Evaluation of a web conferencing tool and collaborative tasks in an online Chinese course

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Abstract. This case study aims to explore the best practice of applying task-based language teaching (TBLT) via the web conferencing tool Blackboard Collaborate in a beginners' online Chinese course by evaluating the technical capacity of the software and the pedagogical values and limitations of the tasks designed. In this paper, Chapelle's (2001) criteria for CALL task appropriateness are adopted and adapted to evaluate five tasks designed for an online environment in terms of practicality, language learning potential, learner fit, authenticity and positive impact. In the second semester, 2013, eight BA on-campus students who enrolled in an introductory Chinese language course agreed to participate in this project. Five fortnightly one-hour online sessions were conducted, which included two jigsaw tasks, two decision-making tasks and one information-gap task. Learners' interaction in the online sessions has been recorded and transcribed for a deep investigation of learners' negotiation actions in peer-peer interaction. Their experiences of using Blackboard Collaborate and tasks were recorded in in-depth interviews and pre and post-session questionnaires.

Keywords: CALL evaluation, TBLT, web conferencing, SLA, second language acquisition, online Chinese teaching.

1.   Introduction

The popularity of task-based language teaching in the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has drawn increasing attention from both researchers and language teachers (Thomas & Reinders, 2010). A great number of studies have been conducted to investigate the use of audio/video or web conferencing tools and their

influence on learners' interaction and task design (e.g. Hampel, 2006; Hampel & Stickler, 2012; Rosell-Aguilar, 2005). However, there is a lack of research into how to evaluate the appropriateness of web conferencing tools and tasks. This study was performed with the purpose of bridging the gap by proposing a set of criteria for web conferencing-based collaborative tools. The paper will present findings from an empirical study in this context.

1.1. Literature review

Creating optimal conditions to maximise the efficiency of task-based instructions has been one of the key concerns of second language acquisition (SLA) research (e.g., Hampel, 2006; Hampel & Stickler, 2012; Rosell-Aguilar, 2005). From a cognitive point of view, Skehan (1998) summarises and proposes five guidelines for implementing effective task-based instruction. Based on these guidelines, Chapelle (2001) proposes a set of criteria for CALL tasks evaluation.

1.2. Criteria for evaluating the appropriateness
of web conference-based collaborative tasks

In the study, Chapelle's (2001) six criteria for CALL tasks appropriateness and Wang's (2008) criteria for evaluating meaning-focused videoconferencing tasks have been used as guidelines for evaluation.

Table 1. Criteria for evaluating web conferencing tools and collaborative tasks

Criteria	Descriptions
Practicality	The fit between tasks and the affordance of the web-conferencing tool(s) to support collaborative tasks completion.
Language learning potential	• The extent to which learners' attention is directed toward the forms of the language while engaging in meaning-based tasks. • Learners' improvement in the target language, especially in communicative competence. • The appropriateness of tasks in facilitating collaborative learning.
Learner fit	The fit between learners' characteristics and tasks' characteristics, such as: • The fit between the level of the difficulty of the tasks and the level of proficiency of the learners. • The fit between the amount of opportunity for engagement or interaction with learners' expectation.
Authenticity	The degree of correspondence between the web conferencing-based activities and target language activities of interest to learners outside the classroom.
Positive impact	The positive effects of the web conferencing-based tasks on those who participate in it (e.g. the impact of the multimodal environment, the impact on learners' confidence in learning, etc.).

The criteria for evaluating web conferencing tools and collaborative tasks in the current study are summarised in Table 1 above.

2. Method

In this study, the predominant purpose was to evaluate the appropriateness of the web conferencing tool and the collaborative tasks designed (Egbert, Chao, & Hanson-Smith, 1999; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994; Spolsky, 1989). A case study approach was adopted to apply the proposed criteria to evaluate both software and pedagogical values of the tasks (Yin, 2009). As Jamieson and Chapelle (2010) state, today's pressing question is "to what extent a particular type of CALL material can be argued to be appropriate for a given group of learners at a given point in time" (p. 2).

2.1. Context of the study

In the second semester (from August to November 2013), eight BA on-campus students who enrolled in an introductory level Chinese language course participated in the current study. Five fortnightly one-hour online sessions were conducted through the web conferencing tool Blackboard Collaborate (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. A screenshot of Blackboard Collaborate online session
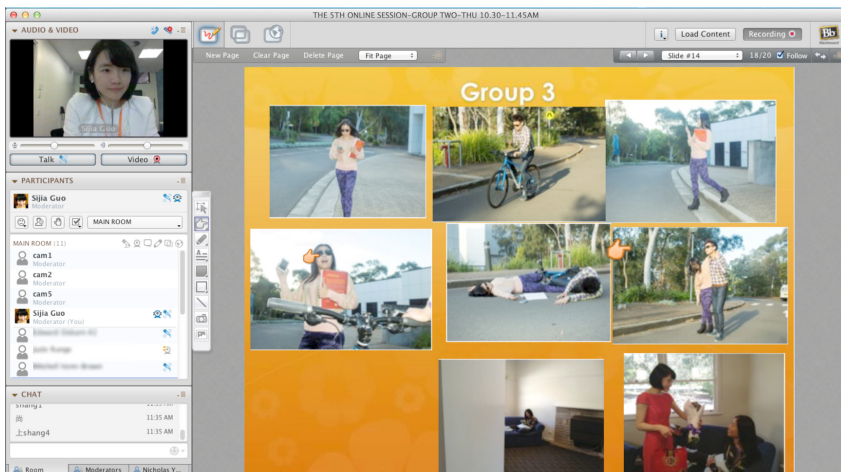
Blackboard Collaborate is a web conferencing tool that enables users to communicate with each other via video, audio, text chat, feedback tools (e.g. emoticons, raise-up hand and polling) and whiteboard (see Guo, 2013 for more details).

2.2. The tasks and data collection

Underpinned by interactionist SLA and sociocultural theories, the five collaborative tasks aimed at reinforcing vocabulary and grammar learning and at facilitating learners' communicative competence. Following the task typology proposed by Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun (1993), the five tasks included: two jigsaw tasks, two decision-making tasks and one information-gap task (see Table 2). Figure 1 is a snapshot of the jigsaw task-describing an accident.

Table 2. Summary of tasks and data collection

	Week	Task type	Topic
1	Week 2	Information-gap	Applying for a Chinese visa
2	Week 4	Decision making	Buying clothes and sending it to China
3	Week 6	Jigsaw task	Maps and showing directions
4	Week 10	Decision making	Planning for a trip
5	Week 12	Jigsaw task	Describing an accident

The participants' experiences of using Blackboard Collaborate and tasks were recorded through in-depth interviews, pre and post-session questionnaires.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Practicality

According to Chapelle (2001), practicality refers to the degree of easy implementation of a CALL task in a certain language teaching setting, including the availability of hardware and software, and the assistance offered by knowledgeable personnel to deal with any unforeseen issues. Findings from the interviews indicated that the affordance of Blackboard Collaborate was satisfactory to support the collaborative tasks completion.

The audio and video quality during the online sessions received positive feedback from the participants. However, echoing the findings in Wang's (2004) study, Internet bandwidth microphone quality was the major limitation. The installation and use of the software was easy and straightforward.

3.2. Language learning potential

Following Chapelle (2001), language learning refers to "the extent to which the activity can be considered to be a language learning activity rather than simply an opportunity for language use" (p. 55). Further, she differentiates language learning and language use as "the extent to which the task promotes beneficial focus on form" (p. 55). In the current study, language learning potential is measured by both focus on form and learners' improvement in Chinese and collaborative learning as below.

3.2.1. Focus on Form

In the follow-up questionnaires, the participants were asked to write down expressions, grammar structures and vocabulary they remembered in the online sessions. The answers primarily focused on grammar structures, vocabulary and certain expressions intensively used in the online sessions, such as "请再说一遍" (Please say it again); "…(English word) 中文怎么说" (How do you say … in Chinese?) "停，走错了！" Stop! You took the wrong way (in the 4th online session).

3.2.2. Improvement in Chinese

The data analysis of interviews and the follow-up survey indicated that the participants perceived that their Chinese proficiency had improved throughout the online sessions, particularly in listening and speaking. One student mentioned in the interview: "I think the fluency has been improved for certain. And also I'm being able to apply the grammar structures in practice. That's just a big thing for me".

3.2.3. Collaborative learning

Results from the interviews showed that the implementation of tasks in the web conferencing based online environment has great potential in stimulating collaborative learning. All the participants preferred collaborative learning rather than individual learning in the context of online language learning, which is contradictory to Wang's (2008) findings.

3.2.4. Learner fit

The participants' perceptions of task difficulty were varied depending on their Chinese proficiency, topic familiarity and task instructions. For example, Student

5 said, "I like the 3rd and 5th online sessions were straightforward and we know what to do. No much thought in deciding things". However, all of them admitted the tasks were challenging in a good way.

In terms of engagement, the majority of participants confirmed that they felt engaged in the online sessions. The participants' feedback suggested that learners' engagement increased when they were used to the online learning environment and higher academic rewards could make participation more attracting.

3.3. Authenticity

When designing the tasks, authenticity was one of the most important concerns. Certain topics, which might be closely related to the learners' real life, were selected. For example, applying for a Chinese visa to participate in a language exchange program, how to fill out a Visa application form; how to ask and show directions, go shopping, etc. In the interviews, all the participants confirmed that the tasks were practical in different ways. Particularly, one student reported her experience of applying the expressions in the 3rd session (showing directions) to help a Chinese lady take a train in Sydney.

3.4. Positive impact

The online sessions have shown a number of positive impacts on the participants, including:
- it created a less pressured environment to learn and practice the target language;
- learners felt more confident to use the target language;
- learners felt more confident to use technology to study a foreign language;
- the positive feedback and encouragement received from peers and the teacher made them feel more confident;
- learners felt they had more opportunities to study between lectures and tutorials.

4. Conclusions

This study proposed a set of criteria for evaluating the appropriateness of web conference-based collaborative tasks and provided empirical evidence of the implementation of the criteria from percipients' perceptions. The findings, which are context specific, showed that the web conferencing tool Blackboard Collaborate, and the five collaborative tasks designed for the particular teaching environment,

had great potential in stimulating learner-learner interaction, facilitating their SLA and learner fit.

We are aware of the limitations of the study. Firstly, the findings and arguments were based on the data collected from a small cohort. Secondly, all the participants were on-campus students. The results for distance learners might be different. Further studies should investigate a comparison of results of online tutorials for on-campus students and distance students.

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