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Peer Collaboration and Learner Autonomy in Online Interaction Spaces

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Abstract

This paper summarizes the initial phases of a study which investigates how learners of a foreign language interact with one another in an online space as part of their self-directed learning course, how they make use of their, and what communicative functions they use. The authors provide a state of the art, a description of the project and its objectives, and comment on how the project supports the goal of the Japanese Ministry of Education to improve students digital literacy skills, while also benefitting from increased interaction with their peers in an online setting.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication, online interaction

State-of-the-Art

Japanese higher education is increasingly tasked with raising learners' pragmatic awareness and improving their critical digital literacy skills (MEXT, 2018b). This shift is due in part to respond to a student population that has access to a wide variety of mobile applications, digital pathways and networking opportunities. Furthermore, these online and mobile tools have also increasingly found their way into everyday classroom practice, resulting in the rise of digital learning spaces such as MOOCs, wikis and learning apps over the past two decades (cf. Akbari, Naderi, Simons & Pilot, 2016; Peeters, 2015; Zourou, 2019). In the case of language learning, where opportunities need to be created for learners to interact in the target language, it has become "commonplace for people to study languages outside the structure of a traditional course or institution" (Mynard, 2016b, p. 333). However, to guarantee that students can benefit from using online spaces and take part in a suitable and sustainable culture of personalized learning while being sufficiently challenged and supported, educational institutions need to provide them with opportunities to develop a sense of autonomy, make adequate resources available, and give them access to multiple learning spaces and communities to inspire and motivate them (Mynard, 2016a).

One of the ways to harness the didactic and networking power of technology and computer-mediated communication (CMC) that has gained ground over the years is the

creation and integration of tailored online peer interaction spaces in education, supplemented with made-to-measure instructions, prompts and tasks (Peeters, 2018; Reinhardt, 2019).

These kinds of CMC spaces are made to function as support tools in the curriculum, aiming to facilitate learners' engagement with the foreign language, increase motivation, and enable them to socially and collaboratively interact with fellow learners online (cf. Lamy & Zourou, 2013; Sato & Ballinger, 2016). Nevertheless, analyses on the ways in which learners interact with one another when involved in these online spaces are scarce. The reason for this lack of research can be found in educators' and researchers' focus on learning outcomes and the implications of task design, rather than on learners' engagement in these interactional processes (Balaman & Sert, 2017). Yet, insights into interactants' communicative behavior can inform both researchers and educators on how to better integrate and devise CMC spaces in the language learning curriculum, coordinate tasks, and provide instructions for online peer interaction activities (Peeters, 2019).

Project Objectives

The purpose of the present research project is to ensure that when online collaboration opportunities for students are implemented in the language learning curriculum, responsible and efficacy-driven design principles are put in place. To guarantee effective and efficient online communication and collaboration, it is necessary to first determine how a successful peer network is built and how interpersonal relationships are established over time (Peeters, 2019). This study investigates how learners of a foreign language interact with one another in a tailored online space as part of their learning trajectory, how they make use of their peers as potential resources of information and support, and what communicative functions they use to do so (Sykes, Oskoz, & Thorne, 2008). This project, therefore, forms a much-needed next step in optimizing the integration of CMC tools in language learning contexts. Similar interventions to optimize integration have already proven to provide opportunities for learners of a foreign language to expand their horizons, gain experience in negotiating content, discover new resources and develop their critical literacy skills; all necessary components of becoming life-long learners (Peeters, 2018, 2019; Sato & Ballinger, 2016).

Informing and improving current practice when it comes to creating and integrating online peer interaction spaces in Japanese higher education is the main objective of this study. In order to achieve this, the Research Institute of Learner Autonomy Education (RILAE) at Kanda University for International Studies (KUIS) has developed a research project in close

collaboration with the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) at the university. The SALC is an environment that allows learners to continue their study outside of the classroom walls and provides them with a suitable environment to individualize their language learning and develop autonomous learning skills. In order to give learners the chance to continue interacting, reflecting and learning outside of the SALC, this project uses Google Classroom as an online environment to promote peer interaction as a means of learner support. Google Classroom is an online and mobile service that aims to facilitate interaction between and among teachers and students, and streamline the way materials, resources, assignments and grades are disseminated. The data generated by the learners will allow us to study whether “users’ needs are being met and that both efficiency (i.e. whether resources are being used optimally) and effectiveness (i.e. whether learning is taking place) are maximized” (Mynard, 2016a), as elaborated on in the project description below.

Project Description

Targets

The proposed plan sets out to integrate Google Classroom groups as peer interaction spaces in the optional, but credit-bearing Effective Learning Modules (ELMs) and Effective Language Learning Courses (ELLCs) offered by the SALC. The modules and courses are designed to help learners develop their skills as language learners, including goal-setting, resource and strategy management, creating and following a learning plan, working with Learner Advisors (LAs) and other students, and evaluating improvements in their English proficiency (cf. Curry, Mynard, Noguchi, & Watkins (2017) for details). Through various units, learners can work on their learning plans and reflect on their weekly activities in the form of written reports which are submitted to their LAs. Students receive written feedback and can get one-on-one support on the learning process from an LA. In the modules, the weekly work is self directed, but learners meet face-to-face with their LA and with their classmates at least three times per 15-week semester, normally once during an introductory workshop, once in a mid-semester workshop, and once during a closing workshop. Students enrolled in the ELLC meet once a week for one 15-week semester with the LA and with their classmates and participate in discussions and workshop-like activities. Learners in both the modules and the courses are required to hand in their plans and reflections to the LA every week to receive feedback, and they submit a final report on their progress at the end of the module or course. Learners can also book the LA for a one-on-one session as many times as they like. On average, about 200 learners participate in the ELMs while about 70 participate

in the ELLCs per semester. The present project will run for at least two semesters (2019-2020).

In order to make sure that learners do not work in isolation from their peers, Google Classroom environments were used to give them the opportunity to consult with each other when they faced a challenge working on the units for the module or course. The module and course packs included several prompts to motivate learners to use Google Classroom and consult with their peers. As an example, in the first unit of the module and course packs, students were asked to share and discuss some of their experiences, ideas, concerns or tips about studying at university online. This exercise was optional and was included in the section of the pack in which students were first asked to reflect on and describe themselves as learners. They were given some example sentences that could serve as inspiration for starting up a conversation with their peers online:

- “I feel very motivated and I want to study hard. Does anyone have a tip about studying English vocabulary?”
- “Does anyone know how to contact the learning advisors? I have a question for them.”
- “I sing along with English songs on YouTube, this is my favorite song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0MK7qz13bU> Do you have a favorite song to sing?”

In addition, a section had been included in the unit in which learners could report back to their LA by writing down the question they had asked online as well as the most interesting or helpful reply they received from their classmates (e.g. when peers provide answers to their questions, sympathize with their struggles or share resources that they find useful). Because of this built-in feedback mechanism, the LAs did not have to be present in the Google Classroom. This way, we aimed to lower the threshold for students to interact with each other, give them the chance to manage themselves within the peer interaction process (Lantz-Andersson, 2016; Martin-Beltrán, Chen, Guzman, & Merrills, 2016; Murray, 2014) and minimize the extra workload for the LAs.

In these online learning and interaction contexts, it has been found that learners can take up different roles as they share knowledge and provide feedback (Peeters, 2019; Sato & Ballinger, 2016). In previous studies, learners have been observed to systematically produce output, plan their learning, get acquainted with the educational framework and connect with others (cf. Peeters, 2018). In doing so, learners develop a sense of cognition, metacognition, organization and socio-affective engagement, which is part of a dynamic process of

establishing agency within the educational framework and within the community of learners they interact with (Murray, 2014; Peeters & Ludwig, 2017). By studying the interrelation between cognition, metacognition, organization and socio-affect, it becomes possible to evaluate whether users' wants and needs are being met when interacting online, whether resources are shared adequately and whether learning is taking place (Mynard, 2016a). Doing so, we can develop criteria to ensure an efficacy-oriented approach for integrating peer interaction opportunities in language learning and communication curricula in the future and improve current practice (Martin-Beltrán et al., 2016).

Research design and methods

In a first phase, questionnaires were developed and sent out to LAs working in the SALC. This questionnaire is part of a needs analysis into the development of learner autonomy and professional practice. It is designed to acquire insights into the variety of online tools that are most commonly used by LAs at the university, the situational and communicative needs they experience in their professional practice as well as their evaluation of learners' digital literacy skills and pragmatic awareness. Their participation in this research study is voluntary. They may choose not to participate. If they decided to participate in this research survey, they may withdraw at any time. Respondents were informed that their answers will be kept strictly confidential and will be used for research purposes only.

In a second phase, integrating the peer interaction spaces for foreign language majors in the SALC allowed users to engage with the community of learners on several learning tasks and challenges which were specifically designed and implemented in the curriculum. The target audience consists of Japanese first-, second- and third-year students majoring in English, International Communications, International Business, Thai, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, Spanish or Portuguese. The project will run for two 15-week semesters and several student groups will take part in this study, allowing the researchers to perform a comparative study of the data sets. The participants are almost all Japanese nationals with a Japanese mother tongue. Participation in the Google Classroom activity and the research project is entirely voluntary and students were informed that they may withdraw at any time.

Two types of data are being collected: online learner conversations (textual data) and learners' self-reported data (questionnaires and interviews). In order to collect textual data, an application programming interface (API) explorer tool is used to transfer the online conversations between peers to a database and prepare them for further analysis. The

researchers will perform a linguistic network analysis of the online peer collaboration processes to determine and analyze the levels of efficacy, language variation and academic socialization based on the network measures of ‘centrality’, ‘density’ and ‘interdependence’ (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005; Scott, 2017). The analysis sets out to determine how the online peer interaction process is developing and whether design principles need to be revised or altered to ensure optimal interaction and learning success.

In addition to this quantitative text analysis, the project aims to keep track of the people behind the data and consult users on their appraisal of the online tool and on the development of their self-efficacy beliefs regarding their linguistic and academic performance. Questionnaires with open-ended and Likert-scale questions are distributed via the Survey-Monkey application to develop an understanding of students’ online interaction behavior, their learning performance and the evaluation of their learner autonomy development. The aim of this approach is to analyze what kind of issues and challenges learners face and discuss, whether they initiate any activities that did not originate from the module or course packages, and how they build and develop a network of peers. In addition, the data obtained in this project also allows us to analyze whether learners transfer the knowledge and skills they obtain in class and from the advisory sessions to the online peer interaction environment.

Deliverables

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan has established that ICT is advancing in all areas of society and calls for educational institutions to support students in acquiring “the ability to utilize information and respond proactively to the Information Society by using ICT” (MEXT, 2018b). In addition, teachers are recommended to integrate ICT in the curriculum to enhance teaching practice and improve efficiency. The present project sets out to meet these demands and provide our target audience with a new range of opportunities to learn, and develop a sense of learner autonomy. It additionally gives them the tools to grow into life-long learners while allowing the researchers to further improve the integration of ICT and, more specifically, CMC spaces in Japanese higher education.

This project bridges the gap between applied linguistic research and a learner-centered approach to language education. It allows us to observe students’ active language engagement and identify gaps in their knowledge and skills, which are key in creating the embedded culture of personalized learning introduced at the beginning of this research plan.

The Ministry of Education has emphasized the importance of improving lifelong learning opportunities by ensuring appropriate and sustainable “access to diverse types of learning, such as school education, social education, and home education” (MEXT, 2018a). This project, therefore, can inform current and future practice of supporting learners in several contexts, ranging from formal, classroom-based education like language education at KUIS, to self-access learning environments like the SALC, and online teaching and research practice at other institutions and in other organizations.

Notes on the Contributors

Ward Peeters is a post-doc researcher in applied linguistics at the University of Antwerp (Belgium) and a research fellow at Kanda University of International Studies (Japan). He studies social network impact in foreign language learning and has conducted research projects in Belgium, South-Africa and Japan as part of an extensive study on computer-supported collaborative work.

Jo Mynard is a professor in the English department, Director of the Self-Access learning Center, and Director of the Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education at Kanda University of International Studies in Japan. Her research interests are advising in language learning and the psychology of language learning.

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