The Discussion of Online Reading Forum Interaction from Sociolinguistic Perspectives

En-Hui Liao
Center of Language Teaching
WuFeng University

Abstract

This paper focuses on discussing how a group of doctoral students interact in an online forum which was specifically designed for academic discussion from sociolinguistic perspectives. Two major findings are found: 1) participants' written responses are more academic oriented. The words, structures, tones, and ways of organizing thoughts were more academic, and 2) through discussing academic issues on line, participants think in a higher level. The interaction among participants benefits learners to develop a higher level of cognitive skills to construct knowledge. In addition, the advantages of an online reading forum with designed problem solving tasks are discussed in this paper as well.

Keywords: online forum, sociolinguistics, knowledge construction

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is power. By means of reading, people synthesis the information, cumulate the information, interpret the information, and gradually, the information processed become personal knowledge. More than that, reading is not a one-way activity; it requires at least two-way communication to make the obtained information meaningful to readers. Readers decode the written text and try to associate the written information with personal experience. The written text is a representation of writers' thoughts and feelings. Therefore, reading involves readers, writers, and texts. The interaction among these three roles forms knowledge.

However, with the rapid-developed technology, the interaction has been gradually transformed from traditional two-way reading to multi-directional reading. Conventionally, there is only two-way communication between readers and written text. Nowadays, readers can easily confirm or revise their interpretation with on-line resources. In an online environment, readers have more options and opportunities to profound their readings. Readers can write to writers to ask questions, confirm some thoughts, or exchange ideas. Readers even can look for other readers' responses on the same piece of reading and see how their personal interpretations are different from others. Readers with same interests can form a reading club on line to discuss their thoughts and ideas periodically. As a result of on-line technology, the knowledge is not merely constructed by conventional ways of reading (which is reader-text relation), but with more resourceful and multi-dimensional ways.

As Kanka and Anderson (1998) point out that, multi-media has changed the communication into bi-directional, grouping, prompt, open, and agent oriented [8]. People no longer take input without having ways to interact with other medium; people can even talk to more than one people online in an open/public chat room, and get immediate responses. This new form of communication is carried out by an agent network.

Scholars such as Chen (2004) and Huang (2004) believe that by using multi-mediated network, learning can be promoted in different perspectives [2] [7]. With the focus of EFL learning, the availability of network helps learners to develop their language skills as well as building up the social interaction with one and other. Different task designs of online activities help to facilitate different forms of learning and therefore make the learning more student-centered rather than teacher-centered learning, and thus make the learning more

personal and meaningful [3].

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss findings of an online forum designed for academic discussion. The paper consists of a brief literature review of online reading club, and background information of the discussion forum, discussion and findings of the project, and conclusion.

2. Literature Review
2.1 ONLINE READING CLUB

The essential purpose of OnLine Reading Club (OLRC) aims on allowing a group of members to discuss and exchange their readings together and learn cooperatively in an online environment.   OLRC members can control their own learning space and time to participate in an online community.   The cooperative learning builds a social community among participants in the club.   The relationship between cooperative learning and social community promote the learning.   As suggested by Dewey and Vygotsky, learning is a social process. To be a member of a society enables the person to be educated.   The experiences obtained within the society forms one's learning. The learning does not come from others but derived from personal experience.   The community formed by OLRC functions the same providing a micro-social community which allows each individual to interact with other social components exist in society to construct personal knowledge. Dawson (2006) finds that in an online forum discussion, the interaction among different components promote the sense of community and that benefit the learning.   In online forum environment, learners interact with other learners and also interact with content.

Through the interaction process, the knowledge is constructed both interpersonally and intrapersonally.   Because of these benefits, teachers wish to reinforce the leaning by incorporate online forum into classroom teaching and make the learning more student-centered and diverse.

2.2 ON-LINE-READING-CLUB 3

On-Line-Reading-Club 3 (ORLC3) was designated to encourage students to exchange their points of views of selected issues in an online forum to reinforce students' understanding of subject content on a course titled as *Topics on Reading Comprehension Instruction* in a doctoral program at National Normal Kaohsiung University.

Students enrolled in this class were required to post their thoughts online and provide their feedbacks to their classmates.   Five doctoral students participated in online forum discussion.   20 issues provided by the instructor were available for students to choose upon their interests. 5 issues were selected after group discussion.   Each issue has several sub-topics for discussion. The five selected issues are as follows:

Issue 2: Getting to know readers and reader activities
Issue 8: Reading Miscue Analysis (Practice and Discussion)
Issue 9: Meta-cognitive Strategies in Reading
Issue 17: Bridging the Gap between Reading and Writing
Issue 19: Testing in Reading: A General Critique

Participants were free to respond to any sub-topic under selected issues. Participants posted their personal general response and responded to other classmates' responses periodically.   Responses were categorized as general response (GR) and peer response (PR). GR refers to the individual response to certain issue while PR refers to feedback to peer's GR.

3. Findings and Discussion

The information posted in OLRC3 were gathered and analyzed qualitatively in this paper. Findings can be generated with following two aspects: writing genre for academic discussion and Knowledge construction.

3.1 Writing Genre for Academic Discussion

The discussion forum of OLRC3 provided a space for participants to exchange thoughts relevant to class learning and discussion in an online space. The friendly environment should provide a more tense-free environment for discussion than face to face discussion [1]; therefore, the word usage and writing style would easily become more casual. However, since the forum is for doctoral students to discuss relevant research issues, the tones, words, structures, and ways of organizing thoughts were more academic rather than free discussion written format. Most participants tended to write in academic format in an online discussion forum. It is a common phenomenon for these participants to present their personal thoughts by starting with a main sentence as an opening sentence, and then followed by supporting sentences. The academic writing format is more salient in GR than in PR. Participants would paraphrase the statement they favored. With the emphasis of their beliefs, they elaborated their personal statement by using supporting sentences along with persuasive research information to back up their stance.

"Reading involves meta-cognition and specific reading strategies to decode the meaning of the reading text. As we all know, there are three levels of reading: reading the lines, reading between the lines, and reading beyond the lines." (Ph-1)

"People read for all kind of purposes. Some people read with a view to acquiring necessary knowledge in their jobs, while other people try reading to relax themselves."(Ph-2)

"In my opinion, the result of miscue analysis is, though subjectivity is inevitable, convincing to some extent. It is convincing because,…" (Ph-3)

*"Every individual reader reacts differently to a reading passage. The mental process that ultimately leads to the comprehension of the text is largely "se*asoned" by the reader's life experience and competence." (Ph-5).

From the above extracts obtained from ORLC3, it is clear that these participants have the tendency to write in academic writing format instead of casual forms. This could be suggested that written genres are strongly associated with social context. The institutional context requires participants to perform with social regulations [14]. The purposes of OLRC3, the institution it was in, and identity of participants form forms a specific social community and activates the specific form of discussion. The academic discussion forum used by a group of doctoral students to carry out after-class discussion tends to make the whole presentation academically oriented. Therefore, the restricted institutional context makes participants to express their GRs in academic form rather than colloquial forms of expression. It is the same in PR. Participants' PRs were usually followed by restating the main focuses of peer's GR, and then provide their PRs. It can be seen from the following extracts.

"Yes, if "dialect" is interpreted based on the provided information, dialect variation would not be major source for causing miscues. However, …" (Ph-1)

"It is true that when people feel the need to acquire knowledge for specific reasons, they will try to read in detail and look for the important information with much effort. On the contrary, …"(Ph-2)

"I agree that comprehension has something to do with experiences and competence. I also think that it has some relationship with interests."(Ph-3)

"I like the notion that Lois has brought up that "Each individual learns differently, and the strategies applied based on different types of tasks accordingly during cognitive process." To further extend this notion, …" (Ph-5)

The extracts here demonstrate that the respond genre tends to be academic in an online forum for academic discussion despite the online environment which reduces the tension for face to face discussion.

3.2 Knowledge construction

It is proposed that problem-solving tasks develop higher level of thinking [3] By solving tasks, one tries to hypothesize, analyze, and synthesize the peripheral information to think critically in order to solve the tasks. The personal experience of solving tasks makes a person's thinking to be developed to a higher level [6]. As a result of the personal experience, the knowledge is gradually constructed. In Constructivism perspective, knowledge is: (1) an organization of learner's exploration of the reality; (2) a function of how the individual creates meaning from his or her experience; (3) constructed through participation and interaction of the surrounding environment. The discussion in OLRC3 allows participants to construct the knowledge by organizing their personal exploration along with their existing knowledge to academic field to interact with other participants in an online community.

From the OLRC3, it is clear that all the participants use different thinking strategies, such as making comparison, contrast, synthesizing, and analyzing to respond to issues or peers. When respondent had similar stance with the issue statements or their peers, the respondent usually applied comparison and analyzing strategies.

"Learning is an ongoing process. As a human nature, we constantly seek a better way that helps us do things in a more effective and efficient manner. So as reading! When learners consciously found that the techniques in current use fail to aid or facilitate the learning process, a change is called for .I think that metacognitive strategies are related to one's motivation to some extent. If one's learning motivation is high enough, …. They not only want to learn the task but also to find ways to learn the task in a better way. As a result, what need to be mentioned is that besides instructing learners how to use strategies, it is as well important to help learners to build learning motivation." (Ph-3)

From the example, the participant makes comparisons of two statements by providing personal interpretation and analysis regarding to the issues/proposed statements.

On the contrary, when a respondent's point of view is different from the statement of issues or others, he/she would propose his/her ideas by first making contrast and then synthesizing two different points of view. The extract below is Ph-5' PR responded to Ph-2's GR. Since Ph-5's proposition was different from Ph-3, he made contrast and later on synthesized the pro and cons of two different points of view.

" Krashen's idea of voluntary and extensive reading assumes the firm existence of learners' motivation and interests. In fact, many English, particularly EFL learners are being persecuted by low motivation and lack of interest in the available sources for reading practice. Ultimately, nothing is attractive to learners anymore .... Therefore, the very fundamental issue that drives learners to read and, consequently, to write extensively is the learners' understanding of the goal of learning the language. In other words, they must clearly know why they make efforts to obtain this skill. And once the goal of learning has been located, their interests should be broadened either by instructors' encouragement or by their own sense of preference." (Ph-5)

By using different thinking strategies, knowledge is cumulated and constructed in different ways. Participants not only exchanged their ideas in OLRC3, PRs make the discussion interactive and provide each other opportunities to think from different perspectives. All the inferential components provided in an online discussion environment (OLRC3) enable participants to organize, share and exchange their thoughts to construct their academic knowledge.

Moreover, through different types of interaction, participants, revise, revisit, or reflect one 's own learning. According to Burr and Dawson (2003), interactions in an online forum can be categorized into three types: learner-learner interaction, learner-content interaction, and system interaction. Learner-learner interaction refers to the interaction among peers while leaner-content interaction refers to the interaction among learner and learning content and teacher. The learning content includes learning material, learning tasks, and environment. The first two require participants' contribution while the last requires none. From previous studies, learner-learner and learner-content interaction facilitate the learning as a result from participants' contribution in an online forum discussion [4] [5]. The responses participants receive from or provide to peers or relevant correspondents benefit learners to develop a higher level of cognitive skills to construct knowledge.

"It seems that Dovy and Lois are in support of the close mutual impact of reading and writing. I would like to propose an issue regarding the skills the reader/writers may use during their reading/writing task. ...." (Ph-2)

Student Ph-2 echoed to his peers but furthermore elaborate the idea by providing other information. The information serves as reflection for his acquired knowledge. The interaction between peers allows participants to revisit and reflect one's prerequisite knowledge to examine its value and meaning to oneself. As Smith points out, when information has been revisit and reevaluated in a meaningful context, the information becomes knowledge stored in a long-term memory.

4. Conclusions

From perspective of sociolinguistics, knowledge building should be developed collectively within a society rather than isolated learning. Social interaction is vital in knowledge construction. The interactions occurred in a community provide different stimulus for people to develop cognitive skills to cope with different situations. Therefore, many teachers incorporate cooperative learning/collective learning activities in classroom to facilitate the knowledge development. However, there are some limitations of in-class discussion, for example, face-to-face tension, time limitation, and insufficient chance for revision and reflection [10] [12]. With the advantages of cooperation, online forums provide an environment for learners to build up their knowledge without time constrain, space limitation, tension for immediate response in face-to-face communication. Online forum allows learners to demonstrate their knowledge in a more flexible, free, and relaxing

atmosphere.   Learners can have more time to reflect to their or others response and provide comments/feedback to others. Knowledge is gradually generated through interactions in an online forum environment [14].

To sum up, the designed online reading forum for academic purposes has the following advantages: 1) knowledge is constructed and cumulated from peer discussion, 2) the tension-free interaction that allows for presenting different propositions makes participants to synthesize thoughts from various perspectives, 3) the student-centered online forum facilitates autonomous discussion, and 4) the interactions between peers and contents allow the learning to be cooperative, initiative, autonomous and reflective.

References

[1] Bishop, G., & Doiron, G. Using online forums as a replacement for face-to-face discussion groups.   C*entre for Development of Teaching and Learning,* 22 (7), 1-3, 2004.

[2] Chen, H.-J. Web resources for English vocabulary teaching and learning. In the proceeding of the conference on ELF and E-learning in Electronic Age: Issues and Alternatives, Tamkang University. Taipei County, Taiwan, R.O.C. 2004.

[3] Cheng, Y-L. A homepage-based problem solving project. 高師大學報. 10:229-252, 2001.

[4] Dawson, S. Online forum discussion interactions as an indicator of student community. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 22(4), 495-510, 2006.

[5] Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T. & Archer, W. Critical thinking, cognitive presence and computer conferencing in distance education. *The American Journal of Distance Education,* 15(1),7-23, 2001.

[6] Hannafin, M., Land, S., & Oliver, K. Open learning environments: Foundations, methods, and models. In C. M. Reigeluth (Ed.), Instructional-design theories and models (Vol. II). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1999.

[7] Hung, P. A corpus study of lexical aspect and its influence on Taiwan English learners' underuse of English past tense markings. In the proceeding of the conference on ELF and E-learning in Electronic Age: Issues and Alternatives, Tamkang University. Taipei County, Taiwan, R.O.C., 2004.

[8] Kanka, H., & Anderson, T. Online social interchange, discord, and knowledge construction.   The Journal of Distance Education, 13(1), 57-74,1999.

[9] Li, Q. Would we teach without technology? A professor's experience of teaching mathematics education incorporating the Internet. EducationalResearch (NFER), 45(1), 61-77.

[10] Li, Q. (2004). Knowledge building Community: keys for using online forums. TechTrends, 48 (4):24-29, 2003.

[11] Merryfield, M. The paradoxes of teaching a multicultural education course online. Journal of Teacher Education, 52(4), 283-299, 2001.

[12] Schrire, S. Knowledge building in asynchronous discussion groups: Going beyond quantitative analysis. *Computers and Education,* 46(1), 49-70, 2006.

[13] Smith, T. (2001). Asynchronous discussions: Importance, design, facilitation, and evaluation. Retrieved from http://www.ion.illinois.edu/pointers/2002_11/page1.html , May 10, 2003.

[14] Wallace,C. Reading, Oxford University Press, New York.,1992

Appendix

5　selected issues for OLRC 3

Issue 2. Getting to Know Readers and Reading Activities
1. Different types of readers vary their reading activities for different purposes.
2. They change shape of literary response.

Issue 8. Reading Miscue Analysis (Practice and Discussion)
1. Is dialect variation involved in the miscue?
2. Is a shift in tone involved in the miscue?
3. To what extent do linguistic cues influence reading?
4. To what extent do redundant cues influence reading?
5. To what extent do a reader's prior knowledge or life experiences influence his own reading?
6. To what extent the social interaction between a T and a S in classes or in interviews influence the miscues of the S?
7. To what extent is the result of the miscue analysis convincing?

Issue 9. Meta-cognitive Strategies in Reading
1. Meta-cognition refers to knowledge about cognition and regulation of cognition (Flavell, 1979).
2. Meta-cognition refers to planning, monitoring, evaluating and revising strategies (Brown, 1987).
3. Meta-cognitive strategies include thought mapping, Think-aloud, Self-questioning, Summarizing, RAR (Read, Ask and Paraphrase, (Schumaker, et al. 1984)), etc.

Issue 17. Bridging the Gap Between Reading and Writing
1. Reading practice and writing practice reinforce one another.
2. A person usually plays duel rules, including a writer and a reader, when revising his writing piece.
3. Many activities combine reading and writing together, such as a reading cycle, a writer cycle, guestbook on-line or discussion on-line.

Issue 19. Testing in Reading: A General Critique
1. Many variables of testing influence the real effects on a test.
2. Testing should be a means to diagnose the strength and weakness of reading of students rather than the end of reading instruction.
3. Tests should test what students learn rather than what they know.
4. The citizen general English proficiency test is a normal assessment of English proficiency for students in Taiwan.