

Fostering a Cross-contextual Language Learning Practice through Social Media Creation and Social Interaction Processes

Wong Lung Hsiang, Aw Guat Poh, Chai Ching Sing and May Liu

KEY IMPLICATIONS

1. The seamless language learning practice can become a catalyst to help language teachers think about design, and practice pedagogy beyond the traditional presentation-practice-production model.
2. The study has proven the effectiveness of what contemporary language learning theorists advocate: authentic, contextualized learning and the communicative approach.
3. Social media creation and social networking could be leveraged to extend students' opportunities in language learning, application, and reflection.

BACKGROUND

Researchers (e.g., Liu, Goh, & Zhang, 2006; Tedick & Walker, 2009) have argued that the current K-12 language classroom typically falls short in a number of ways: (1) Unbalanced instructional emphases (e.g., language knowledge over language skills, language input over output activities); (2) Use of decontextualized learning materials; (3) Domination of the "presentation-practice-production" (PPP) model; (4) Lack of autonomous or self-directed learning and authentic social interactions. Mobile-assisted seamless language learning offers a promising solution with the foregrounding of cross-contextual (formal to informal learning, individual to social learning, learning in physical and digital realms) and therefore authentic and communicative learning.

FOCUS OF STUDY

This study aimed to design and evaluate a seamless Chinese language learning environment entitled MyCLOUD (My Chinese Language ubiquitous learning Days). MyCLOUD included a two-year curriculum package, covering Primary 3 and 4, and a cloud-based learning platform accessible via students' mobile devices. The intention was to overcome the above-stated limitations of formal language classes by connecting them to students' genuine day-to-day lives. The intervention consisted of cycles of the following activities: (1) in-class learning of new vocabulary; (2) students' creating posts using social media (photos and sentences/paragraphs in Chinese utilising the learned vocabulary) in their daily lives; (3) online peer reviews and social interactions in Chinese; (4) teacher-scaffolded in-class discussions and consolidation of the students' social media postings.

KEY FINDINGS

There were gradual improvements in student motivation, and the quantity and quality of students' social media postings and interactions. A mixed-ability class was used and the intervention period was divided into two stages. The amount of social media created was increased by 353% in Stage 2 compared to Stage 1. Each social media item was graded on a scale of 1 to 5. The mean scores of the social media in Stages 1 and 2 were 3.11 and 3.45 respectively. Further statistical tests showed that the improvement was statistically significant. The richness of online interactions also significantly improved in Stage 2 (Wong, Chai, Aw & King, 2015).

Furthermore, gradual transformations in teachers' classroom practice were observed. Lesson enactments were smoother and more student-centered. The teachers were more willing to let students attempt challenging tasks, rather than simplifying the activities because they assumed that "they are not at the right level of motivation or competency". The classroom pedagogy became more engaging and meaningful.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

The continual and progressive seamless language learning practice of MyCLOUD can become a catalyst to help language teachers think about design, and practice pedagogy beyond the traditional PPP model. In the study, they became more willing to let students 'apply' and "produce" first, and then leverage on the student work to carry out language-focused remedies. The efficacious level-wide scaling up of the practice at the participating school shows that the MyCLOUD intervention can be well-blended into the existing language classroom. Rather than diminish the national Chinese curriculum and textbook, they are being used and enhanced through teachers' conscious design and facilitation. MyCLOUD formed a bridge between classroom learning, out-of-school applications, online socially-stimulated reflections and back-to-the-classroom consolidation.

The research findings prove the effectiveness of what contemporary language learning theorists' advocate: authentic, contextualized learning (application of the language in genuine daily life), and the communicative approach (emphasizing not only language input or output activities, but social interactions). Social media creation and social networking is becoming part of the young students' daily activities; and such online communities can be leveraged to extend the

students' opportunities in language learning, application and reflection.

The MyCLOUD learning environment has undergone level-wide scaling up at Primary 3 at the experimental school since 2013 and has become part of their regular curriculum. By 2015, the intervention will be spread to four more schools.

POPULATION

Four teachers and 84 students from one school were involved in the pilot study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Mixed methods were used in this study. The students' social media and online interactions throughout the two-year intervention period were collected, analysed and graded for formative assessment. The lessons were also recorded, student and teacher interviews were conducted, and questionnaires were administered to the students. Different forms of qualitative and quantitative data were cross-examined to scrutinize the students' learning gains and teachers' growth.

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Addendum: An addition to NIE Research Brief Series 15-002

KEY IMPLICATIONS

1. Students have created social media with much higher quality and richer vocabulary at informal learning spaces. Such environments could offer novel and stimulating contextual elements/experiences which are not directly available in the classroom. Thus, teacher-facilitated language production activities should tap on students' first-hand experience of the authentic physical spaces, which could push them to go beyond what they would produce in traditional sentence or text making.
2. It is conducive to situate language students in low-stakes social networking environments where they are supposed to use the target language to share and communicate, but without the fear of academic consequences. Such environments would bring them the sense of audience and therefore the sense of 'communication with a (socialising, authentic) purpose'. Hence, with proper warm up activities, students would become motivated to participate in social networking that ensue lively, authentic use of the target language and the vocabulary.

Singapore Centre for Chinese Language. Our intention was to identify and unpack the contextual conditions in which MyCLOUD promoted the learning outcomes.

- We randomly selected a mixed-performing Primary 3 class and imported the text components of 1,043 social media items created by the 37 students over 13 months to the corpus analysis system and obtained their raw vocabulary usage statistics.
- We then performed manual statistical analysis in order to discover the usage patterns across the time and across different learning spaces/contextes where individual social media were created. We classified them into four categories: classroom, home, other locations, and (based on) existing online photos—the students were also allowed to download online photos for social media creation). In addition, we lumped the last three categories into “informal contexts”, versus classroom as “formal context”.
- We have also scored all the social media based on a self-developed and teacher-validated rubric with “language”, “context” and “task completion” as the major criteria (range: 0-5).

INTRODUCTION/RESEARCH METHOD

- Another sub-study that focused on the analysis of students' vocabulary use in their social media was conducted with the aid of a corpus analysis system developed by

KEY FINDINGS

- The majority of social media were created either in-class (28.2%) or at home (32.9%) (typical primary pupils' living circle). However, 71.8% of the social media were created in informal contexts as a whole.

- The mean score of social media created at “other locations” (3.5) is significantly higher than social media created in-class (3.1), according to our statistical analysis.
- Students used significantly more “less frequent words” in informal contexts (22.8%) as compared to in-class (12.6%); the use of less frequent words is an indicator of students’ less reliance on simpler, commonly used words and the richness in their vocabulary.
- The results imply that extending language output activities beyond the classroom help students to go beyond the constraints of time and space. The relatively rich and authentic daily experience and encounters provide the students more inspirations and triggers of vocabulary use, resulting in the improvement of the richness and quality of the artefacts created.
- A separate cross-time analysis on students’ social media was performed. The results indicate that the students created significantly more social media in the last 6 months (815) as compared to the first 7 months (228). As well, their mean social media score of the last 3 months (3.6) was significantly higher than the first 11 months (3.1).
 - The rationale: In early months, students were new to social media activities and took it as part of their existing formal curriculum. They were inclined to compose single complete sentences with proper grammar and correct usage of words, despite dullness of the contexts. Over time, a handful of students shared their real-life encounters such as those related to their personal feelings or past experiences; and other students gradually followed suit. Thus, a new practice of social media creation emerges. These were in line with research on vicarious learning wherein peers are able to learn from their classmates. When students see their peers successfully completing a task, they also develop their own sense of efficacy to complete the task.

About this addendum

This addendum is an addition to NIE Research Brief Series 15-002: *Fostering a Cross-contextual Language Learning Practice through Social Media Creation and Social Interaction Processes*

Contact Lung Hsiang at lunghsiang.wong@nie.edu.sg for more information about the project.

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