

Analysis on the Feature of Network: Based Language Learning in China

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Abstract

Network-based Language Learning, which is regarded as an extension of Computer- assisted Language Learning, is more resourceful and interactive and begins to spread in higher education in China. Network-based Language Learning has so far received considerable attention and founded its place as a new language teaching and learning mode. It is worth mentioning the advantages of Network-based Language Learning, but the fact indicates that not all computer potentials are positive. There are also limitations or potential problems to consider.

Key words: Network-based Language Learning; Advantages; Potential problems

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INTRODUCTION

English is considered to be an international language which is widely used around the world. There is no denying that the largest population of English learners exists in China. English is set as a compulsory course in the curricula, and considerable emphasis has been attached to English teaching and learning of different levels, from elementary education to higher education. With the implementation of the educational reform, the English language teaching and learning is changing

from the stereotyped teacher-oriented pattern to learner-centered one. In addition, with the computer science and information technology developing fast, Internet has become increasingly popular in people's daily life and even more prevalent in students' life in universities since 1990s. According to a survey report on Internet development in China provided by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) in January 2007, students who have access to the Internet get online to achieve a variety of goals: getting information, studying, making researches, getting free resources, getting entertained, making friends, satisfying sentimental needs, communicating by emails, conducting business such as stock trading and online shopping, etc. The goal of getting resources ranks as the first one on the list. Studying purpose is the fourth goal following getting entertained and making friends.

All of the above facts reveal that no one can ignore the great influence of the new technology on students' language study. Multi-media means have been applied in English learning and teaching. The Ministry of Education in China drew up the new College English Curriculum Requirements in 2007, encouraging the application of the Internet technology in college English education. The Requirements indicates that one of the important objectives of the college English teaching and learning is to develop and cultivate the individualized studying approaches and the autonomous learning abilities of the students. It also claims that the extensive use of advanced information technology should be encouraged, computer-based and Internet-based English teaching and learning should also be promoted. Therefore, the investigation of students' English autonomous learning under the Internet-based environment has been brought to the focus of concern in English language education.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF COMPUTER-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING

Computers have been used in language teaching and learning ever since the 1960's. According to Warschauer & Healey (1998:31), this process of application can be divided into three main stages: behaviorist, communicative, and integrative. Each stage corresponds to a certain level of technology and certain pedagogical theories.

In the 1960's and 1970's the first form of Computer-assisted Language Learning featured repetitive language drills, the so-called drill-and-practice method. It was based on the behaviorist model of learning and the computer was viewed as a mechanical tutor that never got tired. Behaviorist Computer-assisted Language Learning was first designed and implemented, which was mainly used for extensive skill training, grammar instruction, and translation tests.

Then, communicative Computer-assisted Language Learning emerged in the 1970's and 1980's as a counterforce to the behaviorist approach to language learning. Proponents of communicative Computer-assisted Language Learning challenged behaviorist approaches at both the theoretical and pedagogical level. They stressed that Computer-assisted Language Learning should focus more on the actual application rather than on the forms themselves. Grammar should be taught implicitly and students should be encouraged to generate original utterances instead of manipulating prefabricated forms (Jones & Fortescue, 1987; Philips, 1987). This form of computer-based instruction corresponded to cognitive theories that recognized learning as a creative process of discovery, expression, and development. The mainframe was replaced by personal computers that allowed greater possibilities for individual work.

The last stage is integrative Computer-assisted Language Learning. Communicative Computer-assisted Language Learning was criticized for using the computer in a disconnected context. Teachers have moved away from a cognitive view of communicative language teaching to a socio-cognitive view that emphasizes real language use in a meaningful, authentic context. Integrative Computer-assisted Language Learning seeks both to "integrate the various skills of language learning (listening, speaking, writing and reading) and to integrate technology more fully into language teaching" (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). From then on the multimedia-networked computer provides a range of informational, communicative, and publishing tools that are potentially available to every student.

RESEARCH ON NETWORK-BASED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The multimedia Computer-assisted Language Learning brings color and efficiency with diverse input: hypertext,

pictures, audio and visual clips. Network-based Language Learning, as an extension of Computer-assisted Language Learning, is more resourceful and interactive which begins to spread at tertiary level of education in China. It has brought fresh air to college English teaching, which makes it possible to combine the classroom activities with a large range of communication elements. Therefore it makes the classroom teaching more active and more attractive. Interactive and student-centered uses of the Internet are especially valuable in language teaching and learning.

Great efforts have also been made to explore the nature and characteristics of Network-based learning. The impressive progress that Internet-based learning research has achieved so far includes the exploration of the nature and characteristics of Internet-based learning and the establishment of the conceptual framework of Internet-based learning. A comprehensive understanding of what constitute Internet-based learning, according to the US Ministry of Education, contains the following aspects:

(1) Internet-based learning is a way of being instructed, characterized by new mode of communication and interaction in education. The new approaches to interaction include Internet, multimedia, professional websites, information searching, electronic library, online classroom and so on.

(2) Internet-based learning refers to the Internet-based instruction and other related services.

(3) Internet-based learning ensures learning at anywhere and anytime, thus providing the potential of lifelong learning.

(4) Internet-based learners learn in a significantly new way.

(5) Internet-based learning has changed the role of teachers as well as the teacher-learner relationship, thus transforming the nature of education.

(6) Internet-based learning put an emphasis on learners' critical thinking and analytical ability.

(7) Internet-based learning can realize some teaching goals very effectively but it cannot replace face-to-face classroom instruction.

(8) Internet-based learning cannot replace campus-based education provided by physical educational institutions but it can significantly transform the aim and functions of classroom instruction.

ADVANTAGES OF NETWORK-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING

In the recent years, the Internet-based English learning has received considerable attention and founded its place in language teaching and learning. It is worth mentioning the advantages of Network-based English learning. Much of the published research on this topic indicates that the advantages of Network-based Language Learning far outweigh its disadvantages. The following are some of the advantages.

Firstly, it could provide more learning opportunities and arouse the students' interest. Internet-based English learning has brought fresh air in the learning methods. With the Internet-based English learning approach, the main teaching content, together with a great amount of supplementary learning materials, are put on the Internet, which makes it possible to combine the classroom contents and activities with a wide range of communication elements-text, sound, graphics, pictures, audio and visual clips, etc. The students can find what they need easily by surfing Internet. Therefore, students have more learning opportunities to get access to the learning material whenever they want, which makes English learning no longer boring but interesting and attractive and the students can learn language in a more relaxing and pleasant atmosphere. Additionally, Network-based Language Learning offers teachers more opportunities and choices in classroom and makes the classroom teaching more active. Since students have obtained enough language input through online learning endeavors, teachers can use the limited class hours to answer students' questions, design classroom discussions, and provide feedback to them, so that they can produce a lot of language output rather than just receiving information passively in class.

Secondly, Internet-based learning can ensure learner-centeredness. Since the concept of autonomous learning has been introduced into the field of education, English teaching in China has shifted from the former teacher-centered and text-oriented pattern to a student-centered mode. Before, teachers are regarded as the authority in education who will decide the teaching contents, present knowledge, set the pace of teaching plan and even the whole process of students' learning. Additionally, they are also expected to design various examinations, to evaluate learners' studies. After several years of traditional teaching, many researchers discovered that this teaching pattern directly produces high-mark but low-ability learners. That is to say a large number of learners can get high marks in examinations but they cannot communicate in the language they have been learning for many years. In contrast, as for the Internet-based English learning, students are no longer limited to the textbooks and teachers, and their participation is very important in teaching and learning. Students are encouraged to take part in various activities actively so as to ensure learner-centeredness. They are now free in choosing their learning content and have the right to learn what they feel interested in or what they need to know. They can develop their learning styles and learning strategies, according to their respective level of language competence and the wide range of tasks and rich sources of materials provided by the teachers. It is thought that students' needs are better served and the concept of learner-centeredness is better performed in this way.

Thirdly, computers and Internet have emerged as fascinating technological tools in the educational field. Information technology has brought a big revolution to foreign language teaching and learning in China. Today the network is so popular and widespread in people's life that people can get access to Internet in every field. As

for education, teaching and learning is no longer limited to textbooks and the classroom. With the facilities of multimedia, the teaching and learning process has become more vivid and interesting. Moreover, through Internet, both teachers and students can search for any online learning resources they need and hence engage students in an active, cooperative learning process. Besides, the Internet makes the communication between students and teachers as well as students and students much easier and more convenient. The Internet-based communication obscures some physical and social cues such as appearance, gender, and age so that learners have an equal ground in this online learning environment. This quality is especially important for non-native English speakers who are at a disadvantage in the traditional classroom learning. They get access to anyone who is able and ready to solve their problems through Internet. Most students reported that they felt less anxious when participating in online learning activities, which makes learning easier, freer and more interesting.

Fourthly, it can promote students' autonomy. In the traditional classroom teaching, students had been learning passively. They are required to listen to what the teacher says in class and try their best to understand and memorize what they have been taught by the teacher. Under the Internet-based English learning, learners can access valuable and useful online resources by themselves anytime, anywhere, at their own convenience. Students have a sense of control over their learning. They also have enough space and time to choose what they are interested to learn from the Internet and are expected to take multiple roles in the learning process, such as the roles of planners of their learning, organizers of their group tasks, and independent thinkers in fulfilling the tasks, and self-assessors of their performance by referring to the online feedback of their performance. Therefore, students are more responsible for their own learning and the utilization of the Internet calls for students' autonomous learning ability.

Fifthly, Network-based Language Learning is also helpful for developing effective and democratic teaching and learning environment. English language learning needs an effective language learning and communicating environment. However, most conventional language teaching and learning practice is carried out in hypothetical context. Learners usually learn language just for the sake of learning language. But in the network learning environment, learners can select their favorite English movies, English programs and English teaching reference materials. They can communicate with other experienced learners, teachers or even native speakers in English directly. Moreover, text-based, asynchronous computer-mediated communication allows time for learners to reflect on course materials, their own thinking, and viewpoints from instructors and other students. This kind of language context helps students strengthen their linguistic knowledge and improve the communicative competence of them.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS OF NETWORK-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING

With the Internet and the rise of computer-mediated communication, the forms of language teaching and learning have greatly changed. The recent shift to global information-based economies means that students will be required to grasp the ability to deal with large amounts of information and have to be able to communicate across languages and cultures. At the same time, the role of the teacher has changed as well. "Teachers are not the only source of information any more, but act as facilitators. "Students have become active participants in learning, are encouraged to be explorers and creators of language rather than passive recipients of it" (Brown, 1991). In this case, Network-based Language Learning combines information processing, interactive communication, the use of authentic language, and learner's autonomy, all of which are of major importance in current language learning theories.

Since the implementation of Network-based Language Learning in China, researchers found it successfully solved the entrenched problems of college English teaching and learning in China. However, despite the advantages and attractiveness of Network-based language learning and teaching, researchers have also noticed that some new problems might occur.

Theoretically, the implementation of Network-based Language Learning is confronted with the lack of instruction, for example, the design of the effective software of network English teaching and learning, the theories of the web-based teaching and learning, the evaluating of web-based English teaching and learning, etc. Besides, there is a lack of high-quality network-based English learning programs. Nowadays, the material available on the Internet is massive and not graded. Beginners can easily be overwhelmed with the rich vocabulary and colloquial expressions that they encounter. Designing proper and high-quality learning programs is never easy work. Therefore, it is a big problem that the high-quality Internet-based English learning programs are in urgent need. It is an important task for teachers and researchers to design proper learning programs and guide students to material that not only is of interest to them, but also manageable at their current level of language proficiency.

The students' motivation in utilizing modern technology to facilitate their studies needs to be enhanced. Since the introduction of Network-based Language Learning into the field of second language learning and teaching, the students' motivation towards the application of the new technology in learning has been regarded as a central factor that affects the effectiveness of integrating modern technology into classroom instruction. Low motivation always results in unsatisfactory achievement, while high motivation enables students to overcome problems and develop a positive attitude towards

acquiring skills and knowledge. Therefore, the successful fulfillment of Network-based Language Learning depends largely on whether it can better induce students' motivation towards language learning. If students are lack of motivation towards using technology and are not enthusiastic about what the new technology provides, they cannot learn in the context of the new teaching and learning mode successfully.

The information explosion, or information overload in Network-based Language Learning can cause information anxiety. There is an ocean of information on Internet, including valuable ones and useless ones, which makes the students exposed to large amount of information input. On the one hand, the diverse and boundless information can attract the students and makes their study happier and easier. On the other hand, unfortunately, some students will feel confused while faced with the overloaded information. The students may get puzzled about what learning strategies they should adopt to manage the overloaded information. They may suffer from information anxiety especially without teacher's supervision and instruction.

The students' self-dependence in Internet-based English learning is required. Network-based Language Learning is characterized by learner's self-dependent learning. However, comparatively speaking, human beings' feelings as love, encouragement, and favor etc. may be better conveyed through face-to-face communication, such as voice, facial expression, eye contact and gesture. But in the Internet-based English learning environment, emotions expressed by machine are anyhow deducted. Therefore, the learner may tend to feel lonely if he lacks interpersonal communication with the other learners and the teacher. This lack of self-dependence might result in students' losing their way in the Internet-based English learning. As a result, they cannot benefit from it even though useful learning materials are within their reach. Learning English over Internet does not necessarily mean the learners have to learn alone without the guidance of their teacher. On the contrary, the learners are expected to be involved in a process of interaction between learners, tutor, peers, learning context and learning materials.

Some students cannot immediately adapt to the current teaching and learning pattern. In the new teaching pattern, students' autonomous learning ability is not only a major aim of education, but also is closely related with learners' learning quality and effectiveness. However, with the long period of the traditional education, Chinese education adopted teacher-centered pattern, which means students were quite used to receiving knowledge passively from their instructors. So a large number of students do not have autonomous learning ability and they could not learn effectively under this new learning environment. It is quite urgent to improve learners' self-learning ability to help

them learn more easily and efficiently. So a proper way should be founded to lead the students to learn actively, in which case the students should be encouraged to learn on their own under the teacher's guidance. At the same time, the teachers should adopt a new teaching method to complete the transition from the teacher-centered teaching model to the student-centered one.

SUMMARY

The new mode of college English teaching and learning based on network and multimedia, which has many advantages, has greatly changed English teaching and learning in Chinese universities and colleges. Compared with the conventional classroom teaching and learning mode, Network-based Language Learning requires the students' motivation and self-dependence towards utilizing modern technology to facilitate their studies. Today's students must be equipped with knowledge of learning strategies, which will enable them to deal with the large quantity of information in the Information Age. Students' autonomous learning ability also needs to be enhanced. In addition, an effective way should be founded to lead the students to learn actively, in which case the students should be encouraged to learn on their own under the teacher's guidance. Teachers and researchers are required

to design proper learning programs and guide students to high quality materials that not only is of interest to them but also can help them learn more easily and efficiently.

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