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Teaching Issues

Teacher's Presence in Synchronous Mobile Chats in a Chinese University

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Introduction

The potential affordances of digital devices in assisting language learning has gradually been explored and recognized over the past few decades in the developed countries (Traxler, 2005). Researchers have re-purposed a wide variety of tools and channels with educational aims, ranging from the earliest email and blog writing to the latest digital storytelling, and Wiki composing and digital gaming (Hafner, Chik, & Jones, 2013; Hafner & Miller, 2011; Lee, 2011). Scholars have reported the developmental trend from asynchronous communication to synchronous. For instance, in recent years, telecollaboration has advanced into a more mature and diversified stage, involving e-mail, blogs, audio-conferencing, or social networking (Fuchs, 2016).

In such a situation, teachers cannot avoid asking themselves “what should our roles be?” Though the current constructivism advocates teachers act as facilitators, coaches or moderators, “[w]hat is the role of informal mentoring” (Hafner, Chik, & Jones, 2013, p. 6) in a computer-mediated context deserves another look. By investigating over 1,000 students’ views of teacher’s presence in online learning contexts, Shea, Li, and Pickett (2006) found that students perceived it as a significant factor in their online study when teachers design a project carefully, equip students with facilitating discourse and sometimes offer direct instruction such as question raising, discussion summarizing, and feedback providing. Additionally, they point out the importance of a well-built learning community, including trust, shared goals, support and cooperation.

This large-scale study has provided some invaluable insights, but it had the drawback of lacking in in-depth information usually generated from qualitative data. Furthermore, the report was written for improving understanding of asynchronous learning. How do students react with teachers’ engagement in synchronous projects? Furthermore, few studies have been identified discussing teacher’s presence in a test-dominated setting. In a Confucian society like China, which emphasizes memorization, hard working, social hierarchy and teacher’s authority (Carless, 2006), how students view teachers’ participation in their online discussion has rarely been explored. To shed some light on the topic of teacher’s presence in synchronous mobile chats in a Confucian culture, the paper reports some results from an action research in a Chinese university. First, the project and its sources of data are introduced. Then, advantages and disadvantages of the teacher’s presence and suggestions are discussed mainly from students’ views.

Project and Data

A two-iteration action study of synchronous mobile group chat was carried out in 2015 and 2016, which totally lasted for 16 weeks. Data from the second cycle is reported here because the participants overall agreed it was more constructive, useful and sophisticated than the first cycle (Wu & Miller, forthcoming). Four freshmen and four sophomore students from a Business English programme at a Chinese university were invited to form an online WeChat community with a teacher. The eight students were intermediate-level English learners. The purpose of including year 1 and 2 undergraduates was to create a gap of information that may lead to active information exchanges and construction. Different from the first cycle, topics were assigned and discussed weekly on a fixed period of time with questions given in advance. One thing needs to be pointed out is that no credit was assigned to this project. All participants joined it voluntarily and devoted much of their leisure time on Saturday nights. More detailed descriptions of the project will be presented at Wu and Miller's (forthcoming) work.

The researcher adapted the questionnaire from Hayes and Weibelzahl (2016). A six-point Likert scale questionnaire with 18 questions was finalized to avoid the caveat of respondents' subconscious tendency of choosing the middle point. Respondents rated the 18 statements from "1 (strongly disagree)" to "6 (strongly agree)." In addition, two open-ended questions were asked to elicit students' views of existing problems of the project and suggestions for future improvement. To further uncover the eight participants' perceptions of the teacher's presence, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Data from questionnaires, and qualitative interview data are reported in the following sections.

Teacher's Biodata and Reflections

The teacher in the project was in his middle 20s when it was conducted. Upon reflection, the teacher believed that he was on good terms with his students. They shared similar interests due to a narrow generation gap. His educational background was that he had an MA degree in TEFL and was pursuing his Ph.D. in technology-enhanced language learning. He was interested in computer/mobile-assisted language learning and assessment for learning and made use of class blogs, digital storytelling and MOOCs before joining this project. Thus, he had some pedagogical and technical knowledge and experience and motivation in technology-enhanced learning.

In the first round of this study, the teacher held the view that his role was to activate students' learner autonomy, to empower his students with learning choices and to create a safe and relaxing environment for his students. Therefore, students were not offered topics to discuss in the first cycle with the aim to lower students' anxiety. However, as noticed by both students and the teacher, the first round was not perceived as highly productive. They argued that discussion became superficial and they did not know what to contribute.

To overcome the problem, the teacher improved the second cycle by adding designated topics. He related the topics to the curriculum as he believed that it was beneficial to students and the students would find it more interesting and meaningful. Also, due to the selected topics, the teacher decided to enhance his engagement in the weekly discussion so as to raise questions, challenge students with different perspectives, keep discussion on the track, give timely feedback, and promote a safe and trusting atmosphere. Indeed, the number of messages sent by the teacher in the discussion doubled in cycle two (Teacher: 736/Total: 2,771), compared to cycle one (Teacher: 315/Total: 2,690).

Results and Discussion

This section deals with benefits and drawbacks of the presence of the teacher in this informal learning project. Results of the questionnaire are presented first, and then the interviews were analysed drawing

upon Hofstede's cultural dimensions (2011).

Benefits of the teacher's presence

Overall, students spoke positively about their teacher's presence in the current project, which coincides with the results of Shea et al. (2006). Data from the questionnaire suggested that students generally agreed that the teacher's existence is a benefit rather than an intrusion to the project. Further, students believed that their attitudes toward and relationship with the teacher improved. They enjoyed and welcomed teachers to keep participating in their online discussion.

Similar to Carless's (2012) report, students in the study believed that they had built trust with the teacher over time as the teacher was attentive to their learning and emotional needs and encouraged communication. Also, the teacher had high expectations/trust in participants and required everyone to contribute during the discussion, which gave less extroverted participants more chances to voice their opinions. Additionally, students commented that the teacher's feedback boosted their confidence in contributing more to the chats. Upon reflection, the teacher offered positive feedback most of the time. As the project was entirely carried out in students' free time, negative feedback may impede students' participation (teacher's note). Lastly, the students mentioned that the teacher often sent fun internet memes, which was an extra advantage to build trust among students.

Apart from the affective impact, students also agreed on the five specific aspects of teacher's facilitation in the discussion (shown in excerpts below): (1) to organize the project, (2) to provoke thought, (3) to facilitate participation, (4) to activate learner autonomy, and (5) to ease up the atmosphere. Moreover, it was also found that the teacher (6) showed agreement and (7) clarified misunderstandings from time to time based on the chat logs (Wu & Miller, forthcoming). In summary, the teacher won *competence trust* from his students that he was believed to build "an atmosphere conducive to the sharing of information and ideas" (Carless, 2012, p. 92). In a similar vein, Lee reported in her serial studies that teachers play a pivotal part in "guiding, monitoring, and evaluating the learning process" (2016, p. 82) and teacher scaffolding facilitates critical thinking and active engagement in discussion (2011). Meanwhile, in synchronous projects, teachers are able to provide specific and timely feedback, which has been seen as essential for students to act upon and move their learning forward (Carless, 2006). It addresses the timely feedback issue of written assignments, however, increases workload for teachers to some extent.

A few representative quotes from students follow:

"Of course, we need the teacher to be a part of the project. Teachers can moderate the whole activity and offer some information during discussion. I cannot imagine this project without him." (Year-2 student 4, interview)

"The teacher guided us to think in a more in-depth way. He helped broaden our thoughts and facilitate our culture discussion." (Year-1 student 3, interview)

"Organization and management of the project. And the teacher provoked our thoughts and improved our communication skills. Also, he enlivened the atmosphere of the group." (Year-1 student 1, interview)

Drawbacks of the teacher's presence

From the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, respondents were asked "What are the disadvantages of teachers' presence in the project?" and "Any further advice or comments for the project?" Three of the eight students answered that they felt uncomfortable sometimes with the teacher's presence. A key challenge, as they mentioned, for improving the teachers' role in informal learning projects is to

increase mutual trust (1) between students and teachers and (2) among students (Carless, 2012). A few representative quotes follow:

“I reminded myself that certain topics or words shouldn’t be talked about or used during discussion.” (Year-2 student 1: open-ended question 1, also found in interview with year-1 student 2.)

“I don’t know them [other participants]. I could determine what kind of languages [sic] style to use if I get to know their personality traits.” (Year-2 student 3: open-ended question 2, also found in interview with year-2 student 4.)

The first quote directs our attention to the power distance between teachers and students in a Confucian society. Chinese *Gaokao*, the high-stakes college entrance examination, focuses heavily on memorization and learning outcome over process (Muthanna & Sang, 2015). Though Chinese educators have advocated a student-centred pedagogy for some time, the *Gaokao* has a long-lasting impact on students’ perceptions of teachers’ roles in education. Teachers are viewed as authoritative figures and tend to reward those who study hard or follow teachers’ advice (Carless, 2006). Students trust their teachers for knowledge imparting, but dare not to communicate as freely as they usually did with teacher’s presence (Hofstede, 2011). As Yang and Carless argued, “an imbalanced teacher-student power relationship...can impede students from becoming active agents” (2013, p. 289). Meanwhile, a student mentioned the concern that dependency on teachers may develop if they intervene too much in the informal learning project. However, as we reflected on the project, it might be necessary for teachers to facilitate and scaffold discussion before students get familiar with this innovative learning practice.

Another inference from the quotation is that face work influences Chinese students’ engagement in synchronous chats. In a high-context and collectivistic culture, individuals tend to use more indirect, mutual face-saving behavior in communication (Murugaiah, Thang, Azman & Nambiar, 2016). In order not to lose face, participants may adopt an avoidance strategy when teachers are watching. This finding correlates with the findings in Murugaiah et al. (2016) as they reported that Malaysian students decreased their online participation to avoid potential conflicts and to save face. However, effective learning sometimes involves risk-taking, which requires students to shoulder more responsibilities and teachers to empower students with space to grow in learning (Carless, 2012). Thus, with innovative learning tasks and space, it is not uncommon for students to feel uncomfortable and stressful. However, feeling restrained, participants of the study still engaged actively and showed willingness to express themselves upon reflection of discussion data. One possible explanation is that the participants have gradually developed mutual trust with the teacher over time. Another possible explanation given by the teacher is due to his narrow generation gap with the students, which enabled him to exchange ideas about the latest news attracting his students.

The second comment raises the issue of group harmony in a Confucian culture. In such culture, “relationship prevails over task” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 11). In other words, because participants were unfamiliar with each other, they had concerns about not offending them. They have not developed enough *communication trust*, characterized by “openness, empathy and genuine interest in the ideas of others” (Carless, 2013, p. 125). When asked for a specific suggestion, participants suggested that teachers could organize offline meetings and thus the online discussion might be more productive. Again, Chinese students, affected by the Confucian culture, are sensitive to other individuals’ feelings and care about their face. Fuchs (2016) reported that US students appeared to be more task-oriented instead of relationship-oriented. Perhaps the current study reinforces the cultural stereotype of individualistic and collectivistic culture as Chinese students expressed great concerns about their relationship with the teacher and other students.

The teacher assumed year-one and year-two students knew each other, therefore no pre-project meetings were organized. However, it may have caused some students to participate less actively in the project. One implication for teachers is to increase their presence by organizing warm-up sessions before

conducting online communications and mixing students with different personality traits.

Conclusion

Although Chinese scholars have not researched this area sufficiently, there is a recognition of the potential of digital devices. However, before we make some changes in learning and teaching, it is essential to explore the perceptions from the stakeholders, including students, teachers, school management teams, parents and policy makers. In the current paper, I explored how eight university students perceived their teacher's presence in a mobile group chat project. Results have shown that the teacher's presence was viewed positively. On the one hand, students trusted their teacher's competence for organizing and moving forward the discussion. Several functions of teacher were reported from students' survey. On the other hand, we still notice that trust, integrated with face work, power, and group harmony, impeded the progress of synchronous chats.

Though the number of the subjects in this study is small, researchers have suggested that few participants may work better for mobile-related learning projects (Traxler, 2005). Moreover, generalizing the findings may not be a feasible goal for this exploratory study. Instead, this project provides information for the newly developed research area from a non-western society.

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