



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 to 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; Pellettieri, 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:

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).

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.



Figure 1: Blackboard Collaborate screen shot

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

Name	Web-conferencing tools		Desktop videoconferencing tools	
	Blackboard Collaborate9	Flashmeeting10	Skype11 (Free version)	Skype Premium12 (Paid version)
Software type	Web-based	Web-based	Install software	Install software
Simultaneous user capacity	No participant limits	Up to 25 people	One-to-one	Up to 25 people
Audio support	Up to 6 simultaneous speakers	1 user can speak at a time	Up to 25 people	Up to 25 people
Video support	Up to 6 simultaneous webcams	√	One-to-one	Up to 10 simultaneous webcams
Polling	√	√	×	×
Emoticons	√	√	√	√
Screen sharing	√	√	One-to-one	Group screen sharing
Recording capabilities	√	√	Plug-in (Evaer) 13 is needed	Plug-in (Evaer) is needed
Send files	√	√	√	√
Breakout rooms	√	√	×	×
Training requirement	Medium	Low	Very Low	Very Low

9 <https://www.blackboard.com/Platforms/Collaborate/Products/Blackboard-Collaborate.aspx>

10 <http://cnm.open.ac.uk/projects/flashmeeting/>

11 <http://www.skype.com/en/features/>

12 12 <http://www.skype.com/en/premium/?intcmp=CS-Upsell-FA10868-3>

13 <http://www.evaer.com/>

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

- Bower, M. (2008). *Designing for interactive and collaborative learning in a web-conferencing environment*. (PhD), Macquarie University. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.14/26888>
- Debski, R., & Levy, M. (1999). *WORLDCALL: Global Perspectives on Computer-Assisted Language Learning*. Lisse: SSwets & Zeitlinger.
- Hampel, R. (2012). Multimodal computer-mediated communication and distance language learning. In C. A. Chapelle (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hampel, R., & Stickler, U. (2012). The use of videoconferencing to support multimodal interaction in an online language classroom. *ReCALL*, 24(02), 116-137. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S095834401200002X>
- Hauck, M. (2007). Critical success factors in a TRIDEM exchange. *ReCALL*, 19(02), 202-223. doi: [doi:10.1017/S0958344007000729](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344007000729)
- Hrastinski, S. (2008). Asynchronous and synchronous E-learning. *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, 31(4), 51-55.
- Jauregi, K., & Bañados, E. (2008). Virtual interaction through video-web communication: A step towards enriching and internationalizing language learning programs. *ReCALL*, 20(02), 183-207. doi: [doi:10.1017/S0958344008000529](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344008000529)
- Jewitt, C., Kress, G., Ogborn, J., & Tsatsarelis, C. (2001). Exploring learning through visual, actional and linguistic communication: the multimodal environment of a science classroom. *Educational Review*, 53(5-18). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131910123753>
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal Discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication*. London: Arnold.
- Mercer, N., Littleton, K., & Wegerif, R. (2004). Methods for Studying the Processes of Interaction and Collaborative Activity in Computer-based Educational Activities. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 13(2), 195-213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759390400200180>
- O'Dowd, R., & Ritter, M. (2006). Understanding and Working with 'Failed Communication' in Telecollaborative Exchanges. *CALICO Journal*, 23(2), 623-642. <https://doi.org/10.1558/cj.v23i3.623-642>
- Pellettieri, J. (2000). Negotiation in cyberspace: The role of chatting in the development of grammatical competence. In M. Warschauer & R. G. Kern (Eds.), *Network-Based Language Teaching: Concepts and Practice* (pp. 59-86). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139524735.006>

- Stockwell, G. (2007). A review of technology choice for teaching language skills and areas in the CALL literature. *ReCALL*, 19(02), 105-120. doi: doi:10.1017/S0958344007000225
- Wang, Y. (2004). Supporting synchronous distance language learning with desktop videoconferencing. *Language Learning & Technology*, 8(3), 90-121.
- Wang, Y. (2008). *Distance Language Learning and Desktop Videoconferencing: A Chinese Language Case Study*. Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller.
- Wang, Y., & Chen, N.-S. (2012). The collaborative language learning attributes of cyber face-to-face interaction: the perspectives of the learner. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 1-20. doi: 10.1080/10494821003769081
- Warschauer, M. (2000). On-line Learning in Second Language Classrooms: An Ethnographic Study. In M. Warschauer & R. Kern (Eds.), *Network-based Language Teaching: Concepts and Practice* (pp. 41-58). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139524735.005>

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the students who participate in this study and the members of our FPP project at Macquarie University.

Thank you for your contributions.

Author contact details:

Angeline Sijia Guo, Sijia.Guo@mq.edu.au

Please cite as: Sijia Guo, A. (2013). Applying Web-conferencing in a Beginners' Chinese Class. In H. Carter, M. Gosper and J. Hedberg (Eds.), *Electric Dreams. Proceedings ascilite 2013 Sydney*. (pp.345-349) <https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2013.1494>

Copyright © 2013 Angeline Sijia Guo.

The author(s) assign to ascilite and educational non-profit institutions, a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction, provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author(s) also grant a non-exclusive licence to ascilite to publish this document on the ascilite website and in other formats for the *Proceedings ascilite Sydney 2013*. Any other use is prohibited without the express permission of the author(s).