GIVING VOICE TO STUDENTS AND TEACHER: UNCOVERING COLLABORATION DIFFICULTIES AND COPING STRATEGIES IN ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE DISCUSSION

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ABSTRACT

Asynchronous online discussions such as forums, social networking sites and wikis have been widely used in various educational institutions. Some even utilise asynchronous online discussion as assessment of coursework. It is indicated in numerous studies that asynchronous online discussion can improve student-student or student-teacher interactions in ESL learning. Nevertheless, little attention is paid to the voices of the participants. Using narratives, this paper explores students' and teacher's collaboration difficulties and coping strategies in asynchronous online discussion. Participants include a university lecturer who teaches English for Specific Academic Purposes and three undergraduate students who major in Accounting, Finance and Business Studies, ranging from intermediate to advanced proficiency in English. The subjects took part in asynchronous online discussion for four weeks. Focus group interview and one on one interview were conducted. The narratives have implications for the design and implementation of asynchronous online discussion in ESL classroom.

Introduction

Since the introduction of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) into ESL teaching, asynchronous online discussion which involves non-real-time communication, particularly forum, has been extensively utilised in English language classroom. The major advantage of asynchronous online discussion is that students can pose their comments at almost anytime and anywhere. It provides students more time to reflect, understand, and craft their contributions and responses. Therefore, students are able to construct well-conceived and elaborate arguments (Clark, Stegmann, Weinberger, Menekse, & Erkens, 2007; Hough, Smithey & Evertson, 2004; Kuhn, Goh, Iordanou, & Shaenfield, 2008; Schellens &Valcke, 2005).

Despite the many findings of the benefits of asynchronous online discussion, several studies expose the shortcomings of using asynchronous online discussion in ESL learning. Show (2009) finds that asynchronous online discussion causes cognitive/linguistic disadvantages on writing process including conflicting feedback, longer time for revising and harder revision. Participants also encounter sociocultural difficulties in asynchronous online discussions, which are spending much more time building an online learning community for emotional support and argumentative knowledge sharing. They may avoid disagreeing with their peers as it could make them lose "face" if they lose an argument

(Nussbaum & Jacobson, 2004). This leads to low amount of rebuttals or counterarguments in asynchronous online discussion (Koschmann, 2003). Scheuer, Loll, Pinkwart and McLaren (2010) argue that asynchronous online discussion may not help learning from different views due to the risk of sequential incoherence, lack of overview and limited expressiveness.

Shifted from the focus of advantages and shortcomings of asynchronous online discussion, there has been a recent emergence of empirical studies on the development of L2 students' critical thinking and cooperative learning through asynchronous online discussion. The findings suggest that pedagogical modifications should be implemented to asynchronous online discussion in order to promote social and cooperative learning in ESL blended courses (i.e., courses that combine elements of traditional face-to-face learning with elements of online learning). According to Lehman, et al. (2009), relevant and effectively facilitated asynchronous online discussions can foster social and cooperative learning in blended courses. Evidence from Hull and Saxon's (2009) counter-balanced experimental research indicates that instructional strategies influence social knowledge construction and subsequent learning outcomes from asynchronous online discussions. These similar results correspond with the Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) theory which views L2 language learning as social practice, one that can be done with the assistance of more competent adults or peers (Coffey & Street, 2008; Kaufman, 2004; Slavin, 2003).

Departing from the social perspective on learning, Hrastinski (2009) proposes an initial theory of online learning as online participation. He postulates four characteristics of online learner participation:
(1) It is a complex process of taking part and maintaining relations with others.
(2) It is supported by physical and psychological tools.
(3) It is not synonymous with talking or writing.
(4) It is by all kinds of engaging activities.
As participation and learning are argued to be inseparable and jointly constituting, it is suggested that online learner participation is the determining factor in enhancing online learning. In the same vein, Abawajy and Kim (2011) maintain that level of participations in the discussion forum determines the overall level of asynchronous online discussion among the learning communities.

Numerous studies contend that asynchronous online discussion, with competent instructor strategies and adequate online participation, is an effective collaborative platform for both students and teacher in ESL learning. Much empirical data obtained confirm the abovementioned hypothesis. However, little attention is paid to the voices of students and teacher who participate in asynchronous online discussion. To fully explore the complex process of virtual collaboration, the critical issues that affect students' and teacher's online interaction must be taken account into. Using narratives, this paper investigates students' and teacher's collaboration difficulties and coping strategies in asynchronous online discussion

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:
(1) What are the peer collaboration difficulties in asynchronous online discussion?
(2) What are the student-teacher collaboration difficulties in asynchronous online discussion?
(3) How does student cope with peer collaboration difficulties in asynchronous online discussion?
(4) How does student cope with student-teacher collaboration difficulties in asynchronous online discussion?
(5) How does teacher cope with student-teacher collaboration difficulties in asynchronous online discussion?

Methodology

Participants

This study was conducted in a Malaysian private tertiary institution. The participants were one female university lecturer and three undergraduate students, 2 females and 1 male. The lecturer had been teaching English to undergraduate business students for more than a year. All the students were first year students majoring in Accounting and Finance who enrolled in a compulsory English course. They were young adults with an average age of 20. The students' ethnicity was Chinese. They had completed Foundation in Art and obtained minimum credit for English subject in SPM (i.e., Malaysian senior high school examination that is equivalent to the "O" Level). The English proficiency level of these students was intermediate.

Research Design

Narrative design was applied in this study. The purpose of using narrative design was to understand the online collaboration experiences of each participant through collection of field texts, or stories in the participant's own words. The participants' stories about online collaboration difficulties and coping strategies were then analysed and rewritten in a chronological sequence. After restorying, the data was segmented into several themes which were later described with the context.

Instrument

Focus group interview and one-on-one interviews were conducted. The focus group interview enables the interviewees to interact and encourage each other to give responses, while the one-on-one interview allows the interviewee to share ideas comfortably. All the interviews were semi-structured that the researcher prepares a written list of guided questions and supplement it with other relevant questions during the interviews. This provides the freedom to researcher to tailor her questions to the interview context and interviewees.

Procedures

The teacher and students participated in an asynchronous online discussion for four weeks in order to complete a research report, which is one of the course assignments. The asynchronous online discussion served as a student-student and student-teacher online collaboration platform. The students were first given instructions in the class to start the preparation of their research report and take part in the asynchronous online discussion regularly. Meanwhile, the teacher facilitated the students' online discussion by responding to their comments or questions frequently. After the completion of research report, the teacher and students were interviewed about their online collaboration difficulties and coping strategies in the asynchronous online discussion. Interviews were then recorded and transcribed.

Results

Peer Collaboration Difficulties in Asynchronous Online Discussion

Ken, Helen and Cathy were group members of the course assignment, research report. Till the day of interview, they had been working together in the asynchronous online discussion for four weeks. The interview began with the peer collaboration difficulties that they faced in online discussion. Ken's sharing revealed his preference over face-to-face discussion, when he said, "I personally think the difficulty is it's hard to explain our information or points, or do discussion online, and that's better to meet face to face, for better discussion." It was later discovered in Helen's story that Ken was the same person who went missing in the online discussion at a critical point of the assignment writing process. She expressed her anxiety when she stated "I couldn't find him. I facebooked him. I messaged him. He didn't reply me. And then I couldn't do anything. I don't know how to cope with it." Cathy, on the other hand, spoke of how unavailable Internet connection affected the flow of online discussion. She highlighted the nuisance by saying, "When you get the internet connection, you log in, then wow, so many comments. You read, read, read, one by one, you miss out some important points." Through these stories, it seemed that the group members encountered multiple internal and external challenges during asynchronous online peer discussion.

Student-Teacher Online Collaboration Difficulties

The stories of students and teacher provide insight into what impede the online collaboration between participants and facilitator. Ken was the first to mention the teacher's inability to respond to the student's comments immediately or within the same day as the major hindrance in the student-teacher online collaboration. Cathy then stated that the usage of English barricaded her online conversation with the teacher. She said, "Because we always communicate using Mandarin…, you have to write in English when you write something on the discussion board. Sometimes we cannot find the right words to express our opinions." Using the plural pronoun "we", Cathy's description discloses the L2 learner's predicament when interacting with the teacher online.

As the interview continued, the teacher voiced her disappointment toward the no-reply situation by saying, "Whenever I give comments, I am expecting a reply. But then it doesn't happen right away, or in fact it doesn't happen at all. Her later recount exposes the disconnectedness between instructional strategies and asynchronous online discussion: "I'm not sure whether the students have actually got the comment, or they've ignored it, or they've done something." The lack of overview of student online collaboration during asynchronous discussion also seemed to obstruct the assessment of learner online participation. The teacher said, "The picture that I get about your communication is not complete; that I'm not really sure whether this is the actual collaboration, or there is some other collaboration going on, in other channels, like Facebook or face-to-face…. I can't really detect the actual collaboration online."

Students' Coping Strategies for Peer Online Collaboration Difficulties

To prevent the struggle of reading a large amount of posts, Cathy responded, "I think get online often." Her remark suggested that one should obtain Internet access and log into the online discussion frequently. Responding to Helen's complaint about failing to find the group member online, Ken tried to mitigate the tension with a suggestion that "he should be reached by phone or other contacts." This indicates that learner's online participation in asynchronous discussion needs to be supported by other communication device or channel, such as mobile phone, email or synchronous online discussion.

Instead of asynchronous online discussion, Ken proposed to use face-to-face discussion to complete a course assignment as it is difficult to explain the information online. However, the other group members held a different view that asynchronous online discussion helps them to read the previous posts at all times, particularly Helen who said, I have different learning style. I have to digest very slowly about the knowledge they posted. I can refer back, think, and generate any thoughts I can put in." The group members' contrastive opinions advocate that the implementation of asynchronous online discussion in ESL classroom should consider different learning styles.

Students' Coping Strategies for Student-Teacher Online Collaboration Difficulties

In order to cope with the difficulty of locating the teacher online, Ken offered a quick solution. He commended that the group members could go to the teacher's office for personal consultation. His suggestion is consistent with the findings of previous research that directness and immediacy of communication are emphasised for equivocal tasks, such as course assignments (An & Frick, 2006; Wang & Woo, 2007). While the group members struggled with "finding the right words to express opinions", Cathy shared her coping strategies which are to look up the words in dictionary and to use Google translate. The later illustrates the L2 learner's effort of manipulating the intimate relationship between L1 and L2 to deliver online messages.

Teacher's Coping Strategies for Student-Teacher Online Collaboration Difficulties

The teacher checked the online discussion and responded to her students' posts a few times a week. However, it was not sufficient as the students hoped to get responses within a day. "I wish I could log into the online discussion every day, but I couldn't. I had lots of classes and work to attend to," the teacher articulated her dilemma. "It could be too late when I responded to my student's questions." The coping strategy that the teacher adopted was partially contributed by the students. The students sent her reminders so that she could answer the urgent questions. Once she received the reminders, she posted the answers immediately. She said, "Once I forgot to respond. You reminded me. I responded right away, on the same day."

Instructions and reminders had been given to the students to participate actively in the asynchronous online discussion, yet many did not. Ken, Helen and Cathy were in fact one of the few active groups in the online discussion. The lack of student online collaboration overview also hinders the student-teacher online collaboration. To deal with these difficulties, face-to-face classroom consultation had to be conducted. The teacher expressed her frustration when she stated "I have to check students' progress of research report in the class, especially the groups that are not active in online discussion. Hours are spent on face-to-face consultation."

Discussion

The narratives of this study reveal a number of major findings. First, the students faced various internal and external challenges during asynchronous online discussion, such as individual communication preferences, diverse learning styles, failure to locate group member online and unavailable Internet access. This finding corroborates findings from numerous computer-assisted language learning studies, which exhibit factors that influence the quality of asynchronous online peer discussion in ESL classroom (Appana, 2008; Black, 2005; Serœ et al., 2011). Second, the present study shows that teacher's availability, student's L2 proficiency level, sequential incoherence and lack of overview may hinder teacher-student online collaboration. This is in line with the results of past research by Fung (2004), Peng (2010), and Scheuer, Loll, Pinkwart & McLaren (2010) that argue the limiting factors of collaborative online learning.

Despite myriad online collaboration difficulties, the participants' recounts provide several coping strategies. It is shown that online collaboration can be promoted by high level of online learner participation, support of other communication modes, integration of individual learning styles and positive student-teacher rapport. The findings indicate that the initiatives from both teacher and students determine the success of an asynchronous online discussion. Previous studies by Riznar (2009), Wang & Woo (2007) and Yildiz & Bichelmeyer (2003) discuss the similar results that instructors and students play equally important role in developing tangible online collaboration during asynchronous online discussion.

Conclusion

A few limitations were exposed in the present study. To begin with, the student-participants were selected as they were active in the asynchronous online discussion; meanwhile, the voices of inactive participants were ignored. In fact, the outlier cases that are noticeable for their failures can be chosen in order to study the reasons behind the inactive participation of asynchronous online discussion. Next, the interviews were conducted at the end of online discussion, providing provide only an incomplete picture of the participants' online collaboration at the beginning and middle stage of the discussion. Instead, the interviews should run from the start to the end of the asynchronous online discussion. Future research therefore may focus on the extreme cases of online collaboration in asynchronous discussion and the participants' progressive collaboration in asynchronous online discussion.

This study is an endeavour to examine the online collaboration difficulties and coping strategies in asynchronous online discussion among teacher and students. Internal and external asynchronous online collaboration barriers and the participants' coping strategies were identified and discussed. The findings lead to a few important pedagogical implications. First, asynchronous online discussion can be improved by constant feedback from students and teacher. Second, teachers should do more than just include asynchronous online discussion in coursework, for instance, taking into account students' communication preferences and learning styles. Third, learners should be facilitated with synchronous and other communication modes throughout asynchronous online discussion. Finally, the assessment of students' online collaboration needs to be conducted according to learners' participation in asynchronous and synchronous online discussions.

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