Chapter 7

Learner Engagement in Computer-Mediated Chinese Learning

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ABSTRACT

Learner engagement has been a topical discussion for decades in both face-to-face teaching of the classroom and computer-mediated virtual learning environment. It is becoming increasingly essential in the agenda of British Higher Education institutions, especially with the tripling of the tuition fee. This chapter focuses on how to engage students with various online activities to improve their proficiency in Chinese as a foreign language. The study shows that students enhanced their learning experience by using voice tools to improve their speaking and listening, by sharing their writing within the learning community, and by documenting their own learning journeys with e-portfolio pages. Using the data from various instruments, the authors evaluate the effectiveness of the tools, analyse and discuss the advantages and problems with blended learning in the context of teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

INTRODUCTION

With the application of modern technology to teaching Chinese as a foreign language, teachers of Chinese in Higher Education institutions have been endeavouring to establish an online learning environment for their students. The pedagogical rationale behind this is to extend our classroom teaching and offer students more exposure to the language, and thus to create a blended learning environment to encourage and enable students’ learning both inside and outside the classroom at their own convenient time and location. Blended learning refers to combining a face-to-face
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classroom component with an appropriate use of technology (Sharma & Barrett, 2007, p. 7). In my teaching at a British university, what interested me most was how to adopt a learner-centred approach to computer-mediated learning and how to engage students in online Chinese learning environment. The learner-centred approach can be adopted in various areas such as course design and choice of teaching strategies. In this study, this approach consisted in passing some control to learners in their interaction with course contents, teachers, and peers, so as to ‘encourage learner interactivity and higher levels of active participation in the learning processes’ (Mason & Rennie, 2008, p. 60).

Having looked at many external commercial websites for learning Chinese, I found these websites information-laden, promotional, and professional. If students stick to learning from any of these websites for a certain period of time, they may be able to learn Chinese well. In addition, these websites provide users with substantial amounts of input, and they tend to treat their users as consumers who receive information passively. Although some of them allow users to carry on human-computer interactions such as looking up Chinese words or giving Chinese names, there seems no space for users themselves to bring their creativities and contributions into actual play. Therefore, it seems that it would be an interesting endeavour to involve students of different levels to contribute to the online learning platform and build their own learning resources and develop their language proficiency in using the language. With this as a starting point, I researched the literature in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and its application to general learning and language learning in particular. Making my initial theoretical searches from social learning theory and Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) literature, I found that, although there are a large number of studies on CSCL in educational inquiries, the area of the applications of CSCL to the context of learning Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) seems to have been less researched. In this chapter, I will first clarify the theoretical underpinning of the study, and then explain how students in my project were engaged in using various e-learning tools. As a pilot study, the effectiveness of the e-learning tools was evaluated through students’ perception of them and also the advantages and issues will be discussed about the blended learning mode in teaching CFL in universities.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

In the last two decades, learning theory has evolved and produced a variety of models, which view learning as a process of social, historical, and cultural activity (Cole, 1996). Sociocultural theories describe the learning process and the knowledge to be learned as distributed among participants and situated within the context of activity (Cole & Engestrom, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In other words, learning can be perceived as a social practice and knowledge can be taken as socially constructed. Social construction cannot be separated from meaningful interactions. As Cole and Engestrom (1993) describes, learning is the consequence of interaction with other people, objects or tools and culture in socially organized and goal-oriented activities. As forms of tools, technology and computer mediation change communication, our actions and our minds (Hampel & Stickler, 2012) and technology enables the sharing of resources between students (Mason & Rennie, 2008) and allows the interactions between teachers and students, and between students themselves during the process in which learning can happen. From this perspective, learning of a foreign language, e.g. Chinese, can happen in the process of learners using the language among themselves for certain communicative purposes via the use of computer-mediated environment.

Another closely related concept is that of ‘community of practices’ which argues that the individual learns through a process of adapting
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