Learners' Perspectives on Online L2 Dynamic Assessment

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Abstract

This study is framed within Vygotskian based dynamic assessment (DA) which focuses on the collaborative dialogue between the learners and the mediator through mediation. It aimed at enriching online DA mediation process by integrating synchronous computer mediated communication (SCMC) features and affordances of web links and highlighting. Applying thematic analysis as the general framework for data analysis, this study intended to find out about learners' perspectives on the effectiveness of DA mediation in SCMC context. To achieve this goal, a post-study semi- structured interview was conducted. The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed and some general themes emerged through thematic analysis which shed new light on the nature of online DA. The participants found SCMC context an ideal setting to promote both their L2 linguistic development in terms of progression towards self-regulation in their zones of proximal development (ZPDs) and electronic competence.

Keywords: DA, Learners' perspectives, SCMC, mediation, ZPD

Introduction

The increasing popularity of Internet in recent years has resulted in unprecedented ways of communication with other people in geographically distant areas of the world. Web users make use of the affordances of SCMC to interact with each other in real time via video, audio and text. In SCMC, participants can have real-time interaction via chat rooms, instant messengers, or video conferencing. They can post typed messages which appear on the computer screen and can scroll back and forth to review shared content. With the emergence and development of SCM, Vygotskian sociocultural concepts of social interaction, zone of proximal development, scaffolding and collaboration have been applied for the study of second and foreign language learning in a (SCMC) context. Focusing on interactional features of SCMC, Darhower (2002) indicates that learners transform the SCMC context into a learner-centered discourse which provides opportunity to construct knowledge in their ZPDs. This in turn allows them to scaffold their mental functioning in a rich collaborative environment.

This study is considered as a further exploration into Birjandi and Ebadi (2012) in which they developed a web-based qualitative inquiry in the SCMC) via Web 2.0 tools of Skype and Google wave. They investigated two learners' microgenetic development of the use modal verbs in writing .Birjandi & Ebadi concluded that in SCMC-based DA study via web 2.0 it might be possible to obtain a richer and more accurate understanding of students' potential level of development. To investigate the efficiency and effectiveness of mediation in SCMC-based DA which is in contrast with the mediation in traditional classroom limited only to face to face interactions lacking the privileges of multimodal discourse of the collaborative Web and SCMC, this study intended to uncover the learners' perspective to shed new light on different factors involved in online DA.

Theoretical framework of the study

Theoretically originated from Vygotsky's Socio-cultural Theory (SCT) in general and his concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) in particular, DA focuses on the learning processes and serves as a means of measuring the ZPD. Vygotsky indicates that individuals learn best when working together with others during joint collaboration that results in actual and potential levels of development. The actual level represents the individual's independent problem-solving and corresponds to the Zone of Actual Development (ZAD). The potential level of development pinpoints the abilities that are in the process of maturation and is associated with the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky's primary concern was for ZPD and he argued that instruction should be adjusted to the learners' potential for development in ZPD and not to the past abilities at the actual level of their development.

Mediation in DA is offered in two general approaches of *interventionist* and *interactionist* which include a wide array of assistance provided in the forms of standardized and nonstandard hints and prompts (Lantolf and Poehner, 2004). The interventionist approach includes mediation which is standardized, prespecified and administered during the test procedure. Interactionist DA includes interaction between examiner and examinee in which the examinee is provided with unscripted help which is not preplanned, but rather emerging from the collaborative mediation to solve his problems.

Method

Following most SCT researchers who advise basing the assessment of the ZPD on qualitative evaluation in order to shed more light on learners' development (e.g Ableeva, 2010; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Oskoz, (2005); Poehner, (2005); Poehner et.al,(2014); Shrestha & Coffin, (2012);

Summers, 2008;), this study gives priority to a qualitative approach which is best suited to the ZPD concept and captures the process-oriented nature of SCMC. Thematic analysis was used as the general data analysis method. Boyatzis (1998) points out that thematic analysis is a method in qualitative research used for uncovering patterns and themes in a particular phenomenon. It involves "a way of systematically observing a person, an interaction, a group, a situation, an organization, or a culture" (p. 5). Boyatzis defines theme as "a pattern found in the information that at a minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at a maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (p.4).Thematic analysis can be used for interpreting qualitative data. In the present study, it was used for encoding the transcripts of the interactions between the mediator and the participants in post-study semi-structured interviews.

The participants and context of the study

The participants of the study were two University students whose native language was Persian. To ensure the confidentiality and protect the participants' identity pseudonyms were used in this study. The firs Participant, Student 1, was a regular Internet user for checking e-mails and working on her projects and was particularly interested to use Internet tools for conducting her research. She had no previous experience of using Internet for language learning. The second participant, Student 2, was attending an English language college to improve her command of English. She just used the internet for checking mails and had difficult time working with Skype at the beginning of the study.

Due to the nature of the study which investigated the effectiveness of online DA in SCMC, Skype, a free online phone service, which made the exchange of information in real time via text, audio and video possible was used to provide oral interaction. To document the data collection procedure

and post-study semi-structured interviews, the online free software of Skype mp3 call recorder was downloaded and employed for audio recording of interviews.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interviews

To find out about learners' perspectives on SCMC-based DA (Birjandi& Ebadi, 2012), a post-study interview (See appendix A for questions) was conducted in Persian with the participants in the study. The purpose of these interviews was to provide an opportunity for the participants to discuss their conceptualizations of successful meditational behaviors that occurred during the study and their overall experience of using SCMC in language learning. Moreover, these interviews provided the researcher with an opportunity to member check to validate the learners' feedback in online DA mediation in SCMC. The final interviews were conducted in Persian over Skype and digitally recorded by Skype's mp3 recorder software at the end of the study. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and was then translated and transcribed by the researcher. The guiding questions were mainly about issues related to this research and some relevant topics to find out more about the learners' account of mediation in SCMC. The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed and the following themes emerged through thematic analysis (See Table 2). Boyatzis (1998) points out that thematic analysis is a method in qualitative research used for uncovering patterns and themes in a particular phenomenon.

Learners' perspectives on online DA

The researcher engaged the participants in a dialogue by giving prompts to initiate follow up questions which were not prespecified and intended to motivate the respondents to explain their perspectives of

events in a unique way. The interview guide for the follow up semi-structured interviews explored

different topics related to the study from which the following general patterns emerged (See Table 1).

Table 1

Post study interview results

	Questions	Dara	Sepideh
Q1	Overall experience of DA in SCMC	New method of learning English	Interesting but works better outside Iran
Q2	The effectiveness of mediation to promote grammatical and electronic competence	Effective	Effective
Q3	The role of L1 in mediation	Less helpful than L2	Helpful
Q4	Favorite mediation moves	Links Highlights	Highlights

Q5	Research context preferences	Skype for screen sharing Google Wave for real time writing	Google Wave for real time writing
Q6	Anxiety levels in mediation in SCMC	Medium	Low

Regarding their overall experience in this study, the participants in the study found the project interesting for distant education purposes. Although Student 2 found the procedures for doing DA in SCMC context interesting, she doubted its feasibility in Iran in the following excerpt:

"*That's good, I think if you want to use them in Iran, it won't do much good, because of the internet situation in there, but it's great for outside the country.*"

The second question was concerned with the effectiveness of DA mediation in SCMC context to promote the target structures' development and electronic competence. The learners were questioned on the effectiveness of online mediation to aid the development of both electronic

literacy and language skills that form the basis of their electronic communicative competence (Chapelle 2001). They indicated the online mediation was generally effective in raising their awareness to the problematic sections of some target structures such as third person singular "s" in simple present tense, the prepositions, and the speculation about past using modals. Student 2 observed that:

"In the last three sessions it really helped me, specially the part about the present tense, and also the speculations, that you talked about, I studied them before, but you helped me to pay more attention and notice the difference , the links were very useful for me"

The participants thought that their oral and written narratives could become richer if they were initially provided with a list of relevant vocabularies to the theme of the stories. They indicated that more time was dedicated to unknown vocabulary rather than focusing on target structures.

Student 2 indicated that she had struggled to master the use of prepositions in different classes, but the information she found on the posted web links and oral explanations made them quite easy and understandable. In the same vein, Student 1 pointed out that she could remember times in which she missed third person singular "s" in her writings. She found highlighting mediation very instrumental in reminding him of this problem and consequently overcoming it. The participants indicated that working with Skype and Google wave and their associated applications enhanced their electronic competence and now they feel much more comfortable to use the collaborative Web tools to promote their linguistic competence as well.

The third question addressed the role of L1 in mediation and how the learners felt about using L1 in the DA mediation in SCMC. The subjects were divided on the role of L1 in mediation. While Student 1 preferred only English to be used in mediations, Student 2 found L1 helpful in

overcoming their problems. Student2 sided with the use of L1 in mediation in the following excerpt:

"When I had a problem it was much better to ask about it in Persian, I used a simple Persian sentence instead of several English sentences and I understood it better."

Despite the fact that student 1 was a regular user of L1 in mediation, she did not approve of L1 use by the mediator in DA mediations and indicated that:

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"Sometimes the explanations in Persian were not understandable for me, I just wanted to learn everything in English because I really need it"

Apparently she was not aware of the fact that without L1 she could not extend his very limited linguistic competence and our mediation would be futile. They both indicated that they used repetitions to concentrate on and memorize difficult structures. For example Student 2 pointed out that:

"I repeated the highlighted structures to focus and remember them"

Next, they were questioned about their favorite mediation moves employed by the mediator through mediation in DA. They unanimously favored highlighting and posted web links more than others. Student 2 was particularly interested in web links and indicated that:

"The highlighting was really interesting, it made me pay more attention…. but what you did really helped me too, one of the links you sent me led me to a great website which I actually put in my favorites, it was a great website."

The main goal of providing web links was to engage the learners with new information available through embedded links to further extend their ZPDs for target structures. Similarly, student 1 also pointed out his stance toward web links in the following statement:

"Well, all the things you did were great feedback and they helped me, and the one that was more interesting for me was the links, I would learn the rules from the links, and after that the highlights were very useful".

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Student 2 also mentioned that in his search to deal with the problems in mediation, the embedded links within the web pages took him to new sites with lots of interesting information to engage him with different aspects of the target structures.

"Yeah, they were very helpful, and the best were the links because apart from the things related to my error I'd see other points too."

The subject of next question was research context and instruments through which the study was carried out. All subjects indicated that Google wave made it possible for them to use real time writing and feedback, something that they never experienced before. They also agreed that Skype was useful for oral mediation and found its screen sharing applications for playing video clips remarkable. Student 1 found these Web 2.0 tools very interesting and expressed her willingness to use them in her future teaching career.

As the learners were monitored while they were writing their narratives in GW, the mediator wondered if they experienced any anxiety and asked them to compare their anxiety levels in SCMC and traditional classroom context. Subjects pointed out that despite the fact that they knew the real time unfolding of their writing process was monitored by the mediator, they did not feel the sort of anxiety they would feel in traditional classroom context. The role of anxiety in classroom-based

DA in general and SCMC-based DA in particular definitely requires a systematic and comprehensive research and exploration to investigate its role in mediation.

Student 2 compared the mediation in SCMC context to the traditional classroom teachings and indicated that:

"Well, obviously, I think this was better than a classroom, this was more comfortable, because I didn't have the stress I would have in a real class, and because of your feedback, I thought you're close to me, so it was more comfortable"

Although Student 1 experienced a medium level of anxiety in mediation in SCMC context because of gaps in L2 knowledge caused by exposure to French, she maintained that:

"No, definitely not as much anxiety as the classroom, but I it wasn't anxiety-free either, maybe a little anxiety but nothing compared to a real classroom".

Generally, the learners found mediation in SCMC context via Web tools of Skype and Google wave effective to promote the target structures and they were satisfied with the results.

Conclusion

The participants in the study found the project very innovative and practical particularly for distant education purposes over the net. As for the effectiveness of the mediation in online DA, both learners favored highlighting as an effective tool to raise their awareness about the location of the errors .They also found cyber-mediation in which the learners were given opportunity to explore the web by following the posted links to the relevant web sites focusing on the target structures. The learners also pointed out that despite the fact that they knew the real time unfolding of their writing process was monitored by the mediator, they did not feel the sort of anxiety they would

feel in traditional classroom context. They rather tried to use the SCMC context as an opportunity to construct knowledge in their ZPDs for the target structures.

The results of the study indicated that the potential fit between the capabilities of SCMC as a cultural tool and the demands of the interactionist DA along with the situational constraints such as physical distance between researcher and participants made SCMC a legitimate discourse for the study.

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The participants indicated that along with the target structure, their web literacy has dramatically improved. This reiterates Suaro's (2009) position that the multimodality of SCMC may provide learners with tools and strategies that not only promotes linguistic competence but it enhances electronic competence (Chapelle, 2001) as well. This highlights the point that sociocultural theory takes a multi-faceted view of human development and can apply to any new knowledge (Simpsons, 2005). Sociocultural theory thus allows us to view language learning as just one part of a learner's development.

A potential limitation of this study is the small sample size. This is, in part, the result of logistical constraints such as limitations on access to broadband internet and the availability of participants - that were outside the control of the researcher. As with any qualitative research study, the external generalizability of the findings may be limited, as there remains the possibility that the research undertaken in different circumstances could produce varying results.

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Appendix A

Questions for semi-structured interview

1-Describe your overall experience of the online exchanges with the mediator.

2. How effective was the mediation to promote grammatical and electronic competence in SCMC? Tell me about the moves during the online mediation that were particularly helpful or confusing.

3. What was the role of L1 in DA mediation? Did you prefer L1 or L2 during mediation?

4. What types of assistance provided through levels of regulatory scale were the most and the least interesting? Why?

5. Did you find SCMC an effective medium to enrich mediation in online DA? What were the advantages and disadvantages of the web 2.0 applications of Skype and Google wave used in the study?

6. How was your level of anxiety in SCMC-based DA and how do you compare it with classroom context ?

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