Learners' Evaluation of Task-Based Online Language Activity in a Community of Inquiry

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Abstract— **This study explored learners' evaluation of task-based online language learning. Using the Community of Inquiry framework to design the online environment, a task-based activity simulating an e-meeting was introduced to engage the learners in problem-solving and discussions to foster higher-order learning and critical discourse (Garrison, 2007). The participants of the study were 60 third year engineering students at two public technical universities in Malaysia enrolled in a workplace English language course. They were divided into teams of four in which two participants from each university made up each team. Seven teams were assigned as +Task Structure (+TS) teams while the other eight were the –Task Structure (-TS) teams. The participants' perception was gauged using a learners' evaluation survey distributed via Google forms. The analyses of the findings demonstrate the potential of task-based online language learning activity when embedded in a Community of Inquiry to stimulate learners' interest in the task on top of encouraging critical and creative thinking.**

Keywords— **task-based, Community of Inquiry framework, learners' perception, language instruction**

I. INTRODUCTION

The Community of Inquiry (COI) framework postulates that an effective online learning environment is created through an infrastructure that takes into consideration three consigning elements which are: Teaching, Social and Cognitive Presences (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000). It is further explained that to ensure meaningful learning, authentic activities and discussions may result in successful development of Cognitive Presence as well as higher-order learning and critical discourse (Garrison, 2007). Task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach puts emphasis on meaningful, real-world process of language use to develop language and communication skills and enhance cognitive processes (Ellis, 2003). In this view, learner interaction is deemed important as a vehicle for effective communication to take place (Gass and Mackey, 2012). To complete the task given to them and solve the problem presented by the task, learners have to interact and collaborate with other learners and as such language learning would become more significant and meaningful (Bowles and Adams, 2014). In addition, the task design may also contribute in increasing the cognitive complexity for learners and hence promote critical thinking. Robinson (2007) mentioned in his Triadic Componential Framework that for task design the three factors which could influence L2 acquisition and cognitive development are task complexity, task condition and task difficulty. For task complexity, there are resource-directing and resource-dispersing variables whereby resource-directing variables increase conceptual demands while resource-dispersing variables elevate procedural demands on learners. Task structure is one of the resource-dispersing variables mentioned in the framework and studies have shown that it could affect learners' language production (Adams, Nik and Newton, 2015, UmiNik and Nor Shidrah, 2015). Due to the potential impact of tasks, specifically task structure, on interactions as well as cognitive and language development of L2 learners in a COI, it would be interesting to have more insights into this setting. However, before advocating that the merge of task-based activities with COI could lead to successful and meaningful learning it is essential to understand learners' perception of the task-based activity and weigh the feasibility of utilizing it in the ESL classroom. Thus, this study examined learners' evaluation of the task-based activity in an online language (L2) learning classroom which has adapted the COI framework. The research was guided by the following question: How do the learners evaluate the task-based online language activity?

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Community of Inquiry instructional approach

The online learning platform was set up using the COI framework. In the framework, Teaching Presence plays a major role in creating a platform which encourages critical interaction and collaboration. Teaching Presence is the "binding element in creating a community of inquiry for educational purposes" (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000: 96) and it comprises of two major elements for consideration which are structure (design) and leadership (facilitation and direction)" (Garrison, 2007: 67). It is believed that through effective design and facilitation, the other elements of the COI framework, Social and Cognitive Presence, could be enhanced resulting in a significant educational experience for learners. Using the study by Szeto (2015) as guidelines, Teaching Presence was facilitated through a mix of face-to-face direct instruction, online student interaction via *Whatsapp* and shared documents on Google drive. The task provided the direction for the discussion and task completion posed as the end goal of the interaction. An ice-breaking session between members of each group from the two universities was conducted prior to their engagement with the task. The session

helped to form and enhance learners' Social Presence through informal interactions prior to on-task discussions. Cognitive Presence was naturally encouraged through the task-based activity, which required students to engage in problem solving, task completion and learners' evaluation survey.

B. Task-based activities

The task resembles an authentic situation at workplaces. It was a workplace simulation activity in which students had to assume the role of personnel at different branches of a company meeting virtually to discuss problems the company faced leading to lower productivity and higher operational cost to the company. Four students were grouped in a team and each of them had a different issue to put forward. They virtually met via WhatsApp for an hour to discuss the causes of and solutions to the problems. The discussion was carried out via text chat and the transcripts emailed to the researcher after the discussion. Since this experimental study engaged resource-dispersing variables which is task structure, seven teams were assigned as the +Task Structure (+TS) teams, while eight teams were - Task Structure (-TS) teams. The +Task Structure (+TS) teams were given two worksheets: Sheet A and B while the - Task Structure (-TS) teams only received Sheet A. Sheet B comprised of questions to help each student prepare for the task and guide the discussion while Sheet A required students to summarize the issues and solutions as well as their recommendation as a team on which issue that had to be resolved first (Table 1). The variable has been set to observe if procedural demands would affect learners' language and cognitive development. However, findings of the experiment will not be reported here as it is not the objective of this paper.

Table 1:Task design

Task complexity > Resource-dispersing variables > Task structure	
+Task Structure (+TS) teams	- Task Structure (-TS) teams
Sheet A and B	Sheet A only

C. Respondents of the survey

This consisted of 56 out of the 60 students (in the main study) from 2 universities in Malaysia. They were divided into 15 groups of 4 with 2 members from each university. The respondents were engineering students in their second and third year of study. The online interaction was via *WhatsApp* and the completion of task was done using shared documents on Google drive.

D. Learners' evaluation survey

A questionnaire via Google form was used to gaugelearners'engagement with the task and their thoughts on the task itself. The survey was distributed and answered via Google Forms and it consisted of 2 demographic, 10 Likert-scale and 2 open-ended questions. Items in the questionnaire focused on the learners' evaluation of:

1. learners' contribution to the online task,
2. the usefulness of Sheet B provided to (+TS) groups
3. the task-based activity

III. FINDINGS

The findings will be reported according to the 3 focus areas in the questionnaire.

A. Learners' contribution to the online discussion

This section consists of 6 items to gauge learners' perception of their individual contribution to the task (Table i).

Table 2: Learners' contribution to the online task

Item	Frequency (%)		
	Most of the time	Sometimes	Rarely
I checked others' understanding of the meaning conveyed	21 (37.5)	32 (57.1)	3 (5.4)
I offered immediate feedback on language errors	14 (25)	34 (60.7)	8 (14.3)
I presented ideas in an organized manner	35 (62.5)	20 (35.7)	1 (1.8)
I expressed arguments convincingly	18 (32.1)	35 (62.5)	3 (5.4)
I interrupted discussions appropriately	24 (42.9)	27 (48.2)	5 (8.9)
I maintained the smooth flow of discussion	34 (60.7)	20 (35.7)	2 (3.6)

The students thought that they contributed most at ensuring the smooth organization of ideas and flow of the group discourse: I presented ideas in an organized manner (62.5%) and I maintained the smooth flow of discussion (60.7%). However, they said that they only sometimes: expressed arguments convincingly (62.5), offered immediate feedback on language errors (60.7), checked others' understanding of the meaning conveyed (57.1) or interrupted discussions appropriately (48.2). Generally, students' evaluation of their individual contribution to the task was good.

B. Usefulness of Sheet B provided to (+ TS) groups

These questions were addressed specifically for the +Task Structure (+TS)groups that received an extra sheet, i.e. Sheet B. Sheet B was treated as a scaffold to their learning, hence, the aim of the sheet was to investigate if the scaffold provided in lieu of Teaching Presence was advantageous to the learners.

Table 3: Usefulness of Sheet B

Item	Frequency (%)	
	Yes	No
Sheet B is useful for structuring my language	27 (95)	1 (5)
Sheet B is useful for organizing my thoughts	27 (95)	1 (5)

Essentially, the students found that Sheet B was helpful in helping them complete the task. They said that it facilitated in structuring their language (95%) and in organizing their thoughts (95%). It functioned as efficient and effective prompt to guide their group discussions. Further evidence is as follows:

"We manage to express our opinion in details and organize the ideas based on the category given." *[sic]* (Student 29)

"We were able to plan the flow of the discussion." *[sic]* (Student 46)

"I can ask the question using the task given, can elaborate the sentences using the question and can make easier to us to know question to ask the teammate." *[sic]* (Student 15)

"Since it already give description what we need to point out such as what is the issue, when it happen(ed), what the action taken. It is really help me get the idea and easy for me to elaborate." *[sic]*

(Student 17)

However, there were also some comments on the disadvantages which the instructor could use for improvement of the task:

"The cons are it might distract the focus of a member during the meeting as each of them have to take some time to complete the table (in the task)." *[sic]* (Student 7)

" too much idea or point to be answer with little time duration." *[sic]* (Student 45)

C. The task-based activity

Majority of the students claimed that the activity was interesting, 98.2% (Table iii).

Table 4: The task-based activity

Item	Frequency (%)	
	Positive	Negative
What is your overall opinion of this activity?	55 (98.2)	1 (1.8)

They also stated that the activity should be continued in other classes as well:

"VERY INTERESTING. It is so much fun knowing stranger from (an)other university during the learning process. This activity rarely found and I hope this activity can be continue(d) and proceed in the future for other student(s) too. I really appreciate it. Thank you." *[sic]* (Student 17)

Some felt that it was a meaningful activity which required critical and creative thinking skills, as well as emulates real workplace experience:

"Something rare and meaningful for us."*[sic]*

(Student 1)

"...this activity challenge students on their creative thinking, problem solving, and also on their critical thinking skills." *[sic]* (Student 9)

"this activity is quite interesting and challenging as the candidates are required to think critically and analyse the issues. At (the) same time, the students experience some real life meeting through online (whatsap) to communicate with the students from other University. I feel that this activity should be continued in future in order to train the students for occupational knowledge." *[sic]* (Student 7)

Several students also suggested some improvements, specifically on the time duration allocated for the task:

"Improvement such as providing more time on the discussion because the internet connection for each team member is not the same. Some members got good internet connection, some are not. So the discussion got some lag time." *[sic]*

(Student 9)

"The activity is very interesting and is a creative approach for students to apply their professional communication skills. The only drawback to this activity is that the allocated time is very short. Because of this the discussion conducted was very hectic and not orderly. Furthermore, because of shortage of time we were not able to discuss the problem at hand with much detail. I would suggest that more time is allocated for this activity to be much more effective and to be able to serve its purpose to the students." *[sic]* (Student 52)

There were also comments that for the ease and comfort of students, the task should be done in a proper computer laboratory rather than the classroom and the briefing on performing the task should be given prior to the discussion for them to prepare better. For the student who did not favour the activity (1.8%), an interesting comment was directed to the online environment rather than the task:

"I prefer direct conversation compared to passive online. So, no idea."*[sic]* (Student 43)

IV. DISCUSSION

The study shows that the students evaluated the task-based online language learning activity in a COI environment advantageously. They felt that they positively contributed to the flow and organization of the online discussions apart from helping to provide some language feedback to other group members. During the online discussions, the students were also consciously ensuring that their message was clearly conveyed and for the +TS group this was greatly facilitated by the prompt provided by Sheet B. As a result, the +TS group members were able to direct the discussion effectively towards its completion.

In general, the students found the whole activity to be very interesting and meaningful as it encourages critical and

creative thinking. From the learners' perspectives, the task-based, online language learning activity utilizing the COI framework has the potential to produce higher-order learning through critical discourse (Garrison, 2007). As such it can stimulate the students' cognitive processes along with their language and communication skills (Ellis, 2003) in a stimulating and an authentic environment. Perhaps one improvement which can be made is the time duration given to complete the task. The students indicated that the one hour given was insufficient to complete all the requirements of the task. Language proficiency could also have played its role in this as students need to use language and ensure that their message is understood by the other team members. Assessment of the learners' language production in terms of accuracy and fluency may provide a discerning answer to this.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper proposes that the use of task-based language learning activity in an online environment structured by the COI framework should be considered a new, beneficial and exciting approach for language learning. Findings from this study show that the learners liked both the task and the online discussions with learners from another university. The discussions helped them communicate more confidently, emulating workplace communication while the task focused the discussion on a real workplace issue. The COI framework is effective as a basis for designing the online classroom and the task-based activity provided efficient direction and facilitation towards task completion.

VI. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The aim of this paper was to report on learners' evaluation of the task-based activity in order to gauge the feasibility of using the activity in an online L2 classroom. The output from the learners' Whatsapp interactions and task completion is not reported. Perhaps, as a future direction for this research the two artefacts could be analyzed and evaluated to see the effectiveness of the approach on language production and cognitive development. A correlational study could elaborate on how far it is effective and efficient for L2 learners and language learning.

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