Computer-Mediated Communication for Course Delivery and Teaching Materials Development: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a university English course which uses computer-mediated communication (CMC) for the dual-purpose of providing lesson materials online and collecting student written output in the form of a news-based blog to develop a learner corpus. Comments on the blog from Japanese university students form the basis of a learner corpus, which is analysed with reference to native speaker norms, allowing needs to be identified and addressed in subsequent materials. The paper discusses CMC as a repository of teaching materials and as a resource to develop teaching materials.

Keywords: CMC, Course Design, Interlanguage Analysis, L1 Influence, Learner Corpus, Motivation, Student Writing

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes a university English course using computer-mediated communication (CMC) and explains the choice and use of digital materials with the purpose of compiling and using a learner corpus. In this course, CMC takes the form of a blog where, each week, an article about a recent news item is posted online for students to access. Students write their reactions to the story on the class blog, and these comments then form the basis of the learner corpus. The paper discusses CMC as an effective source and an insightful resource in a university English course, in three main sections. First, course design using CMC for English classes in a Japanese university context is explained with a brief outline of how the learner corpus was compiled. Second, the basic details of the learner corpus and a native-speaker reference corpus are presented, followed by the results of a corpus analysis showing some tendencies of English usage by the Japanese

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learners. Third, the pedagogical benefits of using a course designed around CMC are explored with the suggestion that the CMC corpus can offer a valuable contribution to course delivery and teaching materials development.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Undergraduate students in Japan are required to study English for one or two years (see Butler & Iino, 2005). Some of this compulsory language study takes place in well-established, unified English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs that cater for the English requirements within a university department, or across different departments. In many universities, however, EFL teachers are expected to design and deliver appropriate English courses that they are requested to teach from year to year (Marchand, 2011). This has led to course and materials design becoming an ongoing concern for teachers in the Japanese higher education context. Equipped with little more than a course title and a general idea of student proficiency level, teachers are often called to make the majority of decisions about the content of the course, including materials selection and student assessment.

The teachers involved in creating the course under discussion in this paper were faced with exactly the same situation. Their solution was to collaborate in designing a curriculum with online content becoming a central feature of the EFL course. The virtual nature of the course delivery allowed the teachers to not only share the lesson materials between their classes, but also encouraged online interaction between students at the different universities where the teachers were employed. The course was run in compulsory English classes at three large private universities in the Tokyo area. Each class had between fifteen to thirty students, from computer science, commerce and law majors respectively. Initial information provided by the universities indicated that the average student level would be lower to upper intermediate, equivalent to A2-B2 Level on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). It was therefore anticipated that most students would have enough language proficiency to handle some challenging materials in English. However, another concern was to what extent the learners would be motivated to study English. A widely reported problem in Japan is students’ reluctance to speak out in class and become fully engaged with the learning process (Anderson, 1993; Doyon, 2000; King, 2013; Marchand, 2012). With this in mind, the course was designed in such a way that would engage student interest and keep them motivated for the duration of the course.

First, it was decided that authentic contemporary news articles should be used to encourage student curiosity and take them beyond the more didactic style of the traditional language classroom that they may have already experienced in their learning so far (Nie & Lau, 2010). This approach is supported in previous studies outlining the benefits of authentic materials in the language classroom (Rogers & Medley, 1998; Al Asri & Al-Rashdi, 2014). For example, Martinez (2003) describes exposure to authentic input as “a discriminating factor in the acquisition of competence in the foreign language enabled through communication based on the conveyance and perception of meaningful information” (p. 134). Secondly, the decision was made to utilize CMC in the course. CMC was seen to play an important role both as another source of authentic input, and as a way of maintaining learner motivation throughout the academic year. The contention that CMC can serve as input is supported in the literature by Levy and Stockwell (2006) who have shown that CMC can offer a platform for authentic interactions providing meaningful reading for learners, while Kitade (2006) suggests that CMC can facilitate interaction and the negotiation of meaning. The former is especially true of asynchronous CMC, which provides learners with time to reflect before responding, while the latter is more commonly associated with the real-time demands of synchronous CMC (Kessler, 2015). Meanwhile the motivational benefits of using CMC have been widely attested in the field. Meunier (1998) has described...
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