Chapter 10
Developing an Autonomous Language Learning Framework in a Blended Learning Environment: A Hong Kong Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Educational technologies in language learning has undergone a shift from learner’s interaction with computers to interaction with other humans via the computer, and now moves towards the blended learning where traditional classroom teaching methods and computer-mediated activities are combined. However, the effectiveness of the blended learning is still inconclusive. The present chapter examines the effectiveness of autonomous language learning programmes in a blended learning environment and presents a framework that was derived from the programme. The framework describes the roles of teacher, the learning construction, and the learning process for autonomous language learning, and suggests a number of techniques that teachers can use to formulate their teaching plans for the blended learning. Findings revealed that students had favorable attitudes towards the autonomous language learning, the blended learning, and the programme, which could not only motivate them to continue autonomous learning but also improve their English competence.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years, the rapid advancement of technology and the impact of globalization made Hong Kong change by leaps and bounds in every aspect of economy, education and information technology. Although Information Communication Technology (ICT) is not frequently used in teaching and learning in the classrooms, it is in fact frequently used in some specific activities and tasks in schools and institutions (Enrique Hinostroza, et al., 2011). “There is now a growing body of evidence detailing the very real impact
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of technology on both formal and informal learning” (Underwood, 2009, p. 8), particularly about changes in behavior at learner, teacher, and school level and at academic performance. Traditional teaching methodologies and courses designed in response to the requirements of the market some years ago may turn out to be inappropriate or irrelevant upon graduation of the students. Therefore, it is necessary for institutions to review the courses according to the market needs and adopt innovative teaching and learning strategies, which are developed to support the aims to produce all round graduates with good language skills, sound disciplinary knowledge and broad generic skills for employment and life-long learning.

As Thomson (1996) describes, language learning is a life-long endeavor and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) seems to be the suitable tool because it frees students from the constraints of learning time and place, and students can learn at their own pace. Previous research also suggests that CMC can facilitate communication, increase oral discussion, develop the writing/thinking connection, improve writing skills, enhance student motivation and/or reduce anxiety (Cooper & Selfe, 1990; Huot, Lemonnier, & Hamers, 2008; Kern, 1995; Sullivan, 1993; Warschauer, 2003; Warschauer, Turbee, & Roberts, 1996). In addition, CMC allows students/teachers to organize grammatical, semantic and discourse into valid language learning activity. Therefore, teachers should expand their thinking about the use of computers to consider new opportunities and contexts for innovative teaching and learning, and need to look continually at the patterns of interaction that emerge. They should build bridges between the tool, the school task, the thinking skills, and the culture of institution (Schon, 1983).

However, we face two problems. Firstly, many Hong Kong Chinese students have been characterized as passive, dependent, and lacking in initiative for a long time (Pierson, 1996). A longitudinal study conducted with tertiary students in Hong Kong has indicated that students have little incentive to undertake learning outside their studies, and tend to limit their work to what is taught on the course. This kind of attitude is not beneficial to second language learning as success so much depends on the individual pursuit of opportunities for language use outside the classroom (Lee, 1998). Therefore, it is important to help students become aware of the value of autonomous language learning so that they acquire the habit of learning continuously, and maintain it after they have completed their formal studies. Classroom teachers in frequent contact with students are in an advantageous position to encourage them to do so because it is easier to establish rapport, and thus foster teacher and peer support (Lee, 1998).

Secondly, many Hong Kong teachers still ‘perceive their role mainly as providers of knowledge, rather than as facilitators guiding students to identify their own knowledge needs and to search for and evaluate information for themselves’ (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004a, p. ii). This is, in my opinion, mainly because they do not have the necessary knowledge and skills especially and there are few researches describing specific approaches to or frameworks of autonomous language teaching and learning with technology. Much of the L2 research has focused on the analysis of interactions generated within such ICT environments as email, chat, MOOs, or electronic bulletin boards (Parks, Huot, Lemonier, & Hamers, 2005). To solve this problem, there is a growing need for a pedagogical framework, which presents a description of the factors that were found to influence the success and to support the use of the new technologies in autonomous language teaching and learning.

The primary objective of this chapter is, therefore, to establish a framework that teachers can use for autonomous language learning in a blended learning environment. After reviewing the existing approaches, a new framework, Reflective Communication Approach (RCA), was developed to suit the needs of Hong Kong students. At the same time, a research program based on Reflec-