Teacher-Learner Interactions in Online Learning at the Center for Online and Distance Training (CODT), Travinh University, Vietnam

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Abstract: This survey research study explored teacher-learner interactions in online education at the Center for Online and Distance Training (CODT), Travinh University, Vietnam. The research focused on how teachers and learners could interact in the online setting, how teachers could incorporate collaboration and communication in online learning environments, and how the teacher encouraged student interactivity. Research findings indicated that teachers and learners recognized the importance and effectiveness of teacher-learner interactions in online education. The results lead to recommendations about the necessity of pedagogical interactions in support of teaching and learning activities both in face-to-face and online courses at the CODT, Travinh University, as well as in Vietnam more generally.

With online learning growing rapidly in all segments of education and training, research has also begun to focus on identifying best practices and validating successful approaches. In particular, many studies have identified teacher-learner interaction as a key to student learning and satisfaction (Prammanee, 2005) because "to teach is to communicate, to communicate is to interact, to interact is to learn" (Hefzallah, 2004).

The purpose of this survey research study is to explore the role that teacher-learner interactions play in the success of online courses for teachers and learners at the Center for Online and Distance Training (CODT) - Travinh University, Vietnam. Are there differences between these groups in their perceptions of the importance and impact of interaction? Further, does the data match results of previous studies that have been mostly carried out in other countries that may have differing expectations of classroom teaching and learning?

Background

Researchers have identified four typologies of online interaction including learner-content, leaner-teacher, learner-learner, and learner-technology interaction (Strachota, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 2001). These online interactions serve as the foundation of instructional strategies and practice, and when these four interactions are used effectively, a collaborative learning community can be built in cyberspace (Strachota, 2003).

Many research findings show that higher levels of interaction between teachers and

learners are related to increase learner satisfaction in the online learning environment (Keeler, 2006; Stocks & Freddolino, 2000; Thurmond, Wambach, Connors, & Frey, 2002). This interaction assists learners in informing the correctness and completeness of their learning activities (Miner, 2003). Students identify a lack of learner-teacher interaction contributing to learners' frustration and ultimately to a decrease in learners' motivation (Miner, 2003). Besides, one of the important reasons of online interaction is that learners experience a 'sense of community' (Rovai, 2002), enjoying mutual interdependence and a sense of trust and interaction among community members, which means that the members of the community have shared their goals and values (Smith & Hardaker, 2000). Participation in online discussion forums serves a dual purpose: to improve learning and to provide support.

The online teacher has different positions that serve as a facilitator, a mentor, guide or a coach whose roles are pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical to support for learning activities (Strachota, 2003; Vonderwell, Liang & Alderman, 2007; Larkin, 2007). One of the essential roles is facilitator or moderator is to overcome incoherence, provide responses and scaffold student learning. With a social role, teachers can create an interactive learning environment to promote group cohesiveness and build up a virtual learning community. In Wang's point of view (2007), to encourage the collaborative building of knowledge, the teacher may create meaningful activities to engage student in-group or exploratory learning.

The Vietnamese Context

In Vietnam, online learning or e-learning so far is mostly used in blended learning as a supplement to traditional face-to-face education. Online learning is considered as a revolutionizing force in Vietnam's higher education and general education systems, opening a new horizon for integrating the world and improving the quality of the labor force with less expenditure and time. To stimulate this significant educational trend, the Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam (MOET) is working to motivate universities to explore online learning potentials to enhance their educational activities. MOET has established a web site promoting e-learning (http://el.edu.net.vn/) to systematically provide information on e-learning globally and in Vietnam. In addition, there are a variety of commercial software companies which have introduced applications in the market for online teaching and training such as electronic lecture, student management, timetable set-up and other software and applications relating to the educational field.

Although online learning in Vietnam has been developing in current years, online interactions between teachers and learners have encountered barriers due to deep influences of traditional teaching method known as the teacher-centered approach. In Vietnam, education is marked by the cultural background of the country marked by traditions of Confucianism and social rules such that Vietnamese students have great respect for their teachers and their propositions. The teacher is considered as the main resource of knowledge provided for students. There are a few communications and interactions between teachers and learners, and only few questions are asked during lecture time. Vietnamese students are generally used to receiving content from their teachers rather than discussing or developing ideas themselves.

Prof. Dinh Dung (Luu, 2005) - Director of Institute of Information Technology – Vietnam National University, Hanoi emphasized that e-learning can make the learning method and learner position change relatively compared with traditional teacher-centered approach. This means that learners could play a central and active role in their learning process as online learning develops. In addition, online learning promotes development of communication, collaboration and participation skills that are not encouraged in traditional education background in Vietnam. Since Vietnamese students are more passive compared to students in Western countries, interactions in online learning could be used to engage students to work more actively and cooperatively (Phan, 2006).

Moreover, unlike in more wealthy U.S. and European nations, only a few Vietnamese students possess a personal computer. Thus, students usually have to use public computers in Internet cafés and public Internet rooms for schoolwork, which is often not an appropriate learning environment for the access of online contents. Furthermore, many Vietnamese teachers are not familiar with using computers for online teaching, especially, techniques of online communication because their computer skills are still limited. Therefore, recognizing these potential constraints from teachers and learners plays crucial roles in effectively combining both teacher-centered and learner-centered pedagogies to enhance educational quality in Vietnam generally and more specifically, in the study site for this research, at the Center for Online and Distance Training, Travinh University.

Methods

The study, conducted in early 2009, involved surveying teachers and students at the Center for Online and Distance Training, Travinh University. The data reported here includes a part of the information collected in the survey focused on teacher-student interaction. The surveys were completed by 19 teachers and 173 students from the University.

Procedure

After getting IRB approval, the researcher applied for permits from the Rector of Travinh University and the Director of the Center for Online and Distance Training to conduct the study of teachers and students at the CODT. Then, the researcher directly contacted participants to request their agreement to participate in the research. After the purpose of the study was presented, questionnaires were delivered to the participants through the Internet. It took about one hour for participants to complete the questionnaires. Survey results were generated by the software and put into spreadsheets for analysis.

Instruments

The instruments used for this researcher included two surveys, one for teachers and one for students, each with 40 questions. The length of the survey and the reading level were carefully calculated to ensure it was relatively easy so that respondents could complete the survey and provided accurate information (Mills, 2007, p.103 as cited in Johnson, 2005). The surveys were designed online by using a Google form application. Each survey included three parts, consisting of open-ended questions of participants' background and demographic information, Likert-scale questions for investigating attitudes, and reflections on teaching-learning activities and technical supporting levels.

Results

The 19 teachers who completed the survey included 12 males and 7 females with ages ranging from 25 to 45 with at least one-year teaching experience in traditional classes. The majority of participants (68.4%) were 26-35 years old and the others were 18-25 years old (15.8%) and 36-45 years old (15.8%). All of teachers are currently teaching online courses at the university level with 14 of 19 teachers have taught online for one year. All had basic knowledge of using technology for teaching, and identified the importance of using technology in their teaching.

There were 173 Informatics Technology students of the Center who participated in this research, including 122 males (70.5%) and 51 females (29.5%). Almost 70% of students are 18-25 years old and 26% are from 26-35 years old. Most of them had never studied online before. All of the participants were studying to earn their bachelor degrees at the Travinh University. 30.1% of the population held a degree while 65.9% had not received any degrees before.

Computer Confidence

There were 15.8% of teachers and 9.8% of students who reported that they worked with computers for more than three years while 39.3% had just two years of experience working with computers. When asked about their abilities to use computers, participants responded that they were very confident in using computers for searching information on the Internet and creating teaching and learning materials.

Figure 1 shows the level of computer using capacity of teachers and students. The majority, 42.1% of the total student sample reported feeling neutral about using computers. Only 14.5% of students felt confident in using computers whereas 52.6% of teachers showed confidence in using computer.
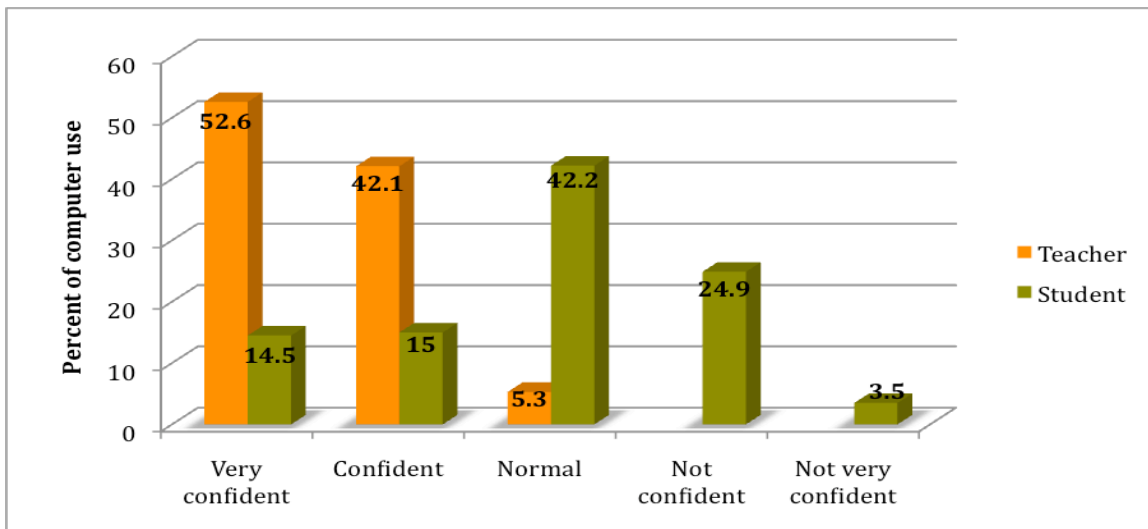
Figure 1. Level of participant computer usage capacity

Means of communications

There are many types of tools that teachers and learners could use to interact and communicate with each other such as class forums, phone, cell phone, and online chat. Teachers and learners could take advantages of supporting tools in the CODT website for pedagogical purposes. Figure 2 shows the means of communication tools that teachers and learners used for teaching and learning activities.
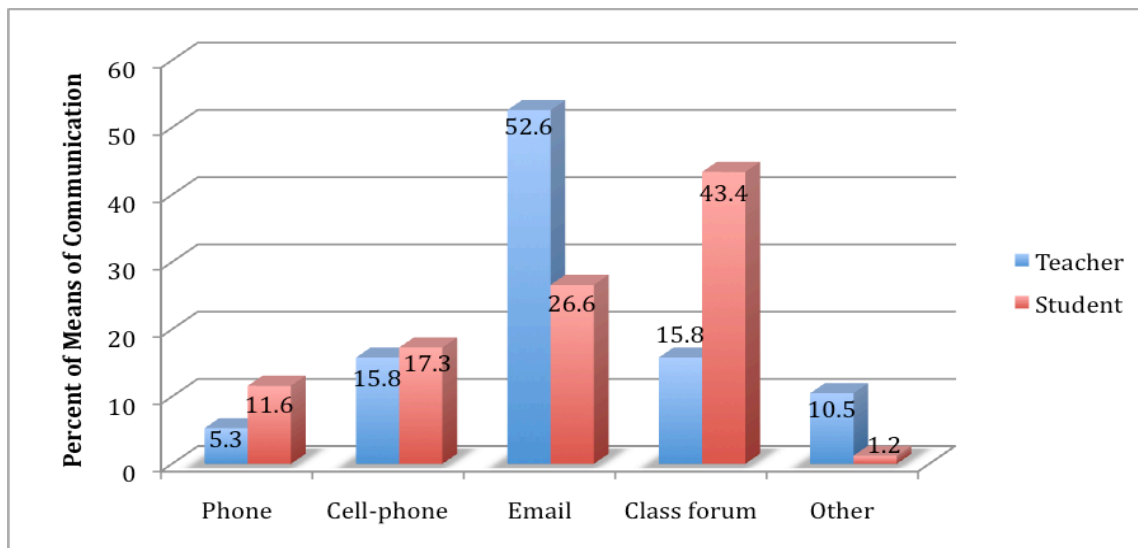

Figure 2. Tools used for teaching and learning communication

For synchronous and asynchronous communications and interactions, cell phone was considered as the best synchronous way for teacher-learner interactions selected by 15.8 % of teachers and 17.3% of students, while the highest ratio for asynchronous communications is email that occupied 53% of teacher choices and 27% of students'. Generally, cell phone and phone are the effective means of communication that students used to reach their teachers due to its convenience and popularity. Moreover, class forum was the best asynchronous means of communication that took 43.4% of students' choice while 15.8% was presented by teachers. For outside class activities, teachers and learners could communicate with each other by using Yahoo messenger which is the most common chat tool in Vietnam.

In terms of using class forums for discussion and asking teachers questions relating to their study, both teachers and learners indicated that class forum is easy to use. Figure 3 reveals about 38% of student and 10.5% teacher agreement while approximate 16% of teachers and 10% of students state about the easy uses of class forum. However, the disagreement ratio of teacher and learner are quite high with 21.1% of teachers and 24.3% of students' views.

Generally, the online discussion board provides opportunities for the teachers and learners interaction that 97 students (56.1%) agreed on this point, and 11 teachers (57.9%) showed their agreement that discussions support student interactivity, enhance

individual performance and satisfaction, increase students' motivations and participation in class discussions, and improve higher order thinking.
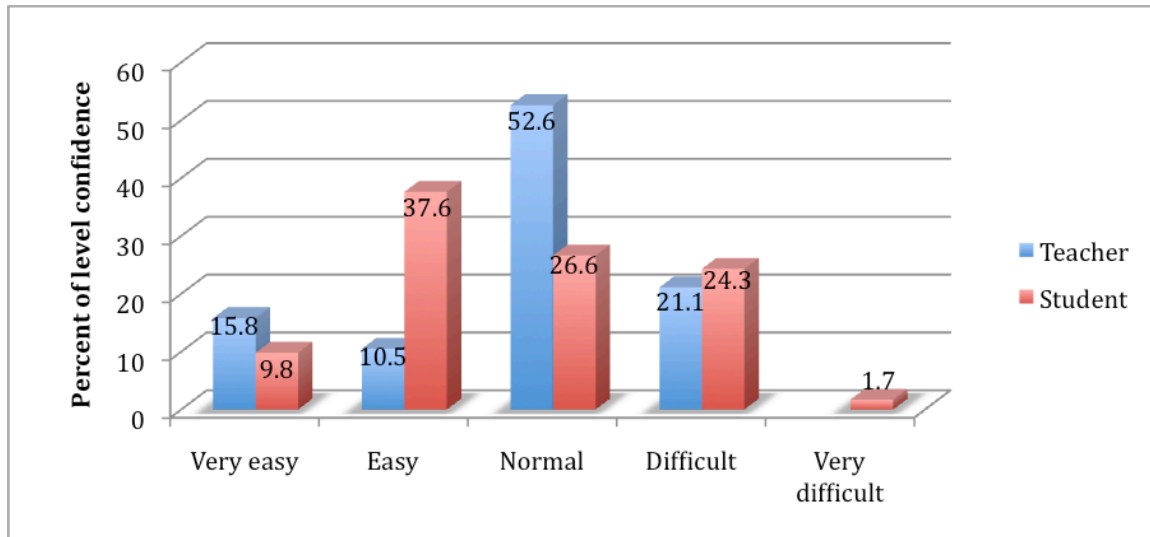
**Figure 3.** The level of confidence of using class forum

Participant perspectives of interactions: Motivation

Motivation plays an important role in creating effective online courses because it encourages student participation and creates opportunities for all students to interact and communicate in online learning environment. Importantly, motivation can foster positive student attitudes towards the educational experience and increase learner engagement. Ninety-four students (54.3%) stated that they learned as much in online courses as they did in face-to-face courses.

Motivating the participation and interaction in an online learning setting promotes student-centered learning because the online courses create a sense of community between the teachers and learners and among themselves. The online courses also stimulate students to express and share their ideas, thoughts and reflections with teachers and their classmates, supported by the 39 students (22.5%) who strongly agreed, and 113 students (65.3%) who agreed.

*Creating a sense of online community*

Figure 4 highlights that the online courses create a sense of online community between the teachers and learners with 26.3% of teachers and 23.1% of students who strongly agreed, and 42.1% of teachers and 60.7% of learners who agreed with this point.
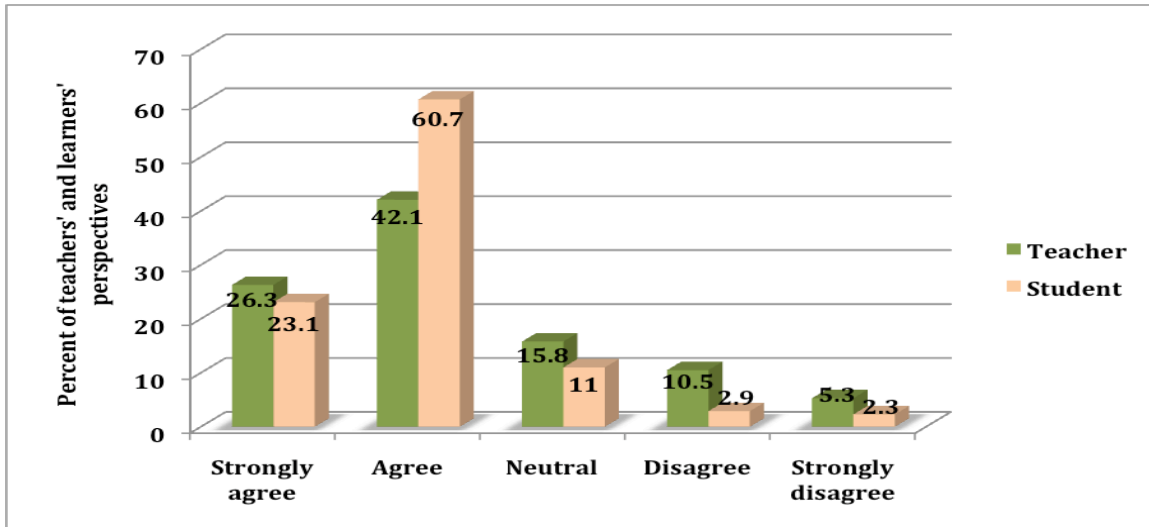
Figure 4. The level of participant motivation perspectives

Improving communication skills

In terms of promoting communication skills, teacher-learners interactions create good opportunities for learners to improve their communication by reducing anxiety, decreasing perceiving risks and fearing failure. Figure 5 indicates that both teachers and learners agreed that online interaction promotes students' communication skills with 63.2% of teachers and 54.3% of learners who agreed.
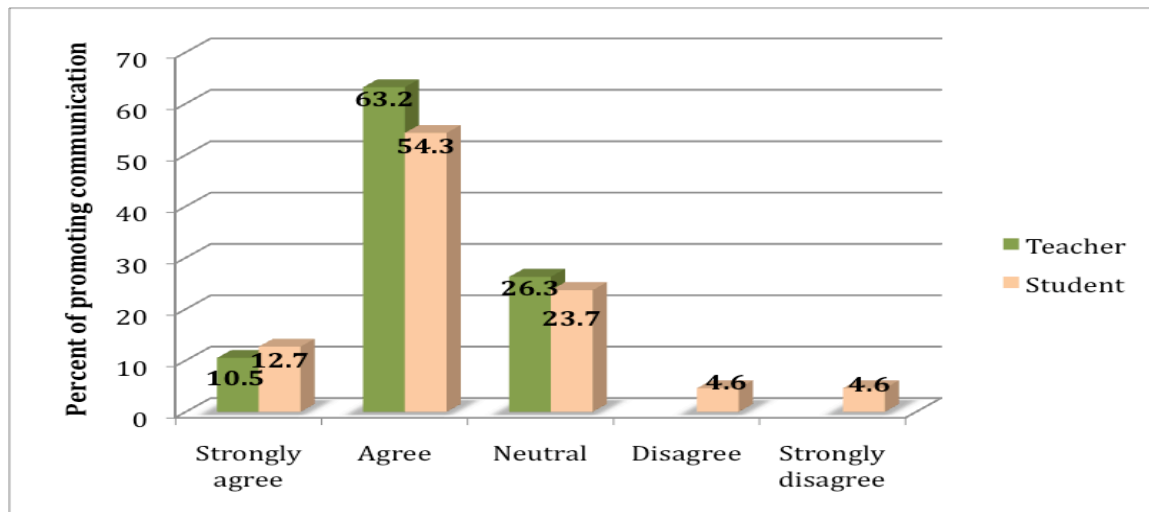
Figure 5. Level of participant perspectives toward communication skills

Discussion

While teachers and students come to distance learning with differing technical skills and confidence, when it comes to the means and power of interaction, there were generally similar responses by both groups. Motivation and communication increased in online courses, and students generally felt their learning was equivalent to face-to-face classes. While teachers saw email as a primary means of communication, students pointed to the class discussion forums, with both noting that this tool was a key to promoting interaction and sharing of ideas.

The results of this research indicated that teachers and learners recognized the importance and effectives of the teacher-learner interactions in online education including motivating students engagement, promoting a sense of online community, and improving student communication skills. Learners should take advantages of synchronous and asynchronous teacher-learner interactions to enhance and improve their study.

Conclusion

The concept of the teacher-learner interactions in online education is quite new and has not been fully explored before in Asian education cultures, especially in Vietnam. Because of traditional teaching practices and the recent implementation of online learning, Vietnamese educators have not fully realized the benefits of the teacher-learner interactions to teaching and learning activities although this study shows that change is happening. Therefore, this research may hopefully provide a significant contribution for online education and voice the concern about the necessity of the teacher-learner interactions supporting for online and face-to-face courses at the Center for Online and Distance Training (CODT), Travinh University and Vietnam towards the development of globalization. This shows the urgent need of establishment online learning not only to support for traditional approaches but also to meet the developing needs of society (Dinh, 2005).

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