Some Interactional Functions of Text in a Text-and-Voice SCMC Chat Session for Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines the functions of the text mode in a predominantly voice-only SCMC tutoring session. Using conversation analysis with attention paid to the sequential and holistic unfolding of both text and voice turns, the authors found that the bimodal text-and-voice mode was employed in repair, Initiation-Response-Feedback, assessment, and topical talk sequences. Within these sequences, text turns often reinforced voice turns to focus on language forms but also sometimes contributed to rapport-building and emotional emphasis in the voice turns. In addition to supporting voice turns, text turns also performed distinct actions that worked together with the actions in the voice turns such as initiating repair, presenting language examples as objects for consideration, achieving humor, and signaling discourse structure. The findings shed light on the interactional processes in bimodal SCMC for second language teaching and learning.

KEYWORDS

Bimodal, Conversation Analysis, IRF, Multimodal, Repair, SCMC, Second Language Learning, Second Language Teaching, Skype, Tutoring, Voice-and-Text Chat

INTRODUCTION

With the increasing availability of multimodal synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) such as Skype™, Yahoo! Messenger™, and Facebook’s™ Chat, text-and-voice chat has gained more popularity in education. Bimodal SCMC provides unique positive and negative affordances (van Lier, 2000, cf. Gibson, 1979) for participants. Most people can produce spoken text more quickly than they can type text, but text provides a more or less permanent visual record in the flow of interaction, which has been found to facilitate noticing in second language learning (Lai & Zhao, 2006; Payne & Whitney, 2002) and academic literacy development (Li, 2013). Importantly, in a bimodal environment, participants have a choice regarding which mode to use at a given moment. A question that arises is: When do participants choose which mode and why? This paper aims to address this question by examining the interactional factors that motivated a tutor’s utilization of text along with voice in a language tutoring session using bimodal SCMC, in which the tutor and tutee completed language learning activities and built mutual rapport.
SOCIAL INTERACTION IN BIMODAL SCMC

In bimodal SCMC involving both voice and text modes, it is important to recognize that while the ongoing process of oral turn construction is available to the recipient, the real-time composing process of text is not. Although many chat technologies alert the recipient as soon as text is being typed and these alerts have a foreshadow effect on the upcoming text (Gibson, 2014), only the final textual package is seen by the recipient when it is posted. Further, the oral mode has linear sequentiality, that is, “each utterance can be placed immediately after its intended referent” (Garcia & Jacob, 1999, p. 361). In contrast, text-based communication can have multidimensional sequentiality, since there are “multiple, concurrent ‘speaker’ selection options” at a time, and “participants can not control where their message is placed relative to its intended referent” (Garcia & Jacob, 1999, p. 361). These features become different affordances for participants in bimodal SCMC.

The main focus in bimodal SCMC research so far has been on how participants shift between voice and text to organize interaction. For example, students in peer-group discussions may shift from one mode to the other in a question–response sequence, but they do not generally shift modes in the same utterance (Scheffel-Dunand, 2006). When shifting modes, participants may utilize certain strategies to maintain coherence, such as mentioning the addressee in their turn, quoting a part of the previous turn in their turn (Scheffel-Dunand, 2006), latching their oral turns to the end of their completed text turns, and using oral turns to repair misplaced text turns (Gibson, 2014). Further, text and voice have a dynamic relationship in the sequential unfolding of interaction in SCMC. In web-based seminar discussions, students may use text turns to respond in overlap to the tutor’s ongoing oral questions, which can trigger the tutor to produce additional oral turns as feedback to the students’ text responses (Gibson, 2014). These studies demonstrate that the on-going production of text and voice needs to be taken as a holistic and tandem process.

To date, little research has been done to find out the discourse reasons for participants’ selection of a mode in ongoing SCMC when both modes are available. What we know is that the audio mode can be used to repair confusion caused by the multiplicity of parallel threads in the text mode in peer group discussions (Scheffel-Dunand, 2006) and that the text mode can be employed in IRF (Initiation – Response – Feedback) sequences (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) in group discussions involving a tutor (Gibson, 2014). Importantly, the choice of which mode to use at a given moment can bear meaningful interactional import. In a dyadic task-based activity in an English as a second language (ESL) class, a learner was shown to use the audio modality to maintain control in the interaction until his partner switched to text chat and took on a more dominant and productive role (Sauro, 2009). Further, text and voice may take on differentiated functions in discourse. Text was used to provide a lasting visual record of essential information for the task while voice was the medium used for conversation management (Sauro, 2009). As such, text may remind the learner of the correct form and facilitate uptake (Guichona, Bétrancourt, & Prié, 2012).

To expand current understandings about the selective functions of voice and text in SCMC educational discourse, the present study examines interaction in a tutor-tutee dyad (vs. learner-learner or tutor-learner group interaction as in previous studies) and aims to describe in close detail which mode or modes are employed in what type of sequences, and how text and voice are used to accomplish specific actions in these sequences.

SEQUENCES AND ACTIONS

Research in conversation analysis (CA) has shown that talk-in-interaction is normally organized into sequences. A sequence consists of a series of turns that cohere together in a progressive trajectory to accomplish a course of action (Schegloff, 2007, pp. 2-3). Sequences have beginnings and ends and are often separated from each other by pauses or some shift of action. Of relevance to the analysis in this paper are the following sequences: repair, IRF, assessment, and topical talk. Through these sequences, the tutor and tutee in the data achieved the overall goals of their interaction: doing language teaching
On Being Earnest: The Importance of Engaging With Technology in Education
www.igi-global.com/article/on-being-earnest/219247?camid=4v1a

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