Enhancing Critical Thinking in Language Learning through Computer-Mediated Collaborative Learning: A Preliminary Investigation

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates a framework for computer-mediated collaborative learning and critical thinking in language learning. It is based mainly on the notions of awareness, autonomy, and achievement posited by Lian (1993). Central to its argument are two assertions. Firstly, computer-mediated collaborative learning requires a high level of autonomy in learners. Secondly, thinking critically in language learning can only occur in learners after they have become aware of the critical elements or “things that matter” in language learning. Hence, the more they are aware of such elements, the more they think critically in language learning. This framework argues against the idea of grouping learners so as to make them work together using a common means toward a common goal. This alternative model of computer-mediated collaborative learning is one in which learners have more control over their own learning. Their needs will arise when they engage in reality. In addition, the paper suggests positive roles that teachers should play in this context. An initial investigation of this framework will be presented.

1: Background

Language teachers in general are concerned with the use of the Internet to enhance language learning. Many of its features have been utilized to foster collaborative learning (Warschauer, 1997). Many studies have reported such learning to be desirable. In the ELT context, the Internet provides ample opportunities for learners to engage in reality by using English as a global language with people from other countries around the world. More importantly, several contemporary concepts such as Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, Krashen’s input hypothesis, Bandura’s social learning theory support the notion of collaborative learning in many respects (Vygotsky, 1935; Krashen, 1982; Bandura, 1977). Computer-mediated collaborative learning has been found to have positive effects on learners by empowering them to explore and experience new possibilities. Though there is some evidence supporting that collaborative learning enhances critical thinking and problem-solving, little research in ELT has been carried out to find the relationships between computer-mediated collaborative learning and critical thinking in language learning.

2: Framework

In a broader sense, thinking is all about being aware of something. Thinking critically in language learning and being aware of the “things that matter” in using the language are highly correlated. The paper hypothesizes that the more learners become aware of the critical element, the more they think critically. Traditionally, such things that matter often include grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Little attention has been paid to context and circumstances in which the language is used. However, in complex real-life situations, learners, to function properly, need more than just grammatical rules and memorized words or sentences. If learners have to communicate face-to-face, when spontaneity is a crucial matter, they often run into the problem of having insufficient time to refer to such rules (Lian, 1993). What learners should be able to do, rather than simply learning grammatical rules and memorizing words, is to engage reality. In reality, a broad range of phenomena and circumstances provides learners with massive opportunities to confront, contrast, and contest their existing perceptions with that of the real world (Lian, 2000).

The Internet is the ‘global market’ where people do things, for example, buying, bargaining, negotiating, and talking to each other. It is the place of work and play. Contexts can be created so as to enable learners to do things together for mutual benefit. On the Internet, learners can learn anytime and anywhere. They can also ‘talk to people’ when they ‘do things at the market.’ By talking to people, this paper means something as simple as greeting, thanking, apologizing, etc as seen from email exchanges or chat-rooms, for instance. Also, it refers to
situations when learners, upon carrying out their duties, are regulated by their own desires and the demands of the task to talk to one another. This situation can be seen in the real world. In the past, because of the limitations, most learners lacked the opportunities to be immersed in the target language communities, which is one of the best ways to become proficient in such a language. Nowadays, however, virtual worlds have been created, and it has empowered learners. Experience has taught us that we can learn from indirect experience as well (e.g. through reading or listening). Thus language learning can be viewed as a by-product of our awareness.

Upon doing things at the ‘market’ together, as learners ‘walk and talk’ with friends and acquaintances, they also talk to strangers and those with whom they have to do business. Little by little, they develop the ‘feeling for the market.’ Gradually, they have become familiar with the market. One can think of one’s favourite shopping mall in which one knows the whereabouts of things and people, of whom to ask for information, or of the quality of the products. Upon carrying out their enterprise, learners become aware of the things at that market, including the people of the market, and the language they use, and their social norms --- of what does matter and what doesn’t. Bourdieu (1991), in the context of cultural practices, calls this awareness the “feeling for the game (sens du jeu) --- a sense of what is appropriate and what is not” (p.13). Unless having severe perception problems, as learners do things together online, they sensitiz themselves/are sensitized to the real world, including the language and its environment. They gradually develop their feel of the language: its context and circumstances. Our feelings of language exist. Krashen (1981), in proposing his Monitor model, has pointed out that: “Adults often demonstrate a ‘feel’ for grammaticality for some aspects of grammar in a second language, in some cases without ever having known a conscious rule” (p. 156).

3: Preliminary Investigation

At present, a website, www.geocities.com/janphauc, is being developed. Under part 3 of the site, Bamboo Enterprise has been created as a center where everybody involved, including learners, teachers, and helpers, can discuss and create a number of joint projects. The collaboration is of two levels: the teacher and the students. The projects are also open to the public.

In addition, the Microsoft online community Bamboo Forum, http://groups.msn.com/BambooForum, has been built as a meeting place for all members to discuss and to decide upon new projects. So far (as of July 30th, 2002), 11 volunteers have joined. The support system comprises of humans (teachers, peers, and other helpers), other resources available online, and resources produces by the researcher. In addition to several intermediate stages, the finished product will also be included in the overall study.

At this conference, I would like to discussed the following questions:

- Under certain conditions whereby learners jointly work on a real life project e.g. creating a radio program or publishing a magazine etc, when does “critical thinking in language learning” occur in learner?
- During the intervention, what data should be considered as relevant, and how should the information be interpreted?

References


