Chapter IV

‘Ears before Eyes’: Expanding Tutors’ Interaction Skills beyond Physical Presence in Audio-Graphic Collaborative Virtual Learning Environments

Beatriz de los Arcos, The Open University, UK

Inmaculada Arnedillo Sánchez, Trinity College, Ireland

Abstract

This chapter considers how the absence of certain aspects of non-verbal behaviour affects interaction in audio-graphical learning environments. The authors introduce strategies to deal with turn-taking, time lag and other incidences, while observing the difficulty in applying the communicative approach to language teaching in these settings. By highlighting the limited validity of an extrapolation of methodologies between face-to-face and virtual classrooms, we call for research to address the need for a new course of action; one that takes full advantage of the technology in its own right.
Introduction

“Hello, can you hear me?” are the words most likely to greet a participant in an audiographic conference. The speaker tries to ensure that, deprived of her eyes, her auditory conduct remains intact. Current approaches in second-language teaching focus on being able to communicate; however, it is seldom we realize how much we rely on information conveyed through the eyes to construct knowledge. Can we function without them? If so, how do we communicate in the dark? It is the aim of this chapter to examine how the absence of certain aspects of non-verbal behaviour affects human interaction in computer-mediated communication (CMC); in particular, in terms of the strategies the tutor needs to develop and incorporate in practice to overcome such loss.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: The literature review establishes the relevance of interaction and collaboration in the construction of new knowledge. It introduces some of the premises of the communicative approach in language teaching and examines to what extent the absence of non-verbal behaviour affects communication in audio-conferencing applications. The design of the learning experience highlights how certain features of the software under consideration facilitate collaboration. It presents the communicative nature of activities to be carried out by learners, and it suggests strategies to deal with important issues, such as turn-taking and awkward silences. A brief explanation of the research methodology and data collection tools serves as a prelude to a short account of the implementation. Findings are discussed and a conclusion put forward: Tandem teaching should be considered a suitable procedure to address the pedagogical shortcomings of audio-graphic collaborative virtual learning environments. The development of new methodologies that concentrate on the importance of oral input in these settings must become a priority among the research community.

Reading for Your Eyes: Literature Review

Illustrating her vision of language learning and teaching online, Felix (2003) borrows the metaphor of the orchestra: competent musicians playing the finest instruments to the guiding baton of a conductor in a milieu of superb acoustics or, as a matter of course, highly motivated students with access to prime equipment and 24/7 technical support, engaged in an endeavor facilitated by an inspiring teacher. It is the partnership of different elements, Felix says, that sustains the performance of an orchestra, a pre-constructed dialog acted out by means of interaction. In a learning/teaching environment, the same interaction occurs: Musicians/learners interact with each other, their instruments/computers and conductor/teacher to display not an already assigned score, but to produce new knowledge.

The concept of collaboration in second language acquisition (SLA) derives from Vygotsky’s account that learners construct new language through socially mediated