

Reflection on Improving L2 Learners' Speaking Performance in Distance Learning

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This reflection presents my teaching practice at university to improve L2 learners' speaking performance through distance learning. In order to facilitate learners' interaction in the speaking tasks provided via synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC), I offered asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC) pre-tasks in advance since ACMC provides learners with preparative and reflective time for the intended learning. However, ACMC might cause L2 learners to experience a sense of isolation, misunderstandings, a lack of collaboration, and a lack of social and emotional reality. To deal with these potential challenges, the instruction on ACMC interaction was provided based on the notion of social presence within the Community of Inquiry (Garrison, 2017). This reflection offered two personal insights: (1) attending to social presence of ACMC tasks could facilitate L2 learners' text-based interaction; and (2) facilitated interactions in ACMC pre-tasks could lead to students' improved speaking performance in the subsequent SCMC tasks.

The spread of COVID-19 has kept some undergraduate students who have pre-existing medical conditions or who live with elderly people with a high risk of severe disease away from face-to-face educational environments and has led to an increase in distance learning. To promote educational equity, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has encouraged universities to ensure that distance learning has interactivity and quality

equivalent to face-to-face learning (MEXT, 2022). Under such conditions, I was in charge of an "English Conversation" distance learning class for 10 third-year business majors for 15 weeks in 2021. The students were approximately at the beginner level of English-speaking proficiency (i.e., from the A1 to A2 level of CEFR). The learning outcome of this class was to improve four skills in business English, mainly focusing on listening and speaking.

To improve the level of the students' learning outcomes, I designed the weekly lessons, adding asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC) pre-tasks (i.e., text chat and discussion forums) to the subsequent synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) tasks (i.e., 90-minute video conferencing), using Microsoft Teams. The theoretical background to this design was twofold: reducing cognitive load through pre-task planning, and facilitating cross-modality transfer of language skill. Firstly, a substantial body of L2 studies suggests that providing L2 speakers with pre-task planning reduces the cognitive load they face, and thus improves the accuracy and fluency of oral production (Burns, 2012; Ortega, 1999). In terms of computer-mediated communication, adding text-based ACMC pre-task planning in advance of SCMC tasks reduces the cognitive burden on L2 learners' oral performance, and thus contributes to a higher level of production than when assigning only SCMC tasks; and this is particularly true for beginner learners (Payne, 2004). The SCMC mode usually has time limitations for planning and preparation for what learners have to say, which increases their cognitive load and results in increased

errors in speaking in terms of grammar and pronunciation. On the other hand, ACMC mode provides learners with ample time for reflection and language manipulation to express opinions, respond to peers and negotiate meaning, which is much more cognitively friendly to L2 learners than SCMC. Therefore, I selected ACMC pre-task planning prior to SCMC speaking tasks. Secondly, sequencing from ACMC to SCMC speaking tasks induces the cross-modality transfer of language skills from writing to speaking (Abrams, 2003; Blake, 2009; Payne & Whitney, 2002; Satar & Özdener, 2008). That is, engaging L2 learners in regular text chat stimulates learners to subvocalize the written texts they produced in their mind, which later, positively impacts on their oral performance (Blake, 2009).

However, it was also important to consider how the use of ACMC might cause L2 learners, including my students, to face the following typical types of difficulties: (1) a sense of isolation, (2) misunderstandings, (3) a lack of collaboration, and (4) a lack of social and emotional reality (Delahunty, et al., 2014). In addition, since most of my students did not have any experiences of ACMC in English, it appeared vital that I be proactive and supportive regarding dealing with the possible challenges when integrating ACMC into my class. To mitigate the above difficulties, I provided at the beginning explicit models of how students should interact with peers for successful ACMC. A theory that deals with such social aspects is the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, 2017). The CoI framework is a generic and coherent system that indicates deep and meaningful learning experiences in which learners are collaboratively engaged in critical inquiry and thereby improve their personal reflection and shared understanding. Such learning is realized by developing three interdependent elements, i.e., social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Social presence is defined as the ability of learners "to identify

with a group, communicate openly in a trusting environment, and develop personal and affective relationships progressively by way of projecting their individual personalities" (Garrison, 2017, p. 25). Since the notion of social presence does not only attend to social and emotional aspects in ACMC environments but also strongly focuses on achieving learning outcomes, I reasoned that this could be helpful for my students to successfully carry out the tasks and avoid the potential challenges.

Objectives

Teachers can use this reflection:

- to avoid the difficulties L2 learners may experience in ACMC in terms of emotion and socialization, and
- to facilitate L2 learners' ACMC for successful speaking performance in SCMC.

Practical implications

By reflecting on my students' interaction in ACMC tasks, I gained some insights into how to deal with salient social and emotional aspects as follows:

1. Showing a model of how to express learners' emotions may improve a sense of belonging, and improve interpersonal relationships. ACMC is typically face-less and body-less, which thus encourages learners to use virtual facial expressions, body language, and interjections that may have functions analogous to the affective expressions used in SCMC and lead to the formation of closer bonds between learners. My students frequently used the following affective expressions (see Figure 1):
 - a. emoticons (e.g., thumbs up, smile, laugh)
 - b. interjections (e.g., *haha*, *oh*, *wow*)

- c. exclamation marks (!)

Figure 1
Screenshot of Students' Asynchronous
Online Communication



2. Showing a model of open communication may make learners feel more comfortable in ACMC. Many students asked questions of each other and expressed appreciation for peers' posts, and interestingly, some of the students voluntarily extended their threads, going beyond the minimum requirements for the number of posts. My students' open communication was realized as follows:
 - a. continuing a thread without creating a new thread
 - b. asking questions and responding to questions (e.g., *Why do you want ...?*)
 - c. expressing appreciation (e.g., *Thank you for asking*) and complimenting (e.g., *That sounds great*)
3. Showing a model of how to become cohesive as a group might help students to develop a sense of collaboration. The students frequently used vocatives and phatic expressions to encourage peers to reply as follows:

- a. vocatives (e.g., *Jack, Rebecca*)
(1: For this article, they were assigned a pseudonym for anonymity)
- b. salutations, phatic expressions (e.g., *hi, hello*)

Although my students interacted with such expressions, it did not seem that they collaboratively formed a cohesive group of 10 students, because the task focuses were mainly on individual interaction (e.g., *What are the best things about your personality?*) rather than group discussions (e.g., *What are the advantages and disadvantages of business meetings and training increasingly taking place online?*).

4. Overall, the students' ACMC appeared to be facilitated by explicitly showing a model interaction based on the notion of social presence within the Col framework. My students seemed to enjoy chatting with each other, minimizing the risk of difficulties that might occur in ACMC in terms of emotion and socialization.
5. Most importantly, successful ACMC pre-tasks were able to help L2 learners improve their speaking performance (see Payne, 2020). In the course, each lesson had a minimum goal that the university set (e.g., to negotiate a new deal, to describe an electronic device, to solve a business problem). However, given my students' beginner-level English proficiency, it would have been difficult to achieve these goals if they only had opportunities to speak impromptu in SCMC. Thus, engaging in ACMC pre-task planning helped them sufficiently plan and prepare for the subsequent SCMC tasks; and in fact, many of the students appeared to accurately express their ideas with only occasional stumbling and

communication breakdowns during SCMC tasks.

6. Moreover, establishing time parameters (e.g., posting a comment at least three days before the SCMC tasks) ensured that learners were well-prepared for the SCMC tasks. For the first few weeks, one or two students posted their comments right before the pre-scheduled weekly SCMC lessons. This made it impossible for peers to respond to them, and thus they lost meaningful opportunities to communicate with peers.
7. Finally, providing a small incentive (5% of the overall course grade) for participating in ACMC seemed useful for increasing learners' engagement and motivation for interacting with peers.

Reflective Conclusion

My reflection concludes with two personal insights: (1) attending to social presence of ACMC tasks seemed to improve facilitation of interaction between beginner-level L2 learners by helping them mitigate the difficulties they might otherwise experience from the emotional and social perspectives, and (2) facilitated interactions in ACMC pre-tasks seemed to lead to their improved speaking performance in the subsequent SCMC tasks, providing preparative and reflective time for the intended learning and reducing the cognitive load of spontaneous conversation. For me, the next phase of this journey will be to view ACMC pre-tasks from the perspectives of teaching presence and cognitive presence in order to improve the quality of ACMC interaction. The perspective of cognitive presence could help to measure the extent to which students achieve higher-order learning outcomes (e.g., recognizing and posing questions, expressing divergent

opinions, collaboratively producing solutions or explanations, or critically assessing co-constructed knowledge). The teaching presence perspective might also help to measure how successful our teaching practice actually is in the virtual environment (e.g., establishing netiquette, setting the learning atmosphere, or responding to technical concerns). Many of us know that it is challenging for us to promote meaningful distance learning of a second/foreign language; however, I hope this reflection will contribute to advances in this field of our endeavors.

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