between the experimental and control classes will be statistically compared.

Third, a questionnaire survey (Creswell, 2012) will be conducted at the end of the whole trial teaching period. All learners from the experimental class will be asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire to indicate their perceptions of the implementation and impact of the designed technology-supported pedagogy in supporting the development of English writing competence. The survey questionnaire will be adapted from the established relevant instruments such as Xiao and Lucking (2008). Fourth, five students in the experimental class will be randomly selected for the semi-structured focus group discussion (Creswell, 2012) to further investigate their perceptions of the designed technology-supported pedagogy. The selected students will be asked to describe the changes in their process, motivation and achievement in the development of English writing competence through the lessons that implement the designed technology-supported pedagogy. The student feedback in the survey and focus group discussion will be systematically analyzed.

5. Research Contribution

In response to the growing need of ESL teachers to make pedagogical innovations in the use of ICT for fostering learners' development of English writing competence in everyday curriculum, this study sets to contribute to the empirical research in the real classroom environment for obtaining evidence that helps to inform the establishment of a pedagogically sound practice which exploits the potentials of self-editing and peer-assessment together with social learning platforms for maximizing the learning effectiveness among elementary ESL learners in English writing lessons. The research approach of this study will lead the evidence-based research outcomes, which not only give ESL teachers recommendations on the advancement of English writing competence in ESL writing classrooms; but also support ESL teachers to gain insights into further effort in the innovative design of technology-supported pedagogies for English writing lessons in elementary school education.

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