INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEARNING

Volume 11

Article: LC04-0213-2004

The Cultural Interaction in On-line ESL Teaching and Learning

Shen Chen, School of Education, The University of Newcastle, Australia

Learning Today: Communication, Technology, Environment, Society
Proceedings of the Learning Conference 2004

International Journal of Learning

Volume 11

www.LearningConference.com

C O M M O N
G R O U N D

www.theLearner.com

This journal and individual papers published at www.Learning-Journal.com
a series imprint of the UniversityPress.com

First published in Australia in 2004/2005 by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd at
www.Learning-Journal.com

Selection and editorial matter copyright © Common Ground 2004/2005
Individual papers copyright © individual contributors 2004/2005

All rights reserved. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part of this book may be reproduced by any process without written permission from the publisher.

ISSN 1447-9494 (Print)
ISSN 1447-9540 (Online)

The International Journal of Learning is a peer-refereed journal published annually. Full papers submitted for publication are refereed by the Associate Editors through an anonymous referee process.

Papers presented at the Eleventh International Literacy and Education Research Network Conference on Learning, Cojimar Pedagogical Convention Centre Havana, Cuba, 27-30 June 2004

The Cultural Interaction in On-line ESL Teaching and Learning

Shen Chen, School of Education, The University of Newcastle, Australia

Abstract

In designing multi-media websites for on-line ESL learning, there seems to be a pedagogical discrepancy and a possible miscommunication due to the difference of cultural contexts. This paper attempts to explore the problem of using technology in language learning, namely the cross-cultural interaction in relation to on-line ESL programs used worldwide.

Keywords: Culture, ESL/EFL, On-line, Teaching, Learning

Introduction

The new era of the twenty-first century has witnessed a rapid development of economic globalization and technological innovation. As a result, education features two important characteristics: internationalization of learning and application of information technology. In the field of language education, ESL teachers in various countries are facing the unexpected challenge of using technology in teaching the language as ESL teaching becomes increasingly important for both English and non-English speaking countries. In addition, ESL is also of great significance in promoting mutual understanding by international communities through learning English as an international language. Naturally, the issue of how to effectively use advanced information technology to teach English to improve learning outcomes has become a common research topic - an urgent concern shared by ESL teachers and academics all over the world (Chen, 2000, 2002). Apart from theoretical exploration on the process of on-line learning for an appropriate pedagogy, various types of commercial multi-media software and ESL learning websites have emerged to meet the needs of online ESL learning. The use of existing software and websites has opened a new territory to evaluate current practice and search for a sound pedagogical framework. This is the reason why research on online language education has drawn more attention from language educators than ever before (Ayoun, 2000, Chapelle, 2001, Hawisher & Self, 2000, Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

In designing and implementing the on-line ESL teaching and learning, the ESL course designers and teachers' attention has focused on two sides of the one coin: language teaching content and language learning process. The former refers to organization of teaching materials including programming units and lessons with language exercises, assessment and evaluation in association with texts presented by

visual images and audio effects. In other words, teaching content is based on the possible application of technology. The technology provides most efficient and effective ways to present the language content. The latter refers to delivery of text with various language learning activities, which engage language learners' active participation and interaction through the World Wide Web. The technology promotes teaching and learning through various learning tasks.

However, there seems to be a "third dimension" of online ESL teaching and learning, namely, an online teacher-learner mutual interaction, which is a form of intercultural communication. It should not be neglected that an undeniable pedagogical discrepancy exists due to the difference of cultural contexts in which the "starting point" or "service center" of providing on-line ESL and "terminals" of learning are allocated (Chen, 2004). This paper attempts to explore this intercultural communication process in light of the current language teaching and educational theories as an attempt to search for a pedagogical framework in online ESL teaching and learning.

Faulty Assumption

In designing ESL learning websites, the first task is to define learners' needs and to set up the learning outcome of the program. Unlike any face-to-face programs, this seems to be difficult for a number of reasons. In the first place, the learners who rely on an ESL learning website are located in different parts of the world. It is difficult for the designer to identify and to take into account the special needs of individual learners. Secondly, it is difficult for the designer to get information about learners' language proficiency and cultural background before setting up the course. Finally, it is extremely difficult for the designer to provide the most appropriate teaching content relevant to learners' cultural environments where they are living and to organize various learning activities accordingly.

For these reasons, the common practice is to assume that all learners probably have a shared cultural starting point, thus individual learners situated all over the world are regarded as an ideal homogenous learning cohort. According to this assumption, teaching and learning would occur within “a universal cultural framework”. In other words, both “teachers of ESL” and “learners of ESL” probably share universal cultural values. Consequently, teaching and learning is a cohesive process of cultural interaction. This kind of “idealist” process of interaction can be described as Figure 1 indicates. However, this picture does not accurately reflect reality since the primary assumption is questionable. In fact, the “two ends” of online teaching and learning are far more complicated than the idealist view illustrated by Figure 1. So far as online ESL teaching is concerned, there are a number of possibilities:

Possibility One: An online “service center”, namely, a website is located in UK. The program aims to provide learning opportunity to learners who wish to learn English as a foreign language. The program might be featured with cultural content based on the way of life in UK. We use “T1” to represent this case.

Possibility Two: Online ESL teaching website is situated in the USA. The purpose of this program is to help new immigrants whose first language is not English. These learners wish to learn English as a second language in an English language setting. The program, as its purpose indicates, focuses on American English and the cultural content is based on an American lifestyle. This situation can be regarded as “T2”.

Possibility Three: Online EFL teaching websites are established in non-English speaking countries such as Japan and China. Based on the special needs of the learners living in those countries, the EFL programs might be identified by its close integration between target culture and local culture. This case can be labeled by “T3”.

Obviously, we could add more possibilities to this list. As to the other end of the World Wide Web, namely, the learners’ end, the situations are impossible to describe. ESL/EFL learners are scattered in every corner of the world. In theory, any learners from non-English speaking countries are able to use the programs designed and managed in English speaking countries in UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand through accessing the World Wide Web. They can also use any online programs developed in their own countries and other non-English speaking countries. Consequently, the distinction between English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) becomes meaningless.

In spite of the common feature of learning English as a second or a foreign language, on-line ESL/EFL learners defer to mother tongues, cultural values and learning strategies integrated with their tradition and the teaching methods used in their countries. That is to say, the terminals consist of learners with multicultural backgrounds. If we use L1, L2, L3...Ln to cover this diversified cohort, then we see a different picture. This realist picture of interaction between teaching and learning could be summarized in Figure 2. Apparently, there is a discrepancy between the “idealist version” and “realist version” about online ESL/EFL teaching and learning. The assumption of “a universal framework” of learning is problematic.

If we go further to examine the on-line interaction of ESL/EFL teaching and learning from the post-structurist view on language and culture, we will find that Figure 2 has oversimplified the process of teaching and learning occurred in “the two ends” of the web, providing an insufficient picture for online ESL/EFL teaching and learning.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure3

Post-Structurist View

One of the most important views of post-structurist theory on language education is the emphasis on diversified learners and dichotomy of *text* and *context*. According to Kramsch (1993), language includes two sides of one coin: language as expression of an individual's thoughts and intentions and language as expression of a speech community's knowledge and expectations. This duality of language was elaborated from Halliday's well-known theory of language as social semiotic: "the notion of text and context are inseparable: text is language operative in a context of situation and contexts are ultimately constructed by the range of texts produced within a community" (Halliday & Hasan 1989:117).

Kramsch adopted Halliday's definition of context as "the total environment in which a text unfolds" (Halliday 1978:5) and further developed her post-structurist theory on foreign language teaching. She points out:

Teaching a language is teaching how to shape the context of the 'lesson' as an individual learning event and as a social encounter with regard to its setting, its participant roles, the purpose of its activities, its topics of conversation, its tone, modalities, norms of interaction, and the genre of its tasks. The way context is shaped through the foreign language determines the types of meanings the students will be allowed to explore, discover, and exchange. The more potential meanings they are encouraged to discover, the richer the opportunities for learning.

(Kramsch 1993:67)

In accordance with this point of view, in designing and organizing on-line ESL/EFL teaching and learning we should take account not only the teaching contents delivered through *text*, but also the teaching methods appropriate to the *context* in which learners are learning ESL/EFL. When a designer develops on-line ESL learning websites, the *text* produced is associated with the *context* where he or she is based. Although the *text* delivered to the learners is same as what the designer prepared, the *context* of the learners is totally different. In other words, while the World Wide Web can convey any *text* to anywhere in the world, it is doubtful to set the same *context* for on-line learners. Figure 3 includes the dual factors of *text* and *context* and displays an even more complicated but complete picture of cross-cultural interaction in online ESL/EFL teaching and learning. Since teachers and learners are not in the same classroom, the *context* of learners cannot be easily shaped and created even if the

similar *text* can be accessed through the web. The discrepancy between teaching and learning due to cultural differences can be a major obstacle in on-line language education.

In addition, since online ESL/EFL teaching and learning is a distant interaction without face-to-face negotiation between teachers and learners, learners' feedback cannot reach in time the teachers who find it impossible to modify the pre-settled *text* and learning activities on the basis of the learners' feedback. If ESL/EFL teachers who conduct the online program insist that the teaching content through the web is "culturally neutral" and believe that the associated teaching method is "universally applicable", then unexpected cultural conflict might occur, leading to seemingly inevitable intercultural misunderstanding. In spite of well-justified objectives in online programs, learning outcomes might not be as promising as expected. On the other hand, if we acknowledge the differing cultural backgrounds of learners and consider the *context* of the learning environment, then pedagogically, we must elaborate a new approach to make the *text* of the on-line ESL/EFL programs be closely associated with the *context* in which online learners are learning the language.

Conclusion

In the above discussion, we have looked at three different pictures of online ESL teaching and learning. We have argued that the assumption of "culturally neutral content" is questionable. There is also a cultural gap between teachers' intentions and learners' interpretations. The *text* used to present teaching content and the *context* in which the learning occurs are the crucial factors leading to a successful interaction.

With regard to *text*, the belief of "cultural neutrality" should be replaced by a practice of "cultural diversity". In other words, teaching content needs to include local culture and target culture to accommodate the requirements of learners with multicultural backgrounds. As for *context*, which is dependent on individual learners, it inevitably creates "cultural conflict" between teaching and learning. A more flexible teaching method associated with online learning should be investigated. Perhaps one possible solution is to rely on local ESL/EFL teachers to monitor the learning process. It is naïve to expect that technology could shorten cultural distance as well as physical distance. On-line ESL/EFL teaching and learning must rely on the assistance of local ESL/EFL teachers. Computers will never fully replace real-life human teaching.

References

- Ayoun, D. "Web-based Elicitation Tasks in SLA Research" in *Language Learning and Technology*, 3 (20) 77-98. 2000.
- Chapelle, C. *Computer Applications in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Chen, S. *Research on Strategies for Teaching Culture and Language*. Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press, 2000.
- Chen, S. "Exploring New Research Area in FL: Cultural Interaction in Teaching and Learning" in Zhang, D & Li, X. (eds.), *Research on CLT to English-speaking Background Learners*. p 281-295, Beijing: People's Education Press, 2001.
- Chen, S. "Do in Rome as Romans Do? A Dilemma of Culture and Literacy" *The Proceeding of the 13th World Congress of Applied Linguistics*. Singapore 2002.
- Chen, S. Text and Context of On-line Programs. *Paper presented at the 29th Annual Congress of the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia*, Adelaide. 2004.
- Halliday, M.A.K. *Language as Social Semiotics. The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Arnold, 1978.
- Halliday, M.A.K. & Hasan, R. *Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Kramsch, C. *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Hawisher, G.E & Self, C.L. (eds) *Global Literacies and the World-Wide Web*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Warschauer, M. & Kern, R. *Network-Based Language Teaching: Concepts and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.