The effects of an online learning management system on students' academic socialization: a qualitative study on a Chinese graduate course

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Abstract. Blended learning which combines face-to-face instruction and online learning is increasingly important and pervasive in China. Guided by the theory of 'Language Socialization', the researchers explored the situated learning experiences of four Year 1 graduate students while they were adapting to the new academic environment through the graduate course of 'Second Language Acquisition' at a university in Beijing. In this course, a WeChat connected to the Blackboard learning system was used. Student-teacher interactions on the WeChat and Blackboard, classroom observations, and interviews were used for data collection. Results from four case studies illustrated that academic adaptation was a complex sociocultural phenomenon in which students gradually became competent members of the academic community. Moreover, Learning Management Systems (LMSs) were of great help for them in adapting to a new environment and developing negotiating competence in their new academic communities.

Keywords: blended learning, learning management systems, case studies, language socialization.

1. Introduction

Research on the use of LMSs suggest that the LMS had greatly influenced students' learning and educators' teaching (e.g. Rubin, Fernandes, Avgerinou, & Moore, 2010). An LMS can allow instructors and students to share study materials,

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submit and return assignments, and exchange ideas online. Many platforms, like WeChat and Blackboard, have been useful tools for Chinese students to study and communicate in recent years. Studies on these tools suggest that they had a positive impact on the students' learning (Liu, Wang, & Tai, 2016).

Early studies on language socialization have investigated how newcomers would be socialized in the community (e.g. Duff, 2010). However, many studies have ignored that the use of technology also has great impact on students' learning while they adapt to a new environment.

In this study, we explored the perceived benefits and actual use of an LMS by instructors and students at a university in Beijing. We did a one year research to find out how they adapted to the new environment of postgraduate education with the help of the LMS. To be more specific, we aim to answer the following questions.

- How do the Year 1 graduate students adapt to the new academic environment with the help of LMS?
- What are the similarities or differences in their academic adaptation experiences in the course of second language acquisition supported by the LMS?
- What are the emerging effects of the LMS on the participants' adaptation experiences?

2. Method

2.1. Contextual background and participants

The study was conducted in a graduate course of 'Second Language Acquisition' at a university in China. This course is a compulsory course for graduate students to explore major issues in second language acquisition and English teaching. The course aims to help students improve their academic competence and learn academic English more deeply.

We focused on four Chinese participants: Gary, Lee, Andy, and Maria. With the permission of the instructor and volunteers, one of the researchers observed the

participants in order to note their behaviors. The time span was from September 2018 to June 2019.

2.2. Research design

WeChat and Blackboard, which are regarded as learning resource centers, bulletin boards (posted messages or announcements), and chatrooms (exchanged ideas and provided group discussion), are the most popular learning and teaching tools in China (Wang, Fang, Han, & Chen, 2016).

The researchers conducted a multiple case study for one year. Data were collected from classroom observations, individual interviews, and interactive messages from WeChat and Blackboard (see Table 1). We took note of our observations. The interview data were first transcribed by the researchers and then double checked by the participants and the course instructor.

Table 1. Data collection

Method	Data collection period (September, 2018-June, 2019)	Data
Interviews with four participants	Interview 1: September 2018 Interview 2: December 2018 Interview 3: June 2019	Face-to-face interviews Total 12 interviews and 24 hours Audiotaped
Classroom observations	16 lessons in the first semester	32 hours of classroom observations Observation notes
LMS data collection		Handouts WeChat and Blackboard messages Online coursework

3. Results and discussion

Presented in this section are preliminary findings of the one-year study. During the first year of the participants' graduate studies, they all experienced a complex adaptation process and met different difficulties. The research data revealed two themes: peer effects and positive aspects of the online learning experience.

3.1. Peer effects

Academic adaptation is a dialogic and communal act that happens during the graduate studies (Seloni, 2012), so peer effects were evaluated within

different communities: members in the same academic groups, classmates, and supervisors. Their behaviors may have a positive or negative effect on the students (Krasilnikov & Smirnova, 2017). We analyzed the data mainly from the interactions on WeChat and Blackboard. In this paper, we took Gary and Andy as examples.

The main challenge for Gary to adapt to the new academic environment was his worries about the differences between his previous and present degree. Therefore, he had to ask his supervisor and senior students for help through WeChat so that he could be familiar with the new environment. Through three interviews, we found that what his classmates or roommates did may have had a great influence on him. He repeatedly said that he used these online tools to communicate with friends, classmates, and supervisors. He gradually began to adapt to the new environment. He said,

> "since WeChat is the main tool for us to communicate, my supervisor sends me tasks about academic papers, writing skills and revising feedback in almost every day. Frequent communication comforts me and helps me be familiar with the academic environment " (interview, 20/12/2018).

The interaction between students and peers indicates that a tight community will give individuals more support and help them adjust quickly to new academic environments. Andy's social network was very simple. She always communicated with her classmates through the online tools. Andy remarked as below:

> "My supervisor and senior students care little for me, and I always envy other classmates, because they can get a lot of help from them. The only way for me to get help and information is to ask my classmates for help. Sometimes, I feel unhappy" (interview, 22/12/2018).

From Andy's interviews, we found that whether the supervisor and senior students can give help has a big influence on her adaptation experiences. It seemed that her attitude toward her social community had affected her performance negatively.

3.2. Positive aspects of the online learning experience

Previous researches have shown that the LMS is a complementary alternative to traditional tools on teaching method. The focal participants all adopted positive attitudes toward mobile learning. Gary remarked as below:

> "I think it's very useful. It provides an easier and more convenient way to learn new knowledge. It's easy to control" (interview, 20/12/2018).

In addition, Andy stated,

> "generally, it's good. The teacher knows how to use the online tools more efficiently. If there are some pictures or files which cannot be printed on time, or some students sit away from the Blackboard, the teacher will use the mobile phone and send these materials to the WeChat groups immediately. She will also put some materials on the Blackboard platform for us to review. However, I think it is essential that teachers should guide the students to focus on the study materials" (interview, 22/12/2019).

The focal participants all experienced the traditional teaching style before they went to the graduate school. The online learning management system was a new attempt for them to adapt to the academic environment. They could get more academic information from the WeChat and Blackboard platforms, which helped them adapt to the academic environment quickly.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the online LMS had a positive influence on the students' adaptation to the new academic environment, and peers played a significant role in the participants' academic socialization. Our results suggest that it is worthwhile to investigate the ways of strengthening students' social networks. Data also showed that educators should look for the best ways of using the LMS.

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