Developing Technological Literacy using Online Chat in English

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Introduction

The future for the United Arab Emirates includes creating a knowledge-based and technological society, so a key role for English language will be to support effective use of computers. Indeed, HCT's Graduate Outcome One (GO 1), Communication and information literacy, and Graduate Outcome Four (GO 4), Technological literacy, each require competence in Information Technology (IT). This paper analyses the use of synchronous communication (IT-mediated chat) in order to develop student familiarity with IT and student effectiveness in speaking and writing. A social constructivist view (Jonassen, Howland, Moore and Marra 1999) of IT is taken, and students' language production is analysed using a systemic functional approach (Halliday 1985). A qualitative analysis is also considered using Bachman and Palmer's (1996) communicative testing framework. The article explains how and why chat in WebCT can add to the repertoire of procedures to aid student learning and can contribute to the eventual achievement of the HCT Graduate Outcomes.

Working Towards Graduate Outcomes

The former director of the World Bank, Bruno Lanvin, stated recently that future jobs, productivity, creativity, competitiveness and wealth creation will depend on information technology (Lanvin 2007). He pointed out that education has to acquire value and content in order to diversify economies, and the engine of globalization is technology. Computer usage has to go beyond standard software and to have the capability of incorporating an ever greater percentage of the population.

These ideas are evident in HCT's Graduate Outcomes, the first of which states, in section 1.1, that graduates "demonstrate an appropriate level of competence in communicating information, opinions, concepts and ideas effectively in English through both spoken and written media to a variety of audiences" (HCT 2006:14) Similarly, GO 4 concerns the use of technology, and specifically, GO 4.2 outlines that graduates need "an appropriate level of competency in using technology to perform effectively in their personal and professional lives"

HCT already uses Web Course Tools (WebCT) as its preferred learning management system and whilst many online courses available to students are creative, a large number of such courses merely use the software to present information in a new way. In effect, students have the textbook on their monitors and so still have to learn from the textbook and from the teacher. However, a social constructivist view of learning would suggest that students must learn with the computer, not from the computer (Jonassen et al 1999). Meaningful learning comes through interaction with people and the development of shared knowledge. In an ever-changing world, knowledge is not gained from the teacher or the textbook but is found, developed, evaluated and analysed so that it can become personalised and "deep", rather than "surface" knowledge. Deep knowledge is going to be accessed and used in the future.
The Challenge

Teachers in HCT are expected to develop information literacy, English language skills and create a learning environment that prepares graduates for future employment or leisure activities. In reality, though, students can become bored in English courses since they have studied it for many years, have possibly reached a plateau of learning, and may well be accustomed to teacher-centered classrooms, rote memorisation and the fulfillment of exam or teacher tasks leading to a pass. As a result, students can be under-motivated and see little benefit to the learning process. In addition the exam system does not encourage broader learning objectives.

The Response

In order to inspire a class of low intermediate students, I decided to use synchronous communication, chat, to develop broader English language skills that I felt were lacking in my students. It is all too easy for English to be seen as an exam subject rather than a means for communication.

WebCT offers chat as one option for communication. However, many teachers view chat as something they try to stop students from doing (for example Richardson (2001: 8) complains about chat in Abu Dhabi Women's College), but I feel purposeful chat has pedagogic benefit. In the early days of networked computers synchronous communication (chat), researchers found that this activity stimulated students, allowed quieter students the chance to participate, and had a focus that is absent from face-to-face conversation and teacher-controlled writing classes (Bump 1987, Kelm 1995, Beauvois 1992, Underwood 1984, Chun 1994, Kern 1995 and Warschauer 1996). It is worth analysing in more detail what is going on when synchronous communication takes place.

The online chat process requires students to use the target language extensively and creatively. Students read, think, formulate, write and send messages to be read by other students in the class during the chat session. During such activities, language is acquired through use rather than learnt, grammar is used and therefore implicit, student contributions are original and thus "authentic". This is motivating for students as it develops fluency and accuracy on topics that they are interested in. Students who feel marginalised and who have no voice in face-to-face classrooms can interact and see value in their contributions. Nowadays most students and teachers have experience of chat and perhaps view it as a fun activity which detracts from learning. However, in a second language the mode offers a better pace to develop interactions. The new medium of chat changes the instructor role to one of facilitator and equal participant, typical classroom roles of "loud" and "quiet" are changed to roles based on typing speed and clarity and quality of thought. Students cannot be interrupted while typing so chunks of language, whether vocabulary or structures, can be attempted and then reviewed.

The vibrancy of online chat means that grammar has to reflect Halliday's (1985) approach of systemic functional grammar because language is actively used as a network of grammar systems. Halliday suggests that language is functional, in having a use, and meanings are important. At the same time, meaning does not have to be
sentence level, as vocabulary and grammar function within a system of meaning and comprehension. Certainly, our students may have experienced or learnt 'school' English which was aimed at correctness or 'display' of specific vocabulary or grammar, but they have not really used English. The choice of structural and lexical options when chatting produces meaning and communication. Grammar, which can include lexical appropriacy, becomes the resource that enables participants in the online environment to construct meaning. The chat environment forces students to actively deal with field, tenor and mode changes, where field refers to what is happening, tenor to who is taking part and mode to the function of language (Halliday and Hasan 1985: 12). In most language teaching situations these are controlled and hence our students become overwhelmed by genuine and authentic situations where they are unsure about what is happening, and cannot achieve the communicative goals they would like. I therefore suggest online chat gives practice that will enable effective communication skills.

Social constructivism (Jonassen et al 1999) suggests that human knowledge is natural and clear to those who have been trained and inculcated into it, and consequently knowledge is the invention of the particular culture. In education, course designers need to be aware that human action shapes technology but this does not mean that online courses should feed students the textbook in an alternative mode. Instead students should develop knowledge by using technology to interact with each other and to construct group language, ideas, grammar and lexis. In particular, online chat offers social actors symmetry and equal participation rights in the construction of language and thought.

Casual conversation can seem trivial, but it is a difficult skill for our students to build. Using Bachman and Palmer's (1996: 63) outline for language use, we can suggest that the students' strategic competence is affected by topical knowledge, language knowledge and personal characteristics. Language knowledge can be divided into organizational knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, syntax, phonology, graphology and also important in online chatting is a knowledge of rhetorical organization. As chatting involves communication goals, students need to know how to manipulate language in order to get people to do things, to control the flow of ideas and most importantly to use interpersonal functions effectively. Examples of interpersonal functions would be greetings, compliments, insults, humour and so on which our students need to perform in English.

**Examples**

In order to illustrate how relevant chat can be to language learning, I will use anonymised excerpts taken from the chat log. I will look at greetings and farewells, enquiries, humour, stories, candid truths and also the problem of 'flaming' which is aggressive behaviour online designed to intimidate others.

After the first chat session I looked at the script and saw greetings and farewells like these:

"hi every bady", "hi evrey bady", "hay", "bye banat", "bay shabay", "I whicic to chat with you again", "good good good bay".

This transcript revealed that students lack practise at both greetings and farewells. Basically greetings are taught in the first few classes and then in the teacher controlled
classroom the teacher says "good morning" and the students may or may not answer. Similarly, once the class ends, students and teachers head for the door muttering "see you". Online chat analysis revealed that my students would not fulfil social norms in greeting people, whether face-to-face or online. Given such poor first impressions, listeners are likely to hold a low opinion of our graduates' language abilities.

In the next few chat sessions I added more to my greetings rather than trying to get the students on to the tasks and I lingered on farewells, so I had better results after a few weeks:

"Hi everybody", "hi mariam how are you", "Hi Girls", "How are you today", "Goodbay goodbye", "b'bye", "I liketo say bay, bye sir", "okay b'bye", "see you on Tuesday".

In a similar way, the students' weaknesses in asking questions were evident. In most classes the teacher controls the conversation and so asks questions, with the result that students have difficulty asking questions and particularly do not ask each other questions. In the online world, the change in teacher role to one of an observer and equal participant means that students can ask each other and have to deal with the consequences. As an example, consider this exchange which appeared during chat about weekend plans:

Student 1 I will go to visit my mother
Student 2 Wher is your mother
Student 1 She don't live with me
Student 2 It's ok
Student 1 I live with my father
Student 2 I am sorry dear
Student 1 it's Ok...I took withe her evrey day

Student 2 is surprised because Student 1 is doing something (seeing her mother) that is unusual for Student 1 but very normal for Student 2. One of the problems with asking questions is of becoming nosy and transgressing social norms, so Student 2 tries to get out of the question and to apologise for being too inquisitive. She clearly has difficulties with social English. Student 1's phrase "I took withe her" needs to be understood as "I talk to her". Student 1 was open about her family situation and this is a feature of online chat; the mode allows a safe and a secure environment (at least, it seems to be only visible to other students and the trusted teacher) so students reveal things that they would not tell normally. For example, the following occurred during chat about names:

when i born my ancle come and he say for my father choes name _______ for your baby because i want to marry her for my sun

Amidst the grammar and the spelling mistakes, Student 3 has revealed that her name was chosen by her uncle because she would be his daughter-in-law. Clearly, Student 3 is caught up in the desire to communicate using the online mode and so reveals some personal detail. In addition, she went on to mention that her family often call her Mariam because that would have been her name before her uncle's suggestion.

Another example, this time from the topic of schooling, also revealed that strong feelings are raised:
when i was in the school i hit a zalamat teachers

This student has a phonetic-grammar confusion: she means to say "hate" but she probably hears "hit" and so makes the past of "hit". She wants to express that she hated "Zalamat" teachers, or teachers from rural areas of Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Her comment led to discussion, negation, negotiation, some irritation at her revelation and then clarification as to meaning.

Conversation cannot always be serious and if we are to enjoy chatting there has to be some comedy. Humour is difficult in a foreign language and the first example, coming from a chat session about childhood reveals this:

i never give the boys my toys only girls because the boys are gosts

This is an Arabic women's joke, based on the traditional white dishdasha worn by Arab men. It is not a particularly funny joke, but most people trying to raise a laugh in another language will translate from L1. It can be much harder to make a joke that makes sense in only one language, but during a chat session on the controversial Lebanese reality show "Star Academy", a student contributed:

i think some people are star acadenyholic

So based on workaholic, chocoholic and alcoholic the student has created a pun in English.

In addition to developing speaking skills, chat can be used to develop writing skills and whilst we were working on the topic of childhood memories a student wrote:

… my friend and i decided to played a joke, unfortunately my friend took the joke seriously then she cut my long hair, Afterthat when my mother saw me she punished me and she didn't allowed me to went with her again

The story concerned a bet which she lost and so had to cut her hair. This student used the chat session to reflect on an event, to try to explain it and to entertain the audience. Similarly another student, who began her story hesitantly and uncomfortably, revealed that she had asked for a chick on a farm visit when she was a child. She took the chick home and broke its neck and asked her mother for a new one. The class showed shock at this story. We were later able to correct the stories using the transcripts and produce these original, authentic, past tense stories as essays. I have no way of knowing if these students will ever use the story with its acquired grammar and vocabulary but if they did it would mean that the examiner is getting a more engaging tale of Emirati childhood memories.

Unfortunately neither face-to-face nor online communication is always rosy, and I had some examples of flaming. Firstly, a conversation on children led to presents for children, then punishments for children, at which point one wrote that she had had to clean her room when she had behaved badly. At which point she was flamed:

you know ____ I think your mother should give you avacume as present! So you can finish your work earlier
The notion of being given a vacuum cleaner as a present is aggressive and really killed the conversation. In another session one student remonstrated:

the egyptian people musn't talk!

As she perceives Egyptians to be dedicated and hard working, the writer wants the "swot" of the class to be quiet and allow less able students to chat. In both cases, a student is targeted. These students were unfortunately not "acting ethically when using technology" as Graduate Outcome 4.3 suggests, but such events of course present opportunities to learn from mistakes in a relatively safe environment.

Discussion

My procedure with WebCT chat was to prepare a topic by looking ahead in the textbook, adding appropriate readings as either classwork or homework, revising vocabulary and grammar. During the chat sessions, which I held every two weeks in class time, I found that the students were challenged by cohesive elements (field and tenor) in communication because the mode has threaded conversations that appear in chronological order. So responses to a posting may appear after a minute or two when there is another topic. The initial topic also changed; I have to admit that at first I wanted to keep students on topic, but I soon found that the most productive use of English language was as the students went off on other topics. As a result, their vocabulary and grammar resources were tested in impromptu, yet communicatively authentic, ways. This led to many subsequent questions when the class and I analysed the chat transcript. Every post-session analysis made students sit forward and explain why they had written comments and what they really meant.

Before class analysis, the chat transcripts (generated from WebCT) needed to be cleaned of student names and identification details and this was time consuming. Once that was achieved, however, there was great class interest in reliving the online conversations. Students asked questions about vocabulary gaps and circumlocutions, they quickly clarified typing mistakes versus serious errors in spelling, they saw phonetic gaps when their spelling revealed they heard and therefore spelt incorrectly. This mix of speaking and writing revision was also helpful to make me revise my own teaching materials in order to reflect not just the grammar or vocabulary topics but all the potential and related grammar and vocabulary that could be needed for successful online communication. In other words, I had to take a systemic view of grammar (Halliday 1985).

Reflection

Online contributions resembled "conversation in slow motion" (Beauvois 1992) as the students could 'speak' slowly but with increasing fluency and accuracy, which is just what many students need in English. Instead of responding to a textbook or to the teacher, students responded to each other in a social constructivist way as advocated by Jonassen et al (1999). There was also authentic communication in that there was humour, insults, changes of topics and so on, thus better communicative language use as defined by Bachman and Palmer (1996).
I would also suggest that regular chat sessions developed the generation of ideas, vocabulary and structures that students need for writing essays. All too often students do exams “cold” in that they suddenly have to write without time to scaffold or develop content, structures or vocabulary, but the process of online chatting allowed the development of ability. A final and unexpected benefit to my students was that of reading speed. Many of my students still move their lips as they read and this slows down both the number of words they can read per minute but also hinders comprehension. The students were very motivated to read peers’ messages quickly, to find the points made and to add their own comments. So they had to read quickly; in fact there were sometimes shouts in the class begging others to slow down their written contributions.

Conclusion

A brief summary of my research would suggest that the use of chat within WebCT has the benefit of motivating both the students and teacher. In many ways the regular use of chat made me revise my curriculum and course content and that was motivating. It also raised student awareness of their errors and gave them encouragement when the communication was successful. Chat develops students IT familiarity and also prepares them for the kind of technological literacy that is likely to be required in the future. As an aside, there are already colleges in the HCT system that use Windows Messenger, and other commercial companies use similar instant messaging systems. If HCT graduates are to develop technological literacy (GO 4), then they will need training, and I would suggest easily through WebCT chat, to use “technology to perform effectively in their personal and professional lives”. Chat also develops GO 1, as students build skills to communicate through written and spoken mediums. By using chat in English, a safe environment is created in which technological and language skills can be developed in a fun and yet pedagogically sound way.

References


HCT (2006) "The HCT Learning Model"


