Chapter 12
Computer-Supported Collaboration in Language Learning

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ABSTRACT
Studies suggest that the computer can support collaborative learning between learners. This chapter discusses collaboration between language learners while using computer-based tasks. The researcher aims to look at in what ways students collaborate when completing tasks using computers during language learning, particularly in developing their listening and speaking skills. This chapter also explores the possibilities of monitoring and assessment for this collaborative language learning. The analysis is based on interview, observation and questionnaire data from both teachers and students at two UK university language centers. The findings indicate that collaboration in computer-based environments organized by teachers is useful for students to develop their language skills. Computer-supported collaboration increases students’ confidence and encourages them to maintain active learning, thus reduces the passive reliance on teachers’ feedback.

INTRODUCTION
Computers have been applied in many subjects in education. Studies have found that computers have large potential impact on education and can enhance students’ learning (e.g., Sutherland et al., 2004). Computers allow students to carry out tasks and self-assessment with the function of instant feedback. The computer user can use feedback from the computer as the monitor to “reshape their actions in response to the feedback” (Facer et al., 2003, p. 191). Therefore, students can assess themselves with the use of the computer.

In language learning, current studies in the computer-assisted language learning (CALL) field suggest that the computer provides material and feedback for learners to practise the target language in and outside the classroom and has been seen as a positive tool for language learners in their individual study. As Chapelle (2003) suggests, CALL programs...
offer the potential for interaction between the computer and the language learner which refers to the learner’s responding questions and receiving correct answers. Hence, the computer is also seen as a potential language tutor by providing assessment for students’ responses (Levy, 1997). In addition, students’ autonomous language learning and self-assessment can be widely available through the web rather than being tied to a particular class (Chapelle, 2001).

Regarding practising listening skills, students can monitor their exercises on the computer at their own pace. They can complete tasks and click buttons to receive assessment from the computer. Computers combine listening materials and various tasks with immediate assessment together through easy control. All these characteristics are much more convenient than using other media (Slater & Varney-Burch, 2001). In terms of speaking, computer programs are also designed for second language students to specifically practise pronunciation skills. For example, learners can record their speaking activities, and then these are evaluated by comparing them with a pre-recorded model version by listening or looking at a graphical representation of the two recordings. This helps learners monitor their language production. This monitoring strategy is helpful to assess and improve learners’ speaking skills and the teacher can use the recordings to assess learners’ performance and give feedback (Slater & Varney-Burch, 2001; Hegelheimer, & Tower, 2004).

Nonetheless, does the computer provide sufficient monitoring and assessment for learners’ individual learning? According to Prain and Lyons (2000), learners will not be the lead players in their learning on computers. Although computers can provide feedback and assessment, computers may not be able to explain why students’ answers are wrong or how to correct their errors. Hence, language learners still need to have collaboration with other learners and to receive support from peers and tutors. Furthermore, the above literature primarily presents the monitoring and assessment for individual learning on the computer; it does not provide approaches of monitoring and assessment for collaborative learning.

**BACKGROUND**

**Collaboration in Learning**

In the classroom, students often work together to communicate, solve problems or share information. Dillenbourg (1999) identifies that collaboration involves pairs or groups interacting to learn something together. Collaboration may benefit students’ learning. As Phipps (1999) describes: “Working with a partner is less intimidating than being singled out to answer in front of the class and it brings a realistic element into the classroom by simulating the natural conversation setting” (p. 1). Further, researchers have found that teachers can enhance students’ motivation by setting up activities including pair or group work (e.g. Pintrich & Schunk 1996). Collaboration between learners in an organized classroom provides powerful motivation for learning which can produce “learning gains and student achievement” (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 40). This demonstrates that collaboration seems to enhance students’ motivation which in turn improves their learning achievement.

In language field, studies have found that second language learners need to use the language to have interactions to learn the target language because interactions between students can reinforce their language learning (Chapelle, 1998; Pica, 1994). Pair work can promote communication and autonomous learning (Phipps, 1999). This is particularly true in second language classrooms because learners need to use the target language to talk to other people to improve their language skills. When they talk to peers, they are less inhibited to express their meaning to each other. In these natural conversations, they can talk to learn the target language and increase their communicative
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