# Implementing online discussion forums based on principled approaches

Heather Woodward[1] and Andrew Warrick[2]

**Abstract**. For three months, Japanese university learners (N=40) utilized the YoTeach! application by Pedagogic and Active Learning Mobile Solutions (PALMS) Project, PolyU as a part of their English discussion class. Researchers re-purposed the application, which originally was designed to be an online classroom backchannel, as an asynchronous, pre-task activity so that learners could exchange ideas about homework topics (e.g. university life, foreign customs) for their discussion. Researchers chose a backchannel chat room rather than a discussion forum to accommodate the learners' spoken interactions rather than formal discussion. To foster interactions, researchers implemented the YoTeach! application based on principles in the field of second language (L2) development and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) from Doughty and Long (2003) and Stockwell and Hubbard (2013). Using learners' and researchers' reflection journals, we consider ways we can connect and adapt the principles to our teaching context.

**Keywords**: CALL, YoTeach!, discussion, L2 development.

## 1. Introduction

Given that Doughty and Long (2003) and Stockwell and Hubbard (2013) mainly addressed different issues (i.e. language learning versus online environment implementation) we decided to separate their principles and address them in two research questions. Doughty and Long (2003) discuss optimal psycho-linguistic environments for online foreign language learning and offered teachers guidance by providing ten Methodological Principles (MP) of task-based language teaching for Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). They categorized 10 principles

1. Rikkyo University, Tokyo, Japan; heather.woodward@rikkyo.ac.jp; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2840-9305
2. Rikkyo University, Tokyo, Japan; andrewwarrick@rikkyo.ac.jp; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6399-2519

**How to cite**: Woodward, H., & Warrick, A. (2020). Implementing online discussion forums based on principled approaches. In K.-M. Frederiksen, S. Larsen, L. Bradley & S. Thouësny (Eds), *CALL for widening participation: short papers from EUROCALL 2020* (pp. 347-352). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.48.1212

into four groups (Table 1): (1) activities, (2) input, (3) learning processes, and (4) learners (Doughty & Long, 2003).

Table 1. Doughty and Long's (2003) MP for CALL

| Activities | Input | Learning Processes (a) | Learning Processes (b) | Learners |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MP1. Use tasks as the unit of analysis | MP3. Elaborate input | MP5. Encourage chunk learning | MP7. Provide corrective feedback | MP10. Individualize instruction |
| MP2. Promote learning by doing | MP4. Rich input | MP6. Focus on form | MP8. Respect learners' internal syllabi | |
| | | | MP9. Promote cooperative or collaborative learning | |

Stockwell and Hubbard (2013) discussed emerging principles for MALL and explained potential issues concerning the design and implementation of online language learning environments. We categorized Stockwell and Hubbard's (2013) principles into four groups (Table 2): (1) activities, (2) environment, (3) learning processes, and (4) stakeholders.

Table 2. Stockwell and Hubbard's (2013) principles of MALL

| Activities | Environment | Learning Processes | Stakeholders |
|---|---|---|---|
| Principle 7. Keep mobile learning activities or tasks short | Principle 2. Limit environmental distractions | Principle 1. Examine the affordances and limitations of mobile devices and learning environments in a principled way and connect these to L2 learning research and theory | Principle 4. Try mending learners' inequalities due to various technology inaccessibility issues |
| Principle 8. Task should fit the technology and environment and vice versa | Principle 3. Push, but respect boundaries | Principle 9. Train learners to use mobile devices for language learning | Principle 6. Be cognizant of learners' current uses of technology |
| | | Principle 5. Plan to accommodate language learning differences | Principle 10. Provide preparation and motivational support |

Our research questions are as follows: in what ways can researchers adapt (1) Doughty and Long's (2003) language teaching MP and (2) Stockwell and Hubbard's (2013) MALL principles of design and implementation to Rikkyo University's online discussion course using the YoTeach! application?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and settings

Forty participants at a Japanese co-educational university enrolled in a first-year compulsory English discussion course to increase spoken fluency, discussion skills, and communication skills. The course was twelve weeks and moved online due to COVID-19. Participants scored 480 to 679 on the TOEIC[3]. The purpose of the discussion course is threefold: increase student English speaking fluency, teach them discussion and communication skills, and broaden their understanding of important topics.

### 2.2. Procedure

YoTeach! is a free, online chat room created by PALMS PolyU to support collaborative mobile teaching and learning (PALMS, 2018). We created two online, YoTeach! chat rooms for 20 participants each, then taught participants how to use the app. We also used Blackboard, where we gave participants weekly reflective journal assignments, in which learners were asked to write at least two to three sentences about their experiences using YoTeach! for three months. Researchers also wrote weekly reflections for three months on how to connect, modify, and adapt Doughty and Long (2003) and Stockwell and Hubbard's (2013) principles.

### 2.3. Analysis

Weekly reflective journals from researchers and participants were examined using the qualitative method of thematic analysis. Our discussion was based on the interactions about chat and application use. We do not use the chat room as a direct source of data. We did use an inductive approach to thematic analysis insofar as we created themes after reading the reflections. Additionally, we did not analyze for underlying assumptions, but rather explicit reflections from researchers and learners. After reading the reflections, we highlighted interesting or prevalent

3. Test of English for International Communication

comments. Next, we created, reviewed, and named themes. Lastly, we connected those themes to principles created by Doughty and Long (2003) and Stockwell and Hubbard (2013).

## 3. Results and discussion

We adapted six of Doughty and Long's (2003) MPs: 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 10. We also added an output category. Additionally, we adapted three of Stockwell and Hubbard's (2013) principles: 1, 4, and 10.

### 3.1. Research Question 1: adaptations to Doughty and Long's (2003) principles

#### *3.1.1. Consider integrating applications with YoTeach!*

As a platform for student to student interaction, YoTeach! was not designed to evaluate L2 performance and development. We paired it with Blackboard to (1) provide corrective feedback, (2) help learners focus on form, and (3) individualize instruction (i.e. MP 6, 7, and 10). Feedback, focus on form, and individualized instruction improves learning outcome because students can identify areas that they can improve upon.

#### *3.1.2. Specify the number and types of interactions*

YoTeach! does not require a specified amount or type of interaction. However, interaction type matters because the discussion course evaluates learners not only on their ability to respond to questions, but also ask questions. We believe that specifying the interaction types improves the learning outcomes of participants because they use more language chunking and learning by doing (MP 5 and MP 2). We realized that task instructions should specify a minimum number of interactions and require more replies than questions to help decrease unanswered questions.

#### *3.1.3. Plan output rules for translanguaging and translation devices*

Participants needed to know when using Japanese and translation devices would be acceptable. We did not say, 'no Japanese', especially because our participants use Japanese to help other classmates learn about the L2. Some participants also expressed a desire not to overuse Japanese because they wanted to express their ideas in English. Given that we could not control whether they used translation

devices on YoTeach!, language instructors should teach learners how to reflect on aspects of the language that compelled them to use translation devices to promote learner autonomy. In this way, learners can improve their learning outcomes by noticing the gap between what they know and what they do not know about the language.

#### *3.1.4. Plan the extent to which the teacher participates*

In Asia, one disadvantage of teachers giving opinions is learners might be hesitant to disagree with or challenge their ideas. We did respond to some unanswered questions to promote more cooperative or collaborative learning (MP 9). YoTeach! does not highlight unanswered questions so these questions might go unnoticed by other learners and then ignored.

### 3.2. Research Question 2: adaptations to Stockwell and Hubbard's (2013) principles

#### *3.2.1. Change the purpose of the task if changes to the learning environment occur*

We originally wanted to incorporate YoTeach! assignments so that learners can have discussions outside of class, then with COVID-19, we flipped the classroom and YoTeach! tasks became pre-task planning for Zoom meetings (Principle 1).

#### *3.2.2. Anticipate and plan for application server crashes*

Several times the YoTeach! app crashed so learners submitted their work via Blackboard rather than on the application (Principle 4).

#### *3.2.3. Open communication channels with other teachers*

Open communication channels with other teachers to know the applications and programs they use in their courses. Participants stated that they spent too much time learning apps and programs that it would be better to limit the number (Principle 10).

#### *3.2.4. Pilot the application*

We re-purposed YoTeach! because we appreciated the shorter exchanges as it is more comparable to spoken discussion than discussion forums, but some

participants stated that the chatroom was not as organized as a discussion forum. It would be valuable information to know the application's original purpose when considering its affordances and limitations and then pilot it with other teachers, to gather ideas on the strengths and weaknesses of using it (Principle 1).

## 4. Conclusion

The main research findings were (1) teachers should consider app integration to give better form focus instruction, (2) create a guideline and activities for students to do when they use translation devices so that they can focus on the form they did not know, (3) anticipate app crashes by having a back-up plan so that students can continue to submit work, and lastly, (4) pilot the application before using it to see the strengths and weaknesses of the app. We recommend that other teachers also utilize these principles to improve the implementation and use of applications.

## References

Doughty, C., & Long, M. (2003). Optimal psycholinguistic environments for distance foreign language learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, *7*(3), 50-80. https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/10125/25214/1/07_03_doughty.pdf

PALMS. (2018). *YoTeach! (PolyU)*. Pedagogic & Active Learning Mobile Solutions Project. http://palms.polyu.edu.hk/educational-apps/yoteach/

Stockwell, G., & Hubbard, P. (2013). *Some emerging principles for mobile-assisted language learning*. The International Research Foundation for English Language Education. https://www.tirfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/TIRF_MALL_Papers_StockwellHubbard.pdf

Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net



**CALL for widening participation: short papers from EUROCALL 2020**
**Edited by Karen-Margrete Frederiksen, Sanne Larsen, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouësny**

**Publication date: 2020/12/14**



Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover theme by © 2020 Marie Flensborg (frw831@hum.ku.dk), based on illustration from freepik.com
Cover layout by © 2020 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-81-8 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

**Legal deposit, France**: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2020.