Applying Web-conferencing in a Beginners’ Chinese Class

Sijia Guo
Department of International Studies
Macquarie University

The development of new technologies and the falling cost of high-speed Internet access have made it easier for institutes and language teachers to opt for different ways to communicate with students at a distance. The emergence of videoconferencing applications, which integrate text, chat, audio/video and graphic facilities, offers great opportunities for language learning through the multimodal environment. This paper reports on initial data elicited from a pilot study of using web-conferencing in the teaching of a first year Chinese class in order to promote learners’ collaborative learning. Firstly, a comparison of three conferencing tools was conducted to determine the pedagogical value of the web-conferencing tool-Blackboard Collaborate. Secondly, the evaluation of 10 campus-based Chinese learners who conducted three one-hour online sessions via the multimodal environment reveals the users’ choice of modes and their learning preference.

Keywords: Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), online Chinese teaching, web-conferencing

Introduction and background

For course designers, developing effective language teaching environments are mainly based on Second language acquisition (SLA) theories. The same is true of the development of computer-assisted language learning (CALL). Nowadays, with the rapid development of online teaching technology, and escalating bandwidth capabilities (Hrastinski, 2008), Internet-based synchronous videoconferencing applications are available for teachers use to overcome the geographical challenges of students at a distance and real time oral and visual communication (Wang, 2008). However, applying synchronous communication tools in teaching practice does not automatically lead to successful acquisition since there are other factors involved in the process of interaction (Hauck, 2007; O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Pelletieri, 2000). As a consequence, there is an urgent need to investigate the influence of the new technologies on students learning experience and to evaluate the pedagogical value of the web-conferencing tool from both the learners’ and instructors’ perspectives. This study aims at trialing the web-conferencing platform- Blackboard Collaborate and to find out the answer to the following questions: what are the technological capability and pedagogical values of Blackboard Collaborate? What are the users’ evaluations of the tool and what are their learning preferences?

Literature review

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and Distance Language Education (DLE)

During the last decades, DLE has experienced dramatic changes and shifts in its delivery approach from tailored materials and one-way interaction tools to multimodal tools. In consonance with this, the research focus has also shifted from learner independence to collaborative learning (Hampel, 2012). This has resulted in the significant development of CMC, which has been transformed from predominantly asynchronous written communication to synchronous multimodal communication (Stockwell, 2007). During the last decade, audio/videoconferencing tools (e.g., Skype, Flashmeeting, Elluminate, Blackboard Collaborate, Netmeeting, BigBlueButton, etc.) have become available and accessible for language instructors. The current literature has shown that
videoconferencing applications have a great potential in stimulating learner-to-learner interaction (Wang, 2004), facilitating collaborative learning (Bower, 2008; Wang & Chen, 2012) and increasing learners motivation and learning outcomes (Jauregi & Bañados, 2008)

**Multimodality**

There have been a number of researchers who have advocated the application of the combination of different modes in CALL and suggested its strong usefulness in language learning and teaching (Jewitt, Kress, Ogborn, & Tsatsarelis, 2001). Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) defined multimodality as:

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the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined—they may for instance reinforce each other [...], fulfill complementary roles [...] or be hierarchically ordered (p. 20). They further give the definition of communication as “a process in which a semiotic product or event is both articulated or produced and interpreted or used” (p. 20, emphasis in original).
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Multimodality not only offers several parallel channels of access to information, but also offers a platform that allows users to interact and to manipulate these representations. Although an increasing number of studies focus on multimodal environments, such as audio/videoconferencing applications, “there is a lack of research that examines the impact of this combined use of tools on interaction and analyses multimodal communication in an online language classroom” (Hampel & Stickler, 2012, p. 119). This pilot study will identify the pedagogical values of the web-conferencing tool Blackboard Collaborate by comparing it with other popular conferencing applications, and provide in-depth sight on learners’ evaluation of the multimodal environments.

**Context: applying web-conferencing in beginning Chinese teaching**

As a partnership program of the Faculty Partnership Program (FPP) Project “Developing online capacity in Introductory Chinese Language Units” at Macquarie University, the unit CHN104 Introductory Chinese 1 was chosen to participate in the Learning and Teaching Centre’s (LTC) Blackboard Collaborate pilot for Session 1 2013. This allowed the unit to integrate the videoconferencing tool—Blackboard Collaborate into the iLearn (Moodle) system to develop capacity and pave the way for applying videoconferencing into Chinese teaching at a distance.

In the first semester 2013, the internal students of CHN104 were introduced to Collaborate via a one-hour online training session in week 4. Following the training sessions Collaborate was used in week 7, 9 and 11 for additional one-hour online tutorials. In the one-hour session, warm up activities were conducted in the main room moderated by the tutor. After that, students were allocated to breakout rooms in binaries or triads to accomplish collaborative tasks with partners. In the end, everybody was brought back to the main room and presented their work, followed by the tutor’s feedback and corrections.

**Methodology**

This study aims at evaluating the multimodal platform—Blackboard Collaborate in the context of beginning Chinese class. A qualitative approach was adopted, proposed by Debski and Levy (1999), Warschauer (2000), and Mercer, Littleton and Wedgerif (2004), to generalise the learners’ reviews of Collaborate and their preference of difference modes through participant observation, individual interviews and focus groups. There were 10 first year Chinese language learners at Macquarie University participated in the study; two fortnightly online sessions were conducted. In addition, a comparison of three videoconferencing tools was conducted to identify the technological capability pedagogical value of Blackboard Collaborate (see Figure 1) in online language learning and teaching.
Results and discussion

Comparison of conferencing tools

In order to determine the pedagogical value of Blackboard Collaborate in promoting collaborative learning, comparisons with Flashmeeting, Skype (free and paid version) were conducted. Flashmeeting is a web-conferencing system designed by the Open University. Blackboard Collaborate and Flashmeeting both fall under the category of web-conferencing. Skype is a popular desktop videoconferencing software. It can be seen from Table 1 that Collaborate has various features that support collaborative learning at a distance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Web-conferencing tools</th>
<th>Desktop videoconferencing tools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Software type</td>
<td>Blackboard Collaborate9</td>
<td>Flashmeeting10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Web-based</td>
<td>Web-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simultaneous user capacity</td>
<td>No participant limits</td>
<td>Up to 25 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio support</td>
<td>Up to 6 simultaneous speakers</td>
<td>1 user can speak at a time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video support</td>
<td>Up to 6 simultaneous webcams</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polling</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emoticons</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen sharing</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recording capabilities</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Plug-in (Evaer) 13 is needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send files</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakout rooms</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training requirement</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Very Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Comparison of Three conferencing systems (September, 2013)

9 https://www.blackboard.com/Platforms/Conferencing/Blackboard-Collaborate.aspx
10 http://cmm.open.ac.uk/projects/flashmeeting/
13 http://www.evaer.com/

30th ascilite Conference 2013 Proceedings
Learners’ evaluation

In the interview and focus group, students were asked about their preferences of different modes and users’ experience with Collaborate. Their average rating of Collaborate was 8/10. The main challenge of using Collaborate during the three online sessions was the audio lag (especially in week 9) but by week 11 this had improved. Interestingly, their most frequent used mode was audio rather than video. Their explanation was because they already knew each other from class, whereas, they perceived that it was necessary for the tutor to use the video. Their second favorite modes was the whiteboard, which was essential for online session since it helped students with recognition of the Chinese characters and provided an opportunity to type the characters instead of writing them as they would in class. Some of them also mentioned the raise-up hand button was helpful since it can easily gain the moderator’s attention and also comes with a number indicating the order of the waiting queue. “It was a more civilised way instead of everyone just talked at the same time” (quoted from the focus groups). When they were asked to compare the main room and breakout rooms activities, all of them preferred the main room with the reason of they feel more comfortable with tutors assistance. In the end, all of them expressed that they would like to continue with online sessions next semester since they find them engaging and helpful to their Chinese learning in terms of speaking, listening and Chinese character recognition.

Conclusion

This study illustrates the implementation of a web-conferencing tool in first year Chinese language teaching. As part of the pilot study, only the initial data was analysed and interpreted. A more in depth evaluation of quantitative and qualitative data will be conducted and reported in the near future. We are aware of the limitations of this study, in which all the participants are campus-based students. Therefore, their perspectives and concerns might be different from distance learners, for example, they didn’t consider visual communication as an important aspect of online sessions. However, since oral-visual interaction plays a key role in DLE (see Wang, 2008), we assume that external students would be inclined to use the video function. To optimise the web-conferencing tool to foster collaborative language learning, and to meet the needs of students with different learning preference and strategies, more research is needed in terms of task design, communication pattern in multimodal environments, learners’ strategies, learners and instructors training.

Reference

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**Author contact details:**
Angeline Sijia Guo, Sijia.Guo@mq.edu.au


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