Task and Tool Interface Design for L2 Speaking Interaction Online

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Abstract. Learners and teachers of a foreign language in online and blended learning environments are being offered more opportunities for speaking practice from technological developments. However, in order to maximise these learning opportunities, appropriate task-based materials are required which promote and direct student to student interaction in order to counter learners' possible reluctance to use new language structures in their target language (TL). This paper presents the provisional findings of a case study in which three groups of English as a foreign language (EFL) students worked synchronously (in Skype) in pairs with spot-the-difference pictures presented to them using three different formats: standard HTML format, the Tandem tool (a content management application which distributes the materials in real-time), and a variation of the Tandem tool interface which incorporates confirmation buttons aimed at providing a scaffold to the interactions. In order to contextualise the results from the three groups of learners, a group of native English speakers also carried out the tasks. Differences in the interactions were identified, particularly between the HTML format materials and the Tandem materials, mostly due to the fact that students were able to access both students' materials prior to the synchronous interaction, enabling them to prepare for the interactions in various ways, and in some cases, to script their conversations. Other differences were found in terms of the turn-taking, time spent on tasks, and the language used to complete the tasks.

Keywords: synchronous interaction, negotiation of meaning, videoconferencing systems.

1. Introduction

Providing contents for computer-mediated communication (CMC) in an L2 language learning context is a complex issue, particularly if communication is synchronous and oral. Pioneering telecollaborative projects have led the way in experimenting with new applications for CMC with the purpose of putting learners in contact with native

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speakers of each others' TL. These experiences provide evidence of the complexity of finding suitable contents to ensure a successful and sustainable collaboration (Mullen, Appel, & Shanklin, 2008; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). Online spoken conversation amongst language learners does not always flow easily: feelings of awkwardness, shyness about their L2 performance and nervousness about being able to understand their interlocutor are some of the issues students report. From a language learning point of view, conversations which are not guided or structured within a task format generally show high levels of avoidance with learners opting to speak about familiar topics they already feel comfortable with and not attempting complex structures beyond their level of interlanguage. Another source of complaint amongst students engaged in telecollaborative projects is not knowing what to talk about if left without enough guidance from their teachers. However, the positive effects of contact and collaboration with native speakers have also been reported, making the pursue for appropriate contents and formats a worthwhile endeavour.

In the context of face-to-face language teaching, lack of sufficient speaking practice often limits the progress learners of a foreign language can make and is a concern for teachers designing foreign language teaching programmes. Scarce contact teaching hours and high student numbers in the classroom may lead to insufficient qualitative opportunities for speaking interaction and the level of teacher feedback possible on interaction. In a distance learning setting, oral production and in particular speaking interaction have often been neglected in the past because of the technological limitations. This has changed with recent technological developments in the areas of VoIP (Voice over IP) and videoconferencing systems which facilitate online voice communication. Speaking interaction is now possible in online environments enriching both distance education programmes as well as face-to-face teaching, which is making increasing use of blended formats. It is at this point that attention should be turned to the lessons learnt from telecollaborative projects in relation to tool affordances and task design for activities involving CMC amongst learners, in this case, of the same TL.

In order to encourage students to use and experiment with new language forms, engage in negotiation of meaning and language use that can lead to learning, it is necessary to design tasks that challenge students and force them to use the language for a real communicative purpose, within a meaningful context working towards the production of a required outcome. Most of these tasks require learners to have access to different materials which will prompt a spontaneous conversation revolving around a negotiation while working together towards a joint outcome (Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993). We present a study which looks at the design of an application for managing contents distributed to learners while they are communicating synchronously online. This application, Tandem, building on the work initiated by Mullen et al. (2008) has been developed within the framework of the project SpeakApps, a European project funded with support from the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission.

We focus on the design of the interface and look into how elements of the interface can guide the conversation and act as a scaffold influencing the use learners make of their L2 in order to complete the task.

2. Method

The students who participated in this study were enrolled in an English as a foreign language online course at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), an entirely online distance university based in Barcelona, Spain. Students belonged to the same EFL subject of level B2.1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), a compulsory subject for their college degree. Their ages ranged between 26 and 55 and they were all native speakers of Spanish.

Three groups of these B2.1 students were selected to participate in the study carrying out an activity based on pictures and a number of variations of spot-the-difference and ranking tasks. For this study, students worked in pairs, communicated using Skype in order to carry out a number of speaking interaction tasks and made recordings of the conversations which were submitted to their teachers as part of the course requirements. In addition, a group of native English speakers also carried out the tasks so that patterns of interaction and language used during the tasks could be compared with those identified in the three groups of learners.

In one of the groups, students accessed the materials on a standard HTML format (38 students), the second group used the Tandem tool which distributes the materials in real-time (22 students) and the third group used a variation of the Tandem tool interface with confirmation buttons providing a scaffold to the conversation (22 students). The standard HTML format materials allow students to see their own materials as well as the task partner's materials beforehand. This format had already been used for the course for six semesters before this study took place and teachers have reported over the years that most students prepare for the task and even script parts of the conversation. The Tandem tool only distributes materials if both students are connected at the same time, which means students will never have seen the materials before connecting with their task partners online, with the purpose of prompting more spontaneous and natural conversation.

Data was gathered from a post-questionnaire which was sent to students in all three groups, the recordings of student performance, teacher interviews and entries made to support blogs. In this paper we report on the results of the post-questionnaires, teacher interviews and the analysis of the recordings of the first two of four tasks carried out: a spot-the-difference activity based on a picture related to the topic "Travelling" corresponding to a unit students had been working on prior to the oral task, and a discussion activity based on the same image used for the first task. Vocabulary, grammar, reading and listening activities have taken place as preparation before the oral task.

3. Discussion

Findings show that there is a clear difference between student performance using the HTML format materials and student performance using the Tandem tool, showing a startling difference in the naturalness and spontaneous use of L2. This was an expected result since we had evidence that students were looking at the materials and preparing beforehand, and the survey results confirmed this with over 60% of the students reporting they had done so. Students also reported being more nervous when working with the Tandem tool than with the HTML format materials. This is also an expected result since the HTML format allows the students to prepare beforehand whereas the Tandem tool requires a certain degree of improvisation and spontaneity which put additional pressure on students.

In relation to the difference between the interfaces in the Tandem tool with confirmation buttons for each identified difference, preliminary findings point to the fact that these buttons are helping students structure the conversation and spend more time on the task. These results are based on auditions of the recordings and measurements of time duration of the tasks.

In addition, we are currently undertaking an analysis of turn-taking in order to identify emerging patterns of tackling the task which determine different uses of L2.

4. Conclusions

The focus of the study is not on identifying which format is best, but rather on examining what skills, learning strategies and types of language are used for each format in order to inform decisions related to the inclusion of these tasks at different points of the course syllabus, or even considering whether these tasks are more appropriate for different levels of proficiency. From the results described above, it emerges that students engage in very different activities depending on the technology employed. With the use of HTML, preparation becomes a central activity in which students invest time and effort and during this process, they revise, consolidate previously seen language structures and vocabulary and even look up new forms. However, the actual speaking activity becomes a rehearsed and somehow unnatural conversation, particularly if, as on some occasions, students are reading the exercise from a previously prepared script, leading to students' focussing on the pronunciation of individual words instead of listening and responding to each other. This in turn has a negative impact on students' oral production in terms of various aspects of pronunciation such as intonation and the use of thought groups, fundamental for intelligibility. In most cases, what was originally designed as a speaking interaction activity becomes an alternation of oral production samples. Students who use the Tandem tool are closer to resembling natural interaction, often with shorter turns and a more natural use of transition relevant places

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