

A Case Study of Student Experiences of Multi-modal Net-based Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of a case study of student attitudes toward the development of language skills through net-based language learning, and especially through a multi-modal platform, Adobe Connect. Research has demonstrated that language skills can be developed through different net-based set-ups, but that technology can sometimes be a barrier. An online survey was conducted with students on net-based English courses at a Swedish university. Informants reported that they had positive experiences of such learning, but that they felt that speaking skills were difficult to develop, often due to connection problems. Listening was a particular problem during so-called hybrid seminars, where net-based students interacted with campus students. Informants felt that the main pedagogical issues for net-based language learning were the attitudes of the instructors and students. The set-up of courses can help develop spoken language skills, including interaction, but also the willingness of fellow students to interact orally rather than through text chat is important.

KEYWORDS

Adobe Connect, Multi-Modality, Interaction, Instructor, Language Learning, Language Skills, Technology, Student

INTRODUCTION

There are many skills that make up our linguistic competence, and much research has investigated whether these can be developed in online language learning environments, including video conferencing, as discussed in the research syntheses by Lin, Huang, and Liou (2013) and Blake (2016). Student experiences of online language learning have been sought for many learning environments, such as forums, blogs, textchat, etc. However, web-based video conferencing has not been investigated to such a great extent.

Since such environments offer the possibility of interacting in both oral and text-based modalities, we can hypothesise that students would perceive video-conferencing environments as being richer environments for language learning. Indeed, as noted in Trinder (2016, p. 97), out of the different online environments, multi-modal environments were rated as most pleasing aesthetically. To investigate this issue, a case study was carried out in order to collect students' opinions about a specific video-conferencing service, Adobe Connect, used in courses at a mid-size university in Sweden. This study sought to examine how the students experienced the development of their language skills in the environment, from oral and listening skills to more formal academic writing and grammatical competence, and also how they experienced interaction with teachers and fellow students. Therefore, this study aims to give an insight into the positive and negative sides of video conferencing as an environment for online language learning.

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A survey was conducted with students at different levels of undergraduate net-based English studies (first to third semesters) through Google Forms (net-based is the common term used at this university to refer to courses conducted online involving synchronous online seminars, and so this is the term that will be used in the article, as opposed to terms such as online or distance). Before presenting the results, though, some background on the issues of language skill development and interaction in net-based learning environments, as well as reports of student attitudes to net-based language learning, will be given, plus a description of the Adobe Connect environment.

BACKGROUND ON LANGUAGE LEARNING IN NET-BASED ENVIRONMENTS

Net-based Learning of Language Skills

Much research has focused on the net-based learning of language skills. Blake (2016) carried out a meta-study of research into the development of the four skills in net-based language learning environments. He notes many examples of studies where it is argued that the skills can be developed equally well or even better in net-based learning environments compared to face-to-face ones. Similarly, Lin, Huang, and Liou (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of research into the effect of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on learning, analysing ten studies from 2002-2011, and found a small-size positive effect on language acquisition from using synchronous CMC. Mohd Alwi et al. (2012) provide evidence that the different language skills are promoted through net-based language use. There needs, though, to be active language support and more structure for complex tasks, as without it there was less discussion of linguistic forms.

Other positive effects from net-based language learning have also been noted. For example, Blake (2009) and Sauro (2012) argue that computer-mediated communication is good for developing linguistic fluency and the noticing of errors in linguistic form (cf. also Shekary & Tahrarian, 2006 and Chun's, 2008 meta-analysis of research). Oskoz (2009) reported research on collaborative interaction on feedback in net-based chats between learners of Spanish and their instructors. There was a reported increase in the amount of noticing of errors and subsequent take-up of this feedback in their linguistic production (cf. also Long, 2014's synthesis of research on cooperative collaborative interaction). Stockwell (2010) also carried out a study comparing linguistic production in synchronous (textchat) and asynchronous (forum) computer-mediated environments. Both resulted in high levels of lexical density, syntactic complexity and spelling accuracy in students' written production.

However, in Trinder's (2016, p. 95) study of different environments for language learning, learners felt that immersion was the best environment for learning a new language (42%), over blended learning (24%), face-to-face (20%), and online only (2%). For improving a language already well known, immersion was experienced as clearly best (70%) over interaction with native speakers (11%) and blended learning (6%). Issues with sound quality were the main reason for online and blended learning not being rated more highly (Trinder, 2016, p. 94).

Apart from the noticing of errors and feedback, much research into net-based environments deals with the promotion of interaction. This is very much tied in with the development of learner autonomy, as well as with the formation of learner communities, and, therefore, is the subject of the next section.

Interaction and Autonomy in Net-based Learner Communities

In his seminal work, Vygotsky (1978) describes learning as a social process. This can mean both that students learn as a part of a community, but also that learners socialise their learning internally. Similarly, Benson (2001) claims that learner autonomy requires a social autonomy, which entails that learner communities can take collective responsibility for learning. As Warschauer (1997) argues, computer-mediated education can be seen to promote reflection and interaction, which are key features of autonomy. Eneau and Develotte (2012) reported positive experiences of interaction and forming an online community among students on a net-based French course, and Fitze (2006) reported that

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