Task Design Principles of a Campus-based Communication Skills Course in a Natural-Virtual Learning Community

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Abstract
Many students from non-English speaking backgrounds find it difficult to use English in the virtual learning communities. This paper proposes a task designed for a campus-based English course in a Singapore university and explains the theoretical underpinnings of the design. It is argued that communication skills in both "virtual" and "natural" learning communities need to be learned. As such, communication skills courses should include learning activities that help students polish such skills.

1: Introduction
While English is the most popular medium of communication in the virtual learning communities, many students from non-English speaking countries have found it difficult to express themselves in English. As such, learning tasks should be designed to help students improve their online English communication skills. This paper briefly describes the design of a web-based task proposed for a communication skills course and explains the rationale for the design.

2: The English Course and the Online Task
The communication skills course referred to in this paper is Graduate English Course: a 12-week campus-based program conducted by the National University of Singapore to help graduates improve their written communication skills. While this course has a website in the Integrated Virtual Learning Environment (IVLE, http://ivle.nus.edu.sg), a courseware management system developed by the University, the site only contains a course outline.

The task proposed in this paper is initially a writing activity. The author, who is also the tutor of the course, designed this task to help students polish their report writing skills through a small-scale questionnaire study. The time allocated for the task is 10 hours, with 1 hour spent in the classroom and 9 hours spent in IVLE. Besides, the students are required to work individually to write a report. The IVLE tools used for this task include Discussion Forum (a CMC tool), Multimedia (an audio/visual resource repository), and Workbin (an assignment repository).

The task begins with a lecture, in which the tutor briefly describes the aims of the task to the class. The lecture focuses on four aspects: (1) how to conduct a small-scale questionnaire study, (2) how to design a questionnaire, (3) how to work collaboratively, and (4) how to communicate effectively in a virtual environment. At the end of the lecture, the students work in small groups to select a survey topic. The recorded lecture, as well as the teaching materials and relevant resources, are uploaded in the IVLE Multimedia and IVLE Workbin respectively.

The students then work collaboratively to draft a 10-itemed questionnaire. They could have discussions in the IVLE Discussion Forum if necessary. To ensure the work is done, each group selects a coordinator, who may set a prearranged time to have the discussion so that the group members could get instant responses from their peers. Each group submits the draft to the tutor and revises it according to his/her suggestions. The group uploads the questionnaire in the group website to collect data from the respondents. When they have finished analyzing the data, the students work individually to write a report and then upload it to the IVLE course website for peer review purposes. Based on these comments, the students revise their reports and submit the final draft to the tutor. As an optional follow-up activity, each group will give an oral presentation on their project in class.

3: Pedagogical Rationale for the Task Design
The task facilitates English communication in both virtual and natural learning environments. This section explains the rationale for design of the proposed task, focusing on three aspects: course model, students’ needs and task aims.

3.1: Course Model
The proposed task uses computer mediated communication (CMC) as a tool to teach communication skills. This design, which involves both readymade print
materials and online components, is similar to the “Wrap Around” model [1]. “Scenario 1” [2] or “Adjunct mode” [3]. It has been argued that such virtual-natural instruction often fails because the technological infrastructure of an institution cannot support CMC among students. However, problems such as dialup connection charges, backward network system, and inadequate networked computers that might affect the accomplishment of online tasks are not observed in this context. This is because the University has an information technology strategic plan to strengthen her technological infrastructure. Currently, tutors and students can access the campus network through 3,000 networked computers on campus. They also gain free access to the system through 7,000 wired and wireless network access points campus-wide. Since this system is powerful, safe and free-of-charge, it is indeed a good virtual environment for online communication.

In addition, the design of this task conforms to the strategic plan of the University [4]. According to this plan, online instruction should supplement but not replace classroom instruction. For this reason, a course model that allows students to collaborate in the virtual and natural communities appears to be an appropriate and practical model for the course.

3.2: Students’ Needs

The online task was designed also because students need to learn how to use English -- the major medium of electronic communication -- to collaborate with others. This is because online discourse, which is neither spoken language nor written language, is itself a new genre [5,6]. Pincas [6], for example, points out that the spatial and temporal patterns in an online learning environment are different from those in a face-to-face environment. Online “talks”, especially when more than two “speakers” are involved, require appropriate turn-taking and referencing skills. Besides, text-based communication in the “virtual world” requires speakers to use text to express their ideas. Whereas paralinguistic cues such as abbreviations or emoticons could also be used, such cues need to be learned before they are used properly. For these reasons, the proposed task allows students to practice online discussion. Besides, tutors can take this opportunity to demonstrate interactions in the natural and virtual communities.

3.3: Task Aims

One of the aims of the proposed task is to allow students to work collaboratively and cooperatively inside and outside of the classroom. In this design, the discussion activity is deliberately put on the Internet and the earlier briefing part conducted in the classroom.

The rationale behind such a design is that at the time of writing, there is still little concrete empirical evidence on the superiority of computer-mediated collaborative work over face-to-face one in the language teaching literature [7-9]. Whereas some claim that computer-mediated collaborative activities help students improve their language learning, others argue that students who have discussions in a classroom setting can focus more on the language task than those who have discussions online.

To avoid the above problem, the present task design is an attempt to make full use of both online and traditional collaborative learning by asking students to have the initial discussion in the classroom and to draft the questionnaire through online discussion. An advantage of this design is that the students could spend more time on thinking about the task and doing library research before drafting the questionnaire items with their classmates.

4: Conclusion

The design principles for an English task have been described. To ensure the success of the course, it is suggested that the task be tested with a few students. Based on their feedback, the task will be revised and more components added to the course. This paper concludes that there is a need for students to do similar tasks in order to improve their English communication skills in virtual and natural learning communities.

References