

How Do ESL Learners Talk and Interthink in Asynchronous Online Discussions?

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Abstract

Education in the post-pandemic era is presented with prospects to reconfigure the mode of teaching and learning with the affordances of technology. Despite the prominence of classroom talk and its associations with students' thinking, little is known about such effects when talk is conducted in a purely asynchronous online context among students and teachers who learn English as L2. The current study explored how Hong Kong ESL learners talk and think together using a micro-blogging tool, Padlet. Twenty-five students from a HK secondary school were recruited to post their individual views on news articles before engaging in open-floor discussions about their opinions. They were then asked to write a short self-evaluation on their discussion process and evaluate their talk. The Scheme for Educational Dialogue Analysis was adopted for coding written contributions while thematic coding was adopted for oral transcriptions for analysis. Results showed that the online talk had short turn-taking and was dominated by reasoning and questioning. However, this type of online talk exposed students to a wider range of views and future learning opportunities. It also promoted the depth and breadth of their thinking and triggered internalisation of co-constructed ideas for individual production with a heightened sense of self-evaluative awareness. Based on these salient findings, the significance of learning via online talk is identified. It is also recommended that self-evaluation should be integrated in the learning process to facilitate students' interthinking.

Keywords: Asynchronous Online Discussion, Interthinking, Mixed Methods, ESL

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Introduction

The need for online teaching and learning since the pandemic has provided greater affordances for technology and distance learning. One such form of distance learning within language instruction involves asynchronous online discussions (e.g. Wang & Woo, 2007). The study herein, as part of a larger study on students' online talk and thinking, presents preliminary results on how English as a Second Language (ESL) learners talk and interthink in asynchronous online discussions in a Hong Kong (HK) secondary school classroom.

Literature Review

Classroom talk has been well-established in the field of education. In the past decades, studies have looked into the effects of classroom talk on content instruction (e.g. Mercer, Dawes, & Staarman, 2009) and the process of learning (e.g. Edwards-Groves, Anstey, & Bull, 2014), specifically how learners think and co-construct knowledge (Atwood, Turnbull, & Carpendale, 2010). Existing literature has attempted to characterise and categorise the types of classroom talks that contribute to learning according to talk features (Mercer, 2010). One such categorisation is offered by Littleton and Mercer (2013), who contended that classroom talk included cumulative, disputational, and exploratory talk, with exploratory talk offering the greatest potential in learning as it allows interlocutors to build ideas upon each other in a constructive manner.

Drawing from the tenets of exploratory talk, scholars have also attempted to study the effectiveness of talk in relation to students' thinking, particularly the notion of interthinking (Knight & Littleton, 2015), which concerns the collective thinking process and idea engagement through talk between interlocutors (Pantaleo, 2007). For example, Mercer, Hennessy, and Warwick (2019) studied how learners were encouraged to use language to think together for better text comprehension with the use of the Kate's Choice software. The results indicated that students were able to offer reasons, critically engage, and evaluate alternatives in the discussion, which demonstrate features of exploratory talk. Yet, most existing studies have yet to focus on the student talk and thinking within asynchronous online discussions, nor have they explicated, in great detail, how interthinking is brought about through online discussions, as opposed to using technology to stimulate face-to-face discussions. The present study hence posits the following research question: How do HK ESL learners talk and interthink in asynchronous online discussions?

Participants

The study adopted purposive sampling in order to identify participants that had similar characteristics as other HK students. In total, twenty-five ESL learners from a HK secondary school participated in the study. The group of students, aged 13 to 14, were of mixed gender. All students belonged to the same Year 8 English class. Therefore, they had similar levels of English proficiency, which facilitated data comparison.

Methodology

At the start of the study, participants were asked to share their individual views on news articles via a micro-blogging tool, Padlet. They would then read others' posts and participate in open floor discussions, which took the form of asynchronous online discussions. They then wrote a piece of self-evaluation on this experience.

With regards to data analysis, on the one hand, the Scheme for Educational Dialogue Analysis framework proposed by Hennessy et al. (2016) was adopted to analyse the online discussions by learners. On the other hand, thematic coding was used to analyse the self-evaluations of participants.

Results

The results revealed the enormous potential of asynchronous online discussions in promoting learner development and thinking. To start with, the breadth and depth of students' thinking was promoted through exploratory talk. Participants stated that the mutual questioning during online discussions helped them broaden and widen their ideas and scope of thinking. They also highlighted that questioning helped to deepen their understanding of the news articles and relevant social issues. Moreover, the act of giving reasons and understanding reasoning during online discussions helped students develop their depth of thinking. These are achieved since more thinking time was allowed for students to formulate their responses during asynchronous online discussions, which helped to enrich their thinking.

Another significant finding was that the process of self-evaluation promoted the internalisation of interthinking. Since students had to read each other's views before formulating their own opinions, their contributions indicated that they had developed a higher awareness of different perspectives through this process. By engaging in the discussion process, they were co-constructing knowledge by making their reasons and thoughts transparent for speculation and exploration. Asking learners to reflect on this interthinking process through self-evaluations helped them to internalise the ideas that they generated together. Participants also reported that they were also more aware of the need to reflect on their own thinking and ideas.

In summary, the results highlighted that asynchronous online discussions enabled ESL learners to make their reasoning and questioning explicit and promoted the depth and breadth of their thinking. By exposing them to a wider range of views, they could also better internalise their co-constructed ideas through the process of self-evaluation.

Conclusion

The preliminary results presented in this study indicates that asynchronous online discussions have capacity to promote students' thinking and trigger the internalisation of co-constructed ideas. Further research can be directed at fleshing out the nuances of this type of online talk and differentiate it from other types of classroom talk. It should also study, in greater detail, the process in which self-evaluation is brought about during the interthinking and internalisation process.

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