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English as a Foreign Language Online: Instructional Conversations

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Abstract

This work in progress reports a year-long, online professional development course for European faculty of English as a foreign language (EFL). Central to its goals is developing faculty understanding of the pedagogical potential of instructional conversations in asynchronous online language teaching venues. To these ends, demonstration tasks were conducted transnationally, collaboratively, and completely online. Teams of faculty from the U.S. and Belarus designed discussion threads and activities for Belarusian undergraduate learners of EFL. The epistemological stance for design and orchestration was a social discourses view of language development with the focal instructional strategy for these courses the responsive instructional conversation. Data comprised of these extended instructional conversations with and among EFL learners are under analysis using a combination of linguistic concordancing and instructional conversation analytic techniques. Preliminary findings suggest that 1) language learning can be systematically tracked in asynchronous online learning venues; 2) relationships between instructional conversation strategic moves on the part of instructors and the language development of EFL learners are evidenced via this tracking; and 3) instructor awareness of and facility with online instructional conversations develop over time by virtue of witnessing student successes in learning the new language. Discussion of implications for language education broadly, and professional development for online language educators more specifically follow illustrations from course archives.

Purpose

As the popularity of online language education grows, issues of principled, effective pedagogical practices arise. For no language is this issue more pressing than English as a Foreign Language, the demand for which far exceeds trained professional educators worldwide. This study undertook a longitudinal examination of EFL faculty development and that of their Belarusian undergraduates who, due to political turmoil, could not meet face-to-face on a regular basis with their instructors. Their EFL instruction was moved, out of necessity, online. While this may be considered an exceptional case of learning in

exile, efforts to meet the demand for EFL instruction around the globe can potentially be informed by this context's processes and outcomes.

Perspective

It is widely accepted that learning a new language prospers from active, purposeful interaction with others. These 'others' must be willing to engage in effortful interaction with the goal of mutual meaning generation. These others can be teachers, fellow learners, or others in the community willing to interact in the target language (Ellis, 1994). In curricular terms, language itself is no longer viewed as a set of static competencies based on the ideal native speaker model (Larsen-Freeman and Freeman, 2008). Instead, language knowledge is complexly dynamic as it is contextually shaped (Hall, Cheng & Carlson, 2006). This kind of talk in action approach is central to the design and processes of both the professional development component and the study of EFL learners' interactions with the faculty in development. Based on this socioculturally influenced perspective on language education, our goal in the design and analysis of the professional development sequences is to build awareness of and fluency in the kinds of teacher guidance and responsive assistance that maximizes language learning opportunities for online learners.

Educators from both sides of the Atlantic were epistemologically aligned in their beliefs and practices concerning language education in adhering to student-centered, developmental views of learning with an emphasis on authentic language practice as the key venue for mastery (Goldenberg, 2008; Meskill & Anthony, 2010; Tharp, 1993; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). Given the special affordances of online venues for language education, emphasis in the collaborative course development processes was consistently on the kinds of responsive instructional conversation that learners best thrive on in online environments (Meskill, 2009). Data collection, analysis and interpretation likewise developed from this point of view regarding language learning.

Method

As part of an internationally funded collaboration between a U.S. university and a Belarusian university in exile, faculty and graduate students collaborated to design and deliver EFL instruction in the online venue, Moodle. Each of the seven faculty observed their U.S. partner conduct conversations in English online with their EFL students. Faculty were guided to not only observe this "talk in action", but to also intervene in a teacherly role using specified strategies that were both instructional and conversational. The chief guiding questions employed in examining the processes and outcomes of the resulting online EFL course components were as follows:

- What issues arise in conceptualizing and implementing instructional conversation strategies in online environments?
- What specific kinds of instructional conversation strategies best support and guide the development of learners' EFL in online venues?

- How might faculty observation of instructional conversation strategies in play contribute to the development of online language teaching expertise?

Data consist of archived collaboration exchanges between educators from either side of the Atlantic, several online interviews with the faculty, the archived EFL courses, and team tracking documents of student learning.

Archived data were collected over the academic year period of the project. Analyses are in process and make use of combined quantitative linguistic concordancing and qualitative keyword coding techniques. Independent coding is undertaken by the two authors and compared. Over the course of the project, iterative analysis based on discussions of comparisons of interpretations has led to ongoing interview questions for educator participants concerning the anatomy of online instructional conversations for language education. Team interview data will be employed in confirming and refining interpretations.

Outcomes and Significance

Findings thus far suggest that 1) language learning can be systematically tracked in asynchronous online learning venues; 2) relationships between instructional conversation strategic moves on the part of instructors and the language development of EFL learners are evidenced via this tracking; and 3) instructor awareness of and facility with online instructional conversations develop over time by virtue of witnessing student successes in learning the new language.

These findings are particularly relevant as the demand for online EFL education augments as does the need for informed professional development for potential and practicing EFL educators. Equally important are the insights the outcomes of this study provide for the design and evaluation of language learning generally, and for the study of English as a foreign language at a distance in particular.

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