The role of chatting in the language classroom

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ABSTRACT

Synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) is more commonly known as "chatting" and has become a commonplace mode of communication in recent years. This paper begins by briefly reviewing the literature in relation to digital literacies and makes a case that language educators have a responsibility to help students to understand the nature of this kind of interaction. The author then gives a brief overview of some of the benefits of incorporating chat activities into a language curriculum and along with some practical suggestions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) within language education was an emerging area of research in the 1990s as more people began to have access to technology that enabled this kind of interaction. There has been ongoing interest in online communication discourse patterns in general, but this paper focuses on ways in which this increasingly ubiquitous mode of communication impacts language learners. The scope of the paper is to focus only on text-based synchronous CMC (henceforth "chatting") and its potential role in the language classroom. The author of this paper takes the view that chatting has an important place in the language classroom for two main reasons. Firstly, drawing on the developing work on multiliteracies and digital literacies, language educators have a responsibility to teach digital literacy skills to learners in order for them to be able to communicate appropriately while engaging in a unique yet popular communication mode. Secondly, there are certain affordances of chatting as an activity; i.e. chatting is

beneficial for helping learners to develop confidence and fluency in the target language, while also providing opportunities for experimentation with language and noticing language in context. The following sections will briefly outline the literature related to digital literacies.

1.1 Literacy, multiliteracies and digital literacies

A general understanding of the term "literacy" is the ability to read and write standard language forms; however, this concept now needs to be extended in order to include the interpretation of different multimedia representations and diverse cultural and language forms. The term "multiliteracies" was created by the New London Group (1996) and includes the ability to interpret new and different forms of literacies that are emerging as the ways in which people communicate change. These changes are due to the emergence of new technologies, and also due to shifts in the usage of language within different cultures. A new pedagogy is being developed in order to account for these shifts:

> "A pedagogy of multiliteracies… focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone. These differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, cultural, and social effects" (New London Group, 1996, p. 64).

The term 'digital literacies' is "used to describe semiotic activity mediated by electronic media" (Thorne, 2013, p. 193). Using electronic media influences the ways in which we do things and also the nature of social relationships (Jones & Hafner, 2012) and may be defined as "practices of communicating, relating, thinking and 'being' associated with digital media" (Jones & Hafner, 2012, p. 13).

Although it has been argued that the younger generation (sometimes referred to as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001), although this term has recently undergone scrutiny – see Dudeney, 2009; Thomas, 2011) are proficient in using new technologies, digital literacies goes beyond being able to simply being able to use technology, or, as Jones and Hafner argue, they "involve not just being able to 'operate' tools like computers and mobile phones, but also the ability to adapt the affordances and constraints of these tools to particular circumstances" (Jones & Hafner, 2012, p. 13). This will involve using the tools in creative ways in order to do different things through mediation (i.e. using tools to facilitate action. See Scollon, 2001; Wertsch, 1993 on mediated action). Dudeney (2009) makes the distinction between "tech-comfy" and "tech-savvy" users of digital tools and suggests that there is a need for language educators to equip learners with skills to be able to use technology tools to mediate learning.

1.2 Texting literacy

There is an emerging debate on the nature and place of texting literacy or *netspeak*, *textspeak* or *txtspk* (Dudeney, Hockley, & Pegrum, 2013) which is the form of written communication used in chatting online and in text messaging on a mobile device. This kind of communication has a unique linguistic register which has evolved due to the focus on speed and word economy (due to costs of sending text messages). This kind of communication blurs features of spoken and written discourse (Crystal, 2008) and is enhanced with the use of emoticons. Some empirical research shows a positive correlation between textspeak and standard literacy skills (see Kemp, 2011 for a review of some research) and indicates that young people are aware of the difference between types of discourse (Crystal, 2008). The next section will discuss whether this kind of language has a place in the language classroom.

2. DIGITAL LITERACIES AND THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

So far, this paper has suggested that there are benefits for incorporating digital literacy skills into the language classroom, but to what extent should textspeak be actually taught? Proponents of multiliteracies pedagogies might argue for explicit teaching of different forms of language (see Kalantzis & Cope, 2008), but some educators might have reservations about overtly teaching textspeak in a language classroom. Unless the course being taught is specifically related to a type of new media, it may not be appropriate for a teacher to teach such forms. Instead, explicit teaching might more appropriately involve helping students to notice patterns and to apply a metalanguage to the texts that they source themselves. Thorne (2013) and Thorne and Reinhardt (2008) describe this approach as "bridging" and suggest involving learners in a cycle such as the following: (1) students source examples of texts that they are interested in (for example an interaction within Facebook or an online game); (2) students are guided in their analysis of the texts; (3) students participate in an activity where similar language is needed. This kind of focus can be very engaging, can enhance digital literacies, and could be appropriately introduced into a language classroom as project work. For example, a group assignment might be to identify a piece of real textspeak in context and prepare a presentation for classmates including some of the following information:

- Where is this interaction taking place?
- Why did the group choose this example to study?
- Who are the participants?
- What is the purpose of the interaction?
- What unique forms do the participants use to express information?

- How would you write these forms in standard English?

- Why do the participants use unique forms?

- How could you continue the discussion if you were participants?

The focus of the activity is on noticing ways in which language occurs in authentic contexts, on understanding the ways in which the language differs from standard forms of the language, and on mimicking/appropriating the kind of language used. This section has given practical examples of how analysis of textspeak could be incorporated into a course in a way which enhances digital literacies. The following section focuses on incorporating actual chat activities into a language course.

3. CHATTING AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

This section will focus on some of the benefits of incorporating chat into a classroom in order to facilitate language development more generally. Jones & Hafner (2012) note that digital literacies involve the use of technology tools in order to do things (in a virtual space) that we would not be able to otherwise do. An example of this is to purposefully use chatting to facilitate language learning with a focus on accuracy and fluency. This kind of chatting does not normally use textspeak because the purpose is different (although students need to be aware of this and understand why the register is different). The following paragraphs will give a brief summary of some of the benefits of chatting for language learners.

One of the often-cited reasons for incorporating chatting into a language classroom is that the act is so engaging for learners. Due to its engaging nature, studies suggest that real time chat activities maximize student participation (e.g. Card & Horton, 2000; Warschauer, Turbee, & Roberts, 1996) and there are several possible

reasons for this: being comfortable with the electronic learning environment; providing opportunities for interlocutors to participate equally regardless of age or status; and enhancing interactivity, which can be said to enhance motivation in general (Irani, 1998).

Another benefit of chatting in the language classroom is that it provides language learners with access to a wider range of interlocutors than normally found in a physical space. This means that there are more opportunities for learners to participate in engaging discussions that not only stretch their linguistic skills, but also help them to shape their worldview.

Chatting provides opportunities for learners to practice both receptive (reading) and productive (writing) language skills. In order to participate in a chat exchange, interlocutors have to read and process text at rapid speeds in order to respond. Through practice, students become skilful at skimming and scanning the text in order to follow the conversation thread. This might be difficult for beginning level learners, but having access to the text both during and after the session provides opportunities to re-read and analyse the text with help from peers and the teacher, and notice language.

In terms of productive skills (writing), language learners have the opportunity to develop writing skills through chatting. Chat transcripts at first glance may appear confusing, particularly those featuring contributions by lower level language learners. However, there are two main benefits to bear in mind. The first is that chatting is a legitimate and unique interaction type and has its own conventions and practices (see the above points about multiliteracies), so will never appear as a polished text such as an essay – even by proficient speakers of the language. Secondly, chatting provides authentic writing practice and opportunities to think in the target language and to

practice constructing coherent structures. Thirdly, in traditional writing classes, students are sometimes asked to write about topics on which they have very little authority or confidence. Chatting gives the language learners chances to explore the topic by discussing it with others, which is likely to increase their writing confidence (Day & Batson, 1995).

Even though chatting is a specific written interaction type, it may also promote competencies that could be transferred to other interaction types, including spoken interaction. Chun (1994) argues that interactional speech acts used in a range of discourse types (such as turn-taking, taking initiative, asking questions and so on) are developed through chatting.

4. PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

This section will look at practical ways in which teachers can incorporate language focussed chat activities into the classroom.

4.1. Resources and practical considerations

In order to facilitate the activities suggested in this section, students all need access to chat software, apps or a purpose-built chat room (some examples are given in Appendix 1). Ideally, students should have access to a device (i.e. PC or tablet) each. The activities assume that learners are familiar and comfortable with chatting. If any of the learners are new to chatting, then it is worthwhile for the teacher to do some preliminary activities first in order to develop students' comfort levels.

4.2 Activity purpose

As with any task in the language classroom, the teacher should first consider the needs of the students and the aims of the lesson. This will determine whether chatting is appropriate and, if so, how the activity can best be facilitated. For example, perhaps chatting can be used for one of the following: (1) to focus on form by either introducing a new language point, reviewing a previously introduced language point, or providing opportunities to practice a particular point; (2) to provide general fluency practice; or (3) to function as a warm up. The next section will provide details for each of three focus areas.

4.3 Providing opportunities to focus on form

4.3.1. Practice

A chat room provides an ideal opportunity for students to practice a newly introduced form. A task that provides intentional practice for certain forms might be one where the discussion topic or task requires students to use a particular form. For example, teachers could introduce a task where students are asked to find out what their classmates had for dinner the previous evening and this would necessitate the use of the past tense. This is just one example of how engagement can be enhanced if the topic relates to the students interests and lives (or if the topic is suggested by the students). See Appendix 2 for further examples.

4.3.2.Noticing

Chatting provides opportunities for learners to notice language use in context. Learners do this either by noticing language during the activity or by focused attention on the form using the transcript after the activity has finished. A teacher might further enhance this teaching opportunity by providing carefully selected

examples or by asking students to continue to work on a particular form after the online discussion has ended. For example, the teacher could ask students to re-write a text or to imagine that they are continuing the discussion (and using similar forms in order to practice them).

4.4 Providing general fluency practice

A chat task might be useful for providing opportunities for learners to develop speaking fluency and confidence. Students could first discuss a topic in a chat environment and then repeat the same discussion face-to-face. This could also be done in reverse order. The topics could be set in advance – ideally by the students themselves.

4.5 Warm up

A chat task might be useful for facilitating communication between learners, between the teacher and the learners, or between people based in different locations. Research shows that shy or reticent learners may be more inclined to participate in this form. Chatting might be an ideal warm up to ensure that all the learners are involved and engaged. A warm-up task could be a game, an interview or brief discussion to introduce the theme of the class.

4.6 Task phases

Once the teacher has ensured that all of the students are comfortable with chatting and has discovered a potential purpose for chatting within the lesson plan, he or she can then design the activity. Ideally the activity will have three phases: pre-activities / chatting / post-activities. A worksheet that could be used to navigate the tasks is provided in Appendix 3.

4.6.1 Pre-chat activities

This phase is needed in order for learners to prepare for the task and for it to be maximally beneficial. The pre-chat activities could be set for homework in advance. Examples of pre-activities might be: reviewing language forms, learning relevant vocabulary, thinking about the task or topic and writing notes or brainstorming ideas, researching topics, preparing an argument, or imagining a role. These activities might be done individually or with other students.

4.6.2.Chatting

This interactive phase takes place mainly within the virtual space, but might also involve interacting with people in the physical space. Details of some activities are provided in Appendix 2.

4.6.3 Post-chat activities

This is an important and often overlooked phase. It is more effective if this is done in class when learners have access to the teacher and other learners. Post-chat activities will depend on the other phases, the purpose of the task and the learners themselves, but may include: reflecting on one's performance during chatting, noticing language, summarizing information discussed, posing follow-up questions, relaying a summary to a partner, noticing vocabulary, or correcting errors. Appendix 4 provides some post-chat activity cards that teachers can distribute to learners and further ideas and included on these cards.

5. CONCLUSION

54

The main points discussed in this paper are that chatting is a useful addition to a language classroom as it involves learners in developing both digital literacies and language skills. The activity suggestions should be adapted carefully to different contexts, with the learners involved as much as possible with the design of tasks, the selection of texts, and in understanding and reflecting on the use of language. This paper has not dealt with other potential benefits of chatting such as the development of learner autonomy or the development of learning communities, but these are other powerful affordances of the available technology.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Examples of Chat Software and Apps

Available from: http://tinyurl.com/mynard2013-appendix1

Appendix 2: Sample Tasks for Chat Rooms

Available from: http://tinyurl.com/mynard2013-appendix2

Appendix 3: Example Task Sheet

Available from: http://tinyurl.com/mynard2013-appendix3

Appendix 4: Reflection Activities

Available from: http://tinyurl.com/mynard2013-appendix4