Internet Chat as Collaborative CALL: Language learning strategies in an Internet Chat class

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Language learning strategies in an internet Chat class

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This paper describes an internet Chat class in a compulsory Japanese language subject at an Australian university. The study seeks evidence of the use of language strategies relating to social interaction in Chat classes and examines the importance of strategy use in this form of Collaborative CALL. It also presents the way the medium is used in the curriculum as a means of fostering student collaboration. A preliminary survey was conducted to investigate types of strategies used by the students in two specific situations: when they saw an unknown word in their Chat partner’s message and when they did not know how to say a particular word. The results demonstrate how students practise the social strategies necessary for collaborative learning through a CALL activity. This is followed by a discussion of the importance and role of social learning strategies in collaborative CALL and possible directions of future studies on internet Chat use in foreign language education.

The arrival of internet and e-learning has added a new dimension to computer-assisted language learning (CALL), described by Sugimori (2003) as Collaborative CALL. Sugimori identifies three categories of CALL. The first, Drills-and-Practice CALL, is derived from behaviourism and audio-lingual habit theory, and students drill and practise things such as vocabulary and grammar points. The second, Communicative CALL, has a theoretical basis in cognitive psychology and constructivism, and learners practise communication through simulation-type tasks. Internet Chat, e-mail and video conferencing are examples of Collaborative CALL, which has a theoretical basis in social constructivism and cooperative language learning in the communicative approach. Social constructivism is derived from Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, which assumes ‘that all cognitive development, including language development, arises as a result of social interactions between individuals’ (Vygotsky 1978, cited in Lightbown & Spada 1999, p. 44). An implication of this theory for second language acquisition is ‘that second language learners advance to higher levels of linguistic knowledge when they collaborate and interact with speakers of the second language who are more knowledgeable than they are’.

Internet Chat as Collaborative CALL has the potential to provide second language learners with an opportunity to advance their linguistic knowledge by interacting with native speakers or with more advanced learners. Effective collaboration of a type that will maximise the benefit of interaction in a Collaborative CALL activity requires learners to use a range of learning strategies, particularly social strategies (Oxford 1993), such as asking questions, cooperating with others, and empathising with others (Brown 1994, p. 127). If learners lack such strategies, their language development in a Collaborative CALL activity is likely to be impeded and the opportunity to advance to higher levels of linguistic knowledge through collaboration and interaction restricted.
This paper will firstly examine previous studies to seek evidence of the effective use of social strategies, notably in internet Chat classes, and evaluate the importance of those strategies in Collaborative CALL. Secondly, it will describe an internet Chat class in a compulsory Japanese language subject at an Australian university (see Iwasaki & Oliver 2003). These studies are encouraging, however, and indicate the potential contribution to foreign language education of such research. In this section, past studies on the use of internet Chat as a place of collaborative learning will be examined, followed by a review of previous studies on the roles of language learning strategies in an internet Chat class.

Freiermuth (2002) examines the collaborative aspects of the use of internet Chat in the context of a group of students studying English as a second language in America. In his study, three university students participated in a collaborative task where they played the role of city council members who had to decide the best business to start in the American city in which they were residing. The study presents the give-and-take of real conversation where negotiation occurred as the three students actively participated in task resolution. It also shows one discussant making sure that one of the other discussants who failed to respond is ‘not off task or feeling left out’.

Although Freiermuth acknowledges that such active and effective discussion could be due to the fact that the discussants were ‘fairly high-level’ students, he claims that ‘the kind of collaborative interaction that occurs in online discussion is a direct reflection of the quality of the task that students need to resolve’ (2002, pp. 36–40). Needless to say, as in any language learning activities, the quality of the task is an important factor and teachers need to prepare tasks carefully in order to make an online discussion successful and interesting. The study also indicates that ‘the ability to view the conversation as it unfolds helps keep students engaged, focused, and contributing’ (2002, pp. 36–40). It is important to note, however, that for the students in this study the strategy of ‘emphasising with others’ might have played a more important part in successful collaboration than Freiermuth’s claim that the teacher had given a well-prepared and interesting task.

Blake (2000) also discusses the importance of task design, claiming that carefully designed tasks can stimulate learners to negotiate meaning. He gives the example of jigsaw tasks which ‘require each partner to both request and contribute parts of the solution’ and suggests that this might lead to a ‘certain level of cooperation, convergence, and a pooling of resources’ (2000, p. 133). In Blake’s study, both partners collaborating in the Chat were non-native speakers (NNS–NNS dyads) and this might have influenced the frequency of online negotiation. Blake’s students seemed to negotiate meaning more with their non-native partners than in this study where the online partners were native speakers (NNS–NS dyads).

Another study which focuses on collaborative aspects in internet Chat was carried out by Kitade (2000), who worked with students from an advanced Japanese language class at an American university, and analysed their discourse via internet Chat as they were designing an ideal school. The study describes how the learners noticed errors, and negotiated meaning during their dialogues. Although the focus of the study was not learning strategies, these two behaviours exemplify the use of social strategies (see Oxford 1993). The participants negotiated the meaning of words with phonological errors and the meaning of multiple topics happening at the same time by pasting a part of the unknown or unclear section from the previous utterance. The text-based nature of computer-mediated communication (CMC), greatly facilitates the use of those strategies which, as Kitade points out, ‘allow individuals to participate at their own time and pace’ and involve a ‘lesser degree of imposition in asking for meaning’ (2000, p. 161).

However, if students were asked to collaborate on a task, would they still take the time required to fully understand meanings, using strategies such as asking questions and cooperating with others? Would the need to clarify meanings take precedence over the need to proceed with the task? Although Kitade’s participants could not see each other during the Chat activity, they negotiated meanings only with their Chat partners. Would they still do this if there were other people, for example, classmates and teachers, in the computer room with them? Or would they seek some quicker form of assistance in order to understand the meaning of an unknown word so that they could carry out their task more efficiently? These same questions apply to Blake’s participants in the study described above. These questions have been taken into consideration when designing the survey which will be presented later in the paper.

Lastly, numerous studies have been conducted in the past with regard to language learning strategy use in general (Cohen 1998; Oxford 1993); in specific situations (Chamot, Robbins & El-Dinary 1993); and in relation to the use of a particular skill — for example, listening and speaking (Hsiao & Oxford 2002). The study by Ramzan and Saito (1999) describes a variety of strategies elicited by self-evaluation sheets, and suggests that the act of completing such an evaluation can enhance students’ metacognitive knowledge about Japanese language learning. Saito (2004) modified and reused the self-evaluation sheet to further develop participants’ metacognitive processes such as self-evaluation, self-monitoring, self-recording, self-metacognitive processes such as self-evaluation, self-monitoring, self-reinforcement — indirect strategies in Oxford’s system (Oxford 1993) that are required for self-directed learning. The study confirms that the ‘internet Chat session with the appropriate instruction could also assume a role in foreign language education as strategy developer and application of learned language’ (Saito 2004, p. 190) as well as promoting learner autonomy, all of which were aims of the study.
In order to fully appreciate the pedagogical potential of the Chat, it is important to further the understanding of students' learning behaviour in Chat sessions at various levels including their language and skills development. The above-mentioned studies do not view internet Chat as Collaborative CALL, despite the fact that participants communicated with groups of students in Japan and engaged in collaborative projects. Furthermore, although the use of metacognitive language learning strategies was evident in Saito's latest study (2004), participants were not provided with an opportunity to reflect on such strategies. This study therefore attempts to view internet Chat in the context of Collaborative CALL and to deepen the understanding of students' learning behaviour in this context. With the questions raised in the studies by Kitade (2000) and Sugimori (2003) in mind, a preliminary survey was conducted to identify the types of strategies used by students in specific situations in internet Chat classes. The results of this survey are discussed below.

**Chat class description and its place in the curriculum**

In 2003, 11 third year students of Japanese at the University of Wollongong participated in a simultaneous Chat program as a part of their compulsory language subject. The subject usually consists of a one-hour lesson of kanji and four hours of grammar per week. For six weeks, one of the grammar hours was replaced with a Chat session, which was conducted in the university computer laboratory where the seating arrangement was unrestricted. Students communicated interactively with their ‘Chat buddies’, students of English at Doshisha University in Japan, once a week for 60 minutes over the six-week period. A web-based communication tool called WebCT was used for the class, providing six Chat rooms. The students of Wollongong University were allocated to rooms in advance in alphabetical order. In total, there were four or five students in each room, at least two from each university.

The coordinators from the two universities decided the topics for discussion at the beginning of the semester. These included self-introduction, future career, gender role, the war in Iraq and how to learn a foreign language. Once the students logged in, they discussed one of the prescribed topics including newspaper articles that they sent to each other by email. Communication was through text that they typed into the computer.

The project theme for the whole subject was the importance of manners. In order to successfully complete the project, students were required to give a speech and write an essay on what they had learned in the subject incorporating what they had discussed in the Chat sessions and what they had learned in kanji and grammar lessons. However, students were not assessed on grammatical accuracy during the Chat sessions. The conversation was free-flowing with the supervising language teacher acting as a resource for understanding and writing.

With regard to the assessment tasks for Chat sessions, students were required to keep a Chat logbook consisting of two sections: 1) a summary report of each Chat session written in Japanese; and 2) self-evaluation of what they learned, how they prepared each Chat session and how they planned the next one. (For more information on the self-evaluation sheet, see Saito 2004). The students submitted five entries for assessment at the end of the six sessions.

**Survey**

During the sixth session, a Chat strategies survey was administered in class. Prior to completing the survey, the students were told that participation was voluntary and not a part of their assessment and that they were free to withdraw from the survey at any time without giving a reason. They were also assured that all data collected from the survey would be presented in a form that did not identify them in any way. Ten students who were present on the day participated and all received the same instructions. The students were asked to choose their five most frequently used strategies in two given situations during Chat sessions, and to rank them by frequency of use; 1 for the most frequently used, 5 for the least frequently used. The aim was to identify what type of strategies the students used in specific situations in order to deepen the understanding of the students' learning behaviour in internet Chat classes.

With regard to survey design, in order to ensure that strategy items were at the same level of specificity, two specific situations were set. Such an approach was recommended by Hsiao and Oxford (2002, pp. 379–380) to improve existing strategies systems on the basis of comparing theories of language learning strategies. The two situations in the survey were:

**Situation A**  ‘When you saw an unknown word or expression in your buddy’s message, what did you do?’

**Situation B**  ‘When you did not know how to say a particular word or expression, what did you do?’

Questions and choices for the survey were created on the basis of student responses recorded in the study by Ramzan and Saito (1998), general ideas from Oxford’s strategies classification system (Brown 1994) and strategies used in specific situations from the study by Chamot, Robbins and El-Dinary (1993). The questions raised in the study by Kitade cited above were also considered in designing the survey in terms of when and to whom the participants asked questions when negotiating meanings.

The following is a list of strategy options from which students were asked to select the five most frequently used in Situations A and B:

a. Ask the Chat buddy what it means or how to say on the spot
b. Ask the Chat buddy what it means or how to say later
c. Ask classmate what it means or how to say on the spot
d. Ask classmate what it means or how to say later
e. Ask teacher what it means or how to say on the spot
f. Ask teacher what it means or how to say later
g. Analyse the grammatical structure
h. Consult dictionary on the spot
i. Consult dictionary later
j. Try to guess what it is from the parts you do understand
k. Try to express in a different way
l. Switch to English right away
m. Ignore
n. Other (please write your strategy)
Survey results

Figure 1 shows the types of strategies most frequently used by students when they saw an unknown word or expression in their buddy’s message.

Figure 1: Types of strategies used in Chat — Situation A

Q: When you saw an unknown word or expression in your buddy’s message, what did you do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d, f, g, i, m</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Twelve strategies were reported as being used in Situation A. The most frequently used strategy was (a) 29% (ask the Chat buddy what it means or how to say on the spot). Five students ranked that strategy as their most frequently used strategy. The second most frequently used strategy was (c) 27% (ask classmate what it means or how to say on the spot). Three students ranked this strategy as their most frequently used strategy. All 10 students listed (a) and (c) as one of the five most frequently used strategies. The third and fourth most frequently used strategies were (e) 16% (ask teacher what it means or how to say on the spot) and (j) 11% (try to guess what it is from the parts you understood). Strategy (e) was reported by eight students and strategy (j) by seven students as one of the five most frequently used strategies. Furthermore, six students indicated strategy (h) 8% (consult dictionary on the spot) as one of their top five strategies.

Figure 2 shows the types of strategies most frequently used by the students when they did not know how to say a particular word or expression during Chat sessions. Eleven strategies were reported as being used in Situation B. The most frequently used strategy was (c) 21% (ask classmate what it means or how to say on the spot). Strategy (h) was included among the five most frequently used strategies by six students and strategy (k) by five students. Furthermore, five students listed strategy (i) (consult dictionary later) as one of the five strategies.

In sum, when they saw an unknown word or expression in the buddy’s message, students were most likely to ask the Chat buddy, classmate or teacher on the spot (29%, 27% and 16% respectively). They also were most likely to ask a classmate or teacher on the spot (21% and 13% respectively) and consult a dictionary immediately (12%) when they did not know how to say a particular word or expression.

Discussion

This preliminary survey shows the use of various strategies in the two specific situations. It is important to note, however, that because of the small numbers of participants, any conclusions which can be drawn are very tentative. Negotiation of meaning with the Chat buddy was mostly reported when participants saw an unknown word or expression in their buddies’ message (i.e. Situation A). This confirms, as mentioned in an earlier section, that CMC tends to allow ‘the lesser degree of imposition in asking for meaning’ (Kitade 2000, p. 161). It is interesting to note,

1 The percentage that accompanies each strategy was calculated as follows: the most frequently used strategy attracts five points and the fifth strategy one point. As the students were asked to select five strategies in order of frequency, each student provides 15 points in total. Then the points each strategy attracted were added and converted into a percentage. As there were 10 students who participated in the survey, the grand total is 150 points which equals 100%. For example, the highest points that a strategy can attract are 50 points (i.e. approximately 33.3%). This is in the case that all of the 10 students selected the same strategy as the most used.

2 11.6% before rounding off.

12.2% before rounding off.

The third most frequently used strategy was (h) 12% (consult dictionary on the spot). Six students included this among their top five strategies. Strategies (k) (try to express in a different way) and (l) (switch to English right away), each with 12%, were equal fourth. Strategy (i) was included among the five most frequently used strategies by six students and strategy (k) by five students. Furthermore, five students listed strategy (i) (consult dictionary later) as one of the five strategies.

In sum, when they saw an unknown word or expression in the buddy’s message, students were most likely to ask the Chat buddy, classmate or teacher on the spot (29%, 27% and 16% respectively). They also were most likely to ask a classmate or teacher on the spot (21% and 13% respectively) and consult a dictionary immediately (12%) when they did not know how to say a particular word or expression.
and who knew their level of Japanese. Blake (2000) found that when second language learners were paired with native speakers, the native speakers were more in control of the conversation and the second language learners did not notice or repair miscommunications, probably owing to the fear of embarrassment (p. 128). Another interpretation could be that the preference to ask the people near them was evidence of a social strategy to avoid interrupting the flow of conversation on the Chat space.

With regard to strategy (I) (switching to English) in Situation B, the strategy is ranked equal fourth. A possible reason is that the participants knew that the Chat buddies were students of English and might have fallen into this comfort zone assuming the buddy would understand what they were trying to say. Or it could be considered a “compensation strategy” in Oxford’s term, in order to overcome limitations in writing. In other words, they reverted to English rather than sticking to the task of using Japanese which was what they were required to do, because using Japanese might have taken longer, and they wanted to avoid slowing down the Chat conversation. It would be interesting to see whether the strategy types employed would be the same if the buddies did not understand English at all, or if the students did not know whether or not the buddies understood English.

Finally, with regard to survey methodology, the students in this study were required to select from a list of strategies given to them. The results relied solely on what the participants reported on the survey and they do not provide information on the actual number of times that the participants used each strategy. Discourse analysis might provide useful information in this regard. In addition, a more qualitative approach that asks students to elaborate on their choice of strategies in their own words might provide a better or different understanding of students’ learning behaviour in internet Chat. It would also be useful to conduct further comparative studies on the use of social strategies, in particular between other Collaborative CALL activities in various situations in order to fully appreciate internet Chat’s pedagogical potential. The implications of the current survey for teachers to better prepare students for Collaborative CALL are to encourage active interaction and to monitor students’ strategy use for effectiveness and efficiency depending on the aim of the task in which they are engaging.

**Conclusion**

This study has viewed the use of internet Chat as Collaborative CALL. A preliminary survey was conducted in order to identify types of strategies used by students of Japanese in two specific situations in internet Chat sessions. Although the survey results could not be statistically confirmed (because of the small number of students), a variety of strategies were identified in the specific situations. The type and rank of strategies reported in the survey indicate that, consciously or not, students practise social strategies that are necessary for collaborative learning. Some strategy preferences could be interpreted as consideration paid to the Chat buddies in order to make the conversation flow. Hence social strategies are an important part of participating in internet Chat sessions (i.e. Collaborative CALL) in order to effectively interact and successfully complete a task. Although the use of various strategies was reported, the efficiency and appropriateness of the strategies used still need to be investigated. In addition, as suggested by Blake, the type of tasks and the make-up of the pairs could also affect strategy use and should be the focus of future studies.
Surveys such as the refined model described above will assist in the better understanding of students’ learning behaviour in internet Chat sessions. Understanding such behaviour will assist teachers to better prepare students for participation in Collaborative CALL and better position internet Chat as a pedagogical tool, leading to more effective use of the medium in foreign language education.

References
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