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A Step Towards Global Education: Collaborative Learning Activities using Social Network Sites

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Abstract

In teaching a foreign language, learners are often encouraged to use the target language to communicate with other learners and native speakers. With rapid technology and Internet progression in recent years, a number of communication tools are now available for foreign language learners and native speakers. Social network sites (SNSs) and Chat alike provide opportunities for learners to engage in social interactions. The demand for, and use of, SNS and online discussion forums for educational purposes are rapidly increasing as is evident in the quick growth of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). The Globally engaged means of education such as MOOCs form an online community and create a learning space in ways that are becoming a center of attention. Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) can be applied to understand such learning since it emphasizes that the role of social interactions is core to learning. However, the complex issues of learning using a SNS, especially language learning are underexplored.

This study investigated learners' behavior in a virtual learning environment by examining the interactions of Japanese language learners and native speakers using a SNS. Both native speakers and learners assisted each other while they participated in a series of discussion forums on Japanese topics in Japanese language. The interactions were analyzed using a modified activity system (Engeström, 2001; Wells, 2002) created by the researcher called the Online Joint Activity System (OJAS). The OJAS allowed the study to reflect how the participants were influenced by a number of constituent components in their virtual learning environment. This paper discusses a number of factors that influenced development of discussion forums and the importance of roles played by the native speakers and the discussion leader. This paper focuses on two issues from its main findings: role of discussion leaders and discussion topics. By doing so, the paper offers recommendations for future online discussion forums so as to construct active collaborative forums.

Keywords: SNS; Discussion Forums; Activity Theory; Scaffolding

Introduction

Parker (2011) reported that the context of universities around the western world is changing rapidly to the point of redefinition: 'university managements are prepared to cut overall expenditures and staffing ... particularly in the less vocational areas such as the arts, including history, philosophy, languages' (Parker, 2011, p. 442). However, as noted by Worton (2010, p. 38), there are opportunities for universities to 'recognize and promote the importance of foreign language study ... (and) there is clear evidence that students will want to study languages in joint degrees or degrees that come "with languages"'. Coupled with this combination of challenge and opportunity, language departments find themselves in universities where total funding is reduced or constrained, whilst at the same time, systems of attestation are increasing. These systems include rankings of universities, audit processes and accreditation reviews that collectively mean importance must be given to both the student experience and learning outcomes.

Furthermore, the expectations of how students view the role of education in their life has rapidly changed in the last century, at least in Australia. Typically, undergraduate students today are different to what universities have previously modeled their teaching on. For example, today students:

- are frequently undertaking part-time employment and thus are time-starved;
- are highly 'connected' in that they frequently use mobile computing devices to communicate with others;
- have a high use of social media;
- have a highly attuned ability to multi-task such that they do not devote large amounts of time to singular tasks; and
- are assertive as to their rights as 'consumers of education' and they evaluate the 'value for money' being delivered to them.

In response to this universities are also exploring the various avenues to cater for the rapidly changing demands and management issues, for example;

- operational matters: methods of delivery of teaching
- research matters: cross-institutional cooperation in research funding bids and delivery of research projects
- funding matters: seeking new sources of funding beyond government provision
- strategic matters: finding partners for core aspects of university provision (for example, consortia of universities to provide languages across a single faculty but to students from all members of the consortia)

In terms of methods of delivery of teaching, one particular method has rapidly attracted vast interests: the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). The numbers of universities incorporating a Social Network Site (SNS) such as Facebook as a communication tool within the university domain have rapidly increased. However, the efficacy of online discussion forums for a purpose of teaching and learning is under explored.

Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) can be applied to understand online learning, since it emphasizes that the role of social interactions is core to learning. Furthermore, a fundamental aspect of any learning is the provision of scaffolding to learners (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Scaffolding can be defined as any support given to a learner to complete a task; this includes support provided via online learning activities. However, the complex issues that come with learning through the use of an SNS, especially with regards to language learning, is underexplored. Therefore, the central objective of this study is to understand the influences successful scaffolding has on online learning activities such as online discussion forums using an SNS.

The Study

The study involved a thirteen-week session in which students engaged in a virtual learning environment. The session had no face-to-face classes and was an examination of the interactions of Japanese language learners and native speakers using an SNS. This virtual learning environment was called Nihongo4us. Both native speakers and learners assisted each other providing scaffoldings, while they participated in a series of discussion forums on Japanese topics in Japanese language.

Seven groups of eight to eleven participants including one or two native speakers were formed. The participants set up their own home page at the Nihongo4us site. Then each participant uploaded their self-introduction in Japanese and read each other's self-introduction, made comments and suggested any corrections. During the first few weeks (Pre-Session), participants were free to communicate in order to "get to know" each other and familiarise themselves with various functional tools available at the site. Furthermore, during this early stage of the study, each group organised their discussion forums by each learner nominating a week to be the discussion leader. Discussion leaders had the responsibilities of choosing a topic to discuss, starting the discussion thread, and facilitating the discussion forum in that week. This approach had three purposes:

1. To ensure a discussion topic was of interest to learners rather than being randomly chosen by non-participants;
2. To ensure every learner's involvement in the discussion forums; and
3. To distribute the role of facilitator evenly within a group.

The interactions were analysed using a modified activity system (Engeström, 2001; Wells, 2002) created by the researcher called the Online Joint Activity System (OJAS) (Christensen, 2014). The OJAS allowed the study to reflect how the participants were influenced by a number of constituent components in their virtual learning environment. Discussion of this paper focuses on a number of factors that influenced development of discussion forums and the importance of roles played by the native speakers and the discussion leader.

Discussion

The OJAS, as seen in Figure 1, reflects online communications recognising that all participants in such environments are both reader(s) and writer(s). The writer composes a written text on a particular topic, using mediating artifacts that are available to a writer, such as electronic dictionaries, computers, online dictionaries and online translation services. The written text under the topic then produces outcomes. The topic can be seen as an object in the OJAS. However, an object in an activity system is in a constant state of transition and construction, as the activity progresses. Therefore, a topic in the OJAS is classified as one of the constituent components of the activity system.

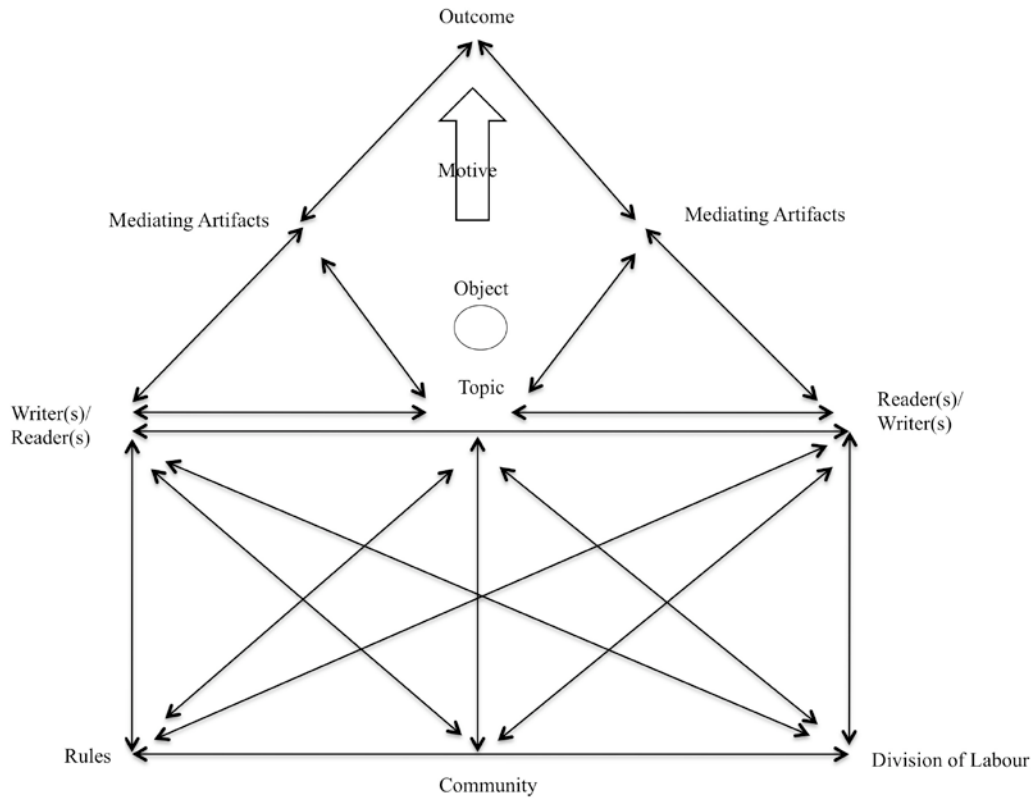


Figure 1: Online Joint Activity System

The reader(s) receive the writer's text and become a writer. Both reader and writer follow the rules in order to participate in the interactions on the online forums. Each reader and writer has the same division of labour: that is, the role of a participant in the online forums to provide scaffolding; and to make posts in a discussion forum and to interact with each other at an SNS. At times, a participant becomes a discussion leader, and then additional division of labour occurs, as the leader is required to upload a discussion topic and to chair the discussion forum. The native speakers, as writers and readers also have to ensure the smooth running of their group during the discussion forums and provide scaffolding as they saw fit.

A supportive online community is where each participant works towards the outcome, producing no contradiction at any of its constituent components, and produces active online discussion forums at Nihongo4us. However, in the Nihongo4us case, many contradictions at its constituent components as shown in the OJAS led to inactive discussion forums.

Previous studies, such as Lee (2009) and Vonderwell (2003), have discussed the importance of participants being able to physically get together prior to the online activities. As the participants were known to each other, they seemed to participate more in the activities. However, such icebreaker activities are not always possible, especially in the context of universities aiming for global education and offering courses such as MOOCs, where the participants are gathered from all over the World. Nevertheless, online

icebreaker activities using the SNS prior to online discussion forums are possible.

The groups, where the participants engaged in active communication sharing their personal experiences and opinions during the Pre-Session, had active discussion forums. In this regard, it seems the Pre-Session communication acted as an icebreaker activity. The Pre-Session communication, where the participants shared their personal experience and opinions as well as providing scaffolding to each other, proved to be vital for establishing a supportive online community in this study. Furthermore, if the native speakers were more active then the learners were also more engaged in the activities, hence a supportive online community was created which led to a more developed discussion forum. As reflected on the OJAS, when each participant shared the division of labour, followed the rules and formed an online community the results was a successful production of the outcomes.

The role of discussion leaders and the presentation of discussion topics had an important role to play in the development of discussion forums. Facilitating an active discussion forum did not come naturally for some participants. The discussion leaders, who posted a discussion topic and their opinions but failed to engage with others, could not develop a forum. They simply posted their opinions on the topic and did not make any comments on what others said. On the other hand, the discussion leaders, who posted their opinions as well as reflecting on what others said, were able to engage everyone in the forum. This assisted the group to extend their discussion.

A good example of the above was Charlotte who was one of the first discussion leaders and posted the initial topic during the Pre-Session. She announced when and where the discussion forum would take place as well as her chosen topic: 'what do you think about traveling alone?' This gave extra time for all the participants in that group to prepare. Charlotte followed up by uploading photo diaries and shared her travel experience: her first time travelling by herself in Taiwan.

Charlotte replied back to every post that the participants made, summarising their contents and adding more personal experiences and putting forward her opinions in her replies. This also acted as scaffolding because some participants could have difficulties comprehending the posts as they were all in Japanese. She also expanded her original discussion topic as the discussion progressed. For example, when she realised nobody else had the experience of travelling alone, she asked where people would like to go if they didn't have any financial or time restrictions. This gave everyone an opportunity to present her/his opinions. Charlotte's behavior is similar to one of techniques required as a facilitator discussed in Hew and Chung (2008). Without 'suggesting a new direction' (Hew & Cheung, 2008, p. 112), the discussion would have come to a halt, as others could not develop the discussion any further.

Charlotte and others like her who were able to facilitate discussion forums followed similar patterns of successful facilitation techniques mentioned in Hew and Chung (2008). These patterns were 'establishing

ground rules'; 'giving own opinions or experiences'; 'questioning'; 'showing appreciation'; 'suggesting new direction'; 'personally inviting people to contribute' and 'summarising' (Hew & Chung, 2008, P.112). As Collison, Elbaum, Haavind and Tinker (2000) stated, a good facilitator can identify comments already posted in a dialogue that can serve as bridges to the next level of discussion – questioning seemed to serve the role of bridging.

Instructional technologist, MacKnight (2000, p. 39) argued that 'the level of questions asked influences the depth of thinking that occurs'. Online discussion forums need thought-provoking questions so that the Learners can go beyond the facts and use their knowledge to express their thoughts. MacKnight (2000, p.39) also argues that 'critical thinking questions tend to generate more questions in both the questioner and responder'. The groups in Nihongo4us, that were able to discuss a number of topics and produced many posts, presented their opinion prompting a thought-provoking question to each other. These learners were able to learn the relevant expressions, vocabulary and sentence structure from each other. However, the study also showed that not every group was successful in achieving this.

Sharing information and thoughts was also an important technique in facilitating a forum. This was also recognised as an important factor in the boundary crossing theory as discussed by Edwards (2012). In order to fully collaborate in a discussion forum, the participants need to share their thoughts and expertise. In other words, a constructive style would involve a participant making a post, summarising other participants' opinions and making comments on previous posts as well as presenting their own opinion and contributions to further discussion by prompting a thought-provoking question. These styles of posts would make a difference in a forum and the learners could learn how to contribute to a discussion forum. However this style of post was not observed in every group, therefore scaffolding showing how to facilitate and participate in discussion forums might be required.

Needless to say the contents of the discussion topic were important for the development of discussion forums, and the level of difficulty of the topic also presented some challenges for the learners of Japanese language. However, a style in which a topic presented to the group also affected the forum. For example, a discussion topic about studying Japanese was presented with multiple questions, such as 'do you enjoy studying Japanese? Why?'; 'How are you studying Japanese other than for study?'; 'What is your goal in studying Japanese?'; 'How long do you think it will take you to reach that goal?' and 'What is the most difficult part of studying Japanese including cultural issues?' The participants simply replied back to each question, which did not lead to a discussion. If this leader had presented just the first question and gradually introduced other questions as the discussion progressed, the group might have been able to discuss about studying Japanese and learn some new techniques in studying Japanese or learn about other participants' experiences in studying Japanese.

Instead of the multiple questions acting as a helpful scaffolding strategy, they prevented others from presenting thought-provoking questions. This might be similar to how multiple topics presented in chats confused the

participants in Toyoda and Harrison's (2002) study. In retrospect, it can be seen that this style of post to present a discussion topic could not develop into a discussion but rather left participants to post only a statement.

The native speakers' inputs were vital to create a supportive online community as well as the development of discussion forums. The learners were motivated to improve their Japanese language skills and anticipated to receive scaffoldings, especially from the native speakers, regarding correct use of language and their personal opinions on Japan and Japanese culture through their experiences. Therefore, if the native speakers were not actively involved, the learners also became inactive.

As previous studies (de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Lee, 2008, 2009; Ohta, 2000; Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003) showed, involvement of experts appears vital in a collaborative activity involving novices and experts. The involvement of the experts does not mean simply making a post, but the contents of the post and tone of the language is also important. The present study showed that the native speakers, who approached the learners from an equal stance and presented themselves as one of the online community members; and who assisted the learners by providing a variety of scaffoldings, were able to help the group to form a friendly supportive community. Such a community was able to overcome any difficulties during the thirteen-week session and develop extensive discussion forums. The groups where native speakers provided minimum corrections and did not share their experience or their opinions with the learners, often resulted in unmotivated learners and underdeveloped discussions.

Conclusion

This study offers a number of recommendations for conducting future online discussion forums:

- To include icebreaker activities prior to a learning activity where the participants have some time to communicate with each other freely;
- To establish and present explicit rules to all participants;
- To set automatic notifications to all participants when someone has made a post;
- To post a series of discussion topics before the forums start;
- To include fun and helpful activities as scaffolding to assist facilitating a discussion forum and making language corrections to fellow students;
- A time period of two weeks to discuss a topic might be better for online forums;
- To be aware that participants might not be able to access an SNS in some countries as some authorities block it.

The universities, I believe, have a social and educational obligation to students to offer lifetime learning. This is more pronounced with mastering of foreign languages. In Australia, the majority of Japanese language learners are at the beginners level (Lo Bianco, 2009; Thomson, 2013). In order for these learners to progress to the advance level, they need support beyond their classrooms. Virtual learning environments make this possible. However,

offering courses such as MOOCs is not enough unless careful consideration of efficacy of teaching and learning are made. Universities have a social obligation to their students to assist the students to extend their knowledge; to develop their cognitive thinking process, and to become autonomous learners. As universities become more business like, the teachers and academics have more responsibility to re-think the meaning of education so that the appropriate scaffoldings are in placed.

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