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Learning to learn collaboratively on Facebook – A pilot study

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Abstract: This study aims to examine negotiated interaction amongst English-as-a-foreign-language undergraduates in a real time text-based environment. It looks at the interactional patterns of negotiation on Facebook between dyads of learners and native speakers of English. Overall, all dyads tended to negotiate meaning rather than form, as numerous errors (e.g., morphosyntactic errors) were not repaired during the tasks. The learners were found to employ a number of interactional strategies for communication breakdowns, e.g., clarification request and comprehension check. In addition, the results derived from the interview data reveal that all learners had a positive perception of working with others on Facebook, e.g., increasing motivation and engagement.

Keywords: Language Related Episodes, Computer-Mediated Communication, Synchronous Text-Based CMC

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the use of online chat or instant messaging in synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become a popular means to enhance second language learning (Sauro, 2012). Due to its capacity to store data files, CMC has potentially provided opportunities for researchers to examine interaction (Peterson, 2009). In light of this, much of the existing research, such as Lee (2001), Peterson (2009), and Sotillo (2005), has explored negotiated interaction in CMC environments.

The underpinning sociocultural theory highlights that social interaction between conversational interlocutors helps scaffolding to take place in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). In second or foreign language (L2/FL) learning, learners interact with more competent individuals to negotiate new words or expressions in the language during a conversation, and the negotiated interaction may be able to provide the learners with linguistic input (Long, 1996). For instance, in collaborative negotiation, a series of ongoing interactional processes take place in order for learners to comprehend the unknown items or to convey intended messages, e.g., asking assistance from their interlocutor and clarifying the meaning of a word. In this way, the learners will be able produce their output relevant to the unknown linguistic items.

Results of negotiation research reveal that unknown words are more likely to be a trigger of negotiated routines than any other forms of linguistic aspects, such as grammar. Fernández-García and Martínez-Arbelaiz (2002) found that when their participants encountered unfamiliar lexical words, they tended to engage in negotiation for meaning. Such results are in line with Tudini's (2003) study, which revealed that lexical and structural difficulties were found to trigger modified negotiation. In terms of communication strategy use, Jepson (2005) claimed that his participants employed a

greater number of clarification requests in both text and voice chat. Nevertheless, such results in terms of types of strategy use differ from study to study, as Lee (2001) reported that her participants employed clarification checks, requests and self-corrections more frequently than other strategies, e.g., word invention.

Another strand of research has investigated attitudes or perceptions of learning in CMC, whether learners perceive CMC learning positively, or whether use of CMC can foster learners' engagement or participation and motivation in the target language. For instance, Peterson (2010) revealed that learners working collaboratively with others in a virtual world demonstrated high levels of motivation and interest and low levels of stress when communicating with others in the virtual world.

This study builds upon previous research in traditional face-to-face (F2F) and CMC settings regarding how second or foreign language (L2/FL) learners employ communication strategies to overcome what they lack linguistically in the target language when conversing with their conversational interlocutors, e.g., Nakahama, Tyler, and van Lier (2001). Specifically, the current study aims to explore the synchronous text-based interaction taking place on Facebook between the learners and the native speakers of English and the learners' perceptions of collaborative learning in the CMC environment. There are two research questions: What are the interactional strategies used by the participants during the task in the real time text-based CMC? What is the perception of collaborative learning in the CMC environment?

Method

Participants

This pilot study involved ten participants, that is, five native speakers of English and five EFL learners, whose ages ranged between 21 and 25 years old and whose first language was Taiwanese or Mandarin Chinese. They had been learning English for more than ten years. The sample of the learners included three female and two male students who were sophomores and had majored in Tourism. Each dyad consisted of a native speaker and a learner, resulting in five dyads in total.

Instruments

Tasks

Three types of communication tasks were made available on Facebook, namely, the information gap and the decision-making activities, and a reading article; the first two tasks were designed based on the task-based approach (Willis & Willis, 2007), and the last one, drawn from the learners' textbook, was modified in this study. For example, the reading task was an attempt to generate negotiated interaction, as there were several words or expressions that were new to the learners.

Retrospective interviews

The interviews were held a few days after the paired participants had completed the given task in terms of the perception of collaborative learning in the text-based environment, such as, 'Can you describe the learning experience with your partner on Facebook?' and 'What is the most challenging part when learning collaboratively on Facebook?' The learners were interviewed individually in the chatroom on Facebook.

Data analysis

Existing taxonomies of interactional strategy use were adopted to analyze the text-based CMC discourse of the participants, such as Bower and Kawaguchi (2010), Lyster (1998), and Varonis and Gass (1985). According to the modified interaction, the interactional strategies may include confirmation and comprehension checks, clarification requests, and asking for assistance. One excerpt taken from Varonis and Gass (1985:78) is given below to illustrate that learners check each other's comprehension, in this instance, when the learners encountered the unfamiliar lexical item 'ingless.'

a. 140J: I was born in Nagasaki.
→ Do you know Nagasaki?
b. 120S: I'm from Venezuela.
UL J: Venezuela
→120S: Do you know?
c. 140S: declares her ingress
140J: Ingless
140S: Yes, if for example, if you. When you work you had an ingress.
→ you know?
d. 140S: and your family have some ingress
140J: yes ah, OK OK
→140S: more or less OK?

In the above discourse, each arrow indicates a trigger showing that the hearer does not understand part of an utterance, e.g., 'Do you know Nagasaki?' Following the trigger, Lines a. – d. indicate a series of negotiated episodes, where Line a. represents a trigger, Line b. was the indicator, Line c. was the response, and Line d. was the reaction to the response.

Procedure of data collection

All the participants took part voluntarily in the real time text-based communication. Afterwards, they were asked individually to work with their interlocutors on Facebook at the same time by using text chat in the chatroom. Each pair of participants notified the first researcher of this study regarding the time of the online discussion, and then the researcher invited each pair into the same chatroom to undertake the tasks. Each pair completed one set of tasks each time, which took them one hour approximately. This resulted in 15 hours of data, that is, 15 dyads of NS-NNS, and it took around six weeks to complete the tasks. One week after the five pairs of participants had completed the three types of tasks, the online retrospective interviews were held on Facebook, where individual learners were interviewed by using a text chat. Each interview lasted nearly 30 minutes, giving 150 minutes of interviews in total.

Results

This section discusses how the results of the pilot study answer the two research questions. Prior to this, the negotiated interaction that was found in the traditional face-to-face environments took place in the text-based CMC environment, such as this current study and some other studies (e.g., Fernández-García and Martínez-Arbelaiz, 2002). First, errors

that occurred in the learners' output were categorized as grammatical errors, errors of lexis, or misspellings. It was found that the learners made the most errors in grammar (76%), which was followed by lexical items (29%), and the fewest errors were those of misspelling (5%). Examples of the grammatical errors included morphosyntactic errors (e.g., subject-verb agreement) and prepositions.

In the first research question, the negotiation discourse during the tasks tended to focus on meaning rather than on form. Hence, many grammatical errors were not corrected by the learners' interlocutors. During negotiation for meaning, a number of interactional strategies were identified, including confirmation and comprehension checks, clarification requests, asking for assistance, and others. In Table 1, the learners employed the most frequent strategy of asking for assistance (35.8%), whilst the strategy least frequently used was the confirmation check (9.4%). It should be noted that apart from one dyad of NS-NNS (Barry-Mei), the rest of the dyads tended to negotiate meaning rather than form.

Table 1: Summary of Interactional Strategy Use by the dyads

	Counts	%
Confirmation check	5	9.4
Comprehension check	10	18.9
Clarification request	12	22.6
Asking for assistance	19	35.8
Others	7	13.2
Total	53	100

Noticeably, negotiated interaction took place when the learners came across new words, whereupon they asked for help from their interlocutors to provide the meaning of the unknown words. In other words, negotiation was less likely to occur when learners made grammatical errors. In the current study, most learners were likely to ask their partners the meaning of new words in a reading task, e.g., 'What does X mean?'

In the second research question, most learners (N=4) had a positive perception of working with others on Facebook, as they believed that they gained linguistic knowledge from their superior interlocutors. Three learners commented that the interaction in the environment enhanced their motivation and engagement in meaningful communication. Specifically, two main aspects emerged from the interview data in relation to the perception of learning in the synchronous text-based environment, namely, cognitive support and affective scaffolding. Regarding cognitive support, the results reveal that four out of the five NNS participants agreed that interaction with native speakers could help them improve their linguistic knowledge in English in terms of vocabulary and grammar. For example, one female learner, Mei, recounted that when she had grammatical errors in her answers, her partner, Barry, corrected them by comparing the differences in sentence structure between English and Chinese: '*Barry is a native speaker of English speaking some Chinese… then he said the structure in English is more rigid than that in Chinese…*' Instances such as this were found in the interaction between Mei and Barry in the log files, where he both implicitly and explicitly explained grammar points to Mei, e.g., '*… lets [let's] keep the sentence in the present tense. Ill [I'll] give you a hint. Its [It's] in the ending.*'

Regarding affective scaffolding, when compared to their previous experience in face-to-face communication, all the learners stated that they felt much less pressure having a chat with native speakers in the text communication during the tasks. As another learner, Joan, stated '*All our conversation is done on Facebook; that makes me feel less embarrassed if I make some grammar mistakes… but if I talk to a native speaker in person, when making stupid mistakes, I will feel nervous…*'

Discussion and Conclusion

This pilot study was intended to examine the negotiated interaction taking place in a real time text-based environment by integrating the overarching socio-cultural theory applied in the L2/FL settings into the synchronous CMC. The preliminary results suggest that the learners made more grammatical errors than misspellings or errors of lexis. There were five types of interactional strategies used by the pairs of NS-NNS in this study: confirmation and comprehension checks, clarification requests, asking for assistance, and others (e.g., use of L1). The learners showed a greater preference for using the strategy of asking for assistance rather than any other strategies, such as clarification requests. It is important to note that there were various types of errors in the learners' messages, but these were not corrected by their superior interlocutors though one pair of participants tended to contribute to form negotiation while the others were more likely to initiate negotiation for meaning. Such results discovered in this study corroborate those in previous research. Finally, the results of the retrospective interviews suggest two essential components in terms of cognitive support and affective scaffolding in relation to the perception of collaborative learning in the text-based environment, such as corrective feedback on grammatical errors provided by an interlocutor.

This study, like any other study, has its inherent limitations. One limitation is that the small size of the sample being adopted in this study cannot provide generalizability to the wider context. Another limitation of this study, which needs to be addressed in relation to the categories of errors occurring in the learners' output, can also include other types of errors, such as word order. Likewise, the interactional strategies can be divided into further different categories, such as word coinage. In addition, one aspect of language use in the text-based communication may focus on the corrective feedback or recast provided by interlocutors and the responses of learners to the corrective feedback. However, those aspects require further investigations.

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