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Blending Synchronous and Asynchronous Communication Technologies in English as a Second Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The world is dynamic and this dynamism is witnessed in all facets of life, including education. Synchronous and asynchronous communication technologies are some of the developmental and innovative tools that have remarkable impacts on the education system, particularly on language teaching and learning which has assumed a new dimension with the introduction of online learning platforms particularly through synchronous and asynchronous learning technologies. Synchronous learning offers students and teachers multiple ways of interacting and sharing information online in real time through various technologies such as video conferencing, webcasts, telephone conferences, and the like. In asynchronous learning, students are able to participate in their own learning and are given the opportunity to interact with their peers, provide peer feedback and reflect on the status of their personal goals and outcomes. They also create, synthesize, explain and apply the content being taught. The paper takes a look at the importance of the two learning platforms for effective language teaching and learning. It identifies the technologies of the two platforms and the benefits of blending them for effective teaching and learning of English language. The anticipated problems of the blend are also highlighted and the paper recommends that English Language teachers should blend learning environments for effective teaching and learning of the subject.

Keywords: Synchronous Communication, Asynchronous Communication, Blended Learning, Online Learning, ESL

Introduction

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) emerged as the language of the Internet. Linguists and Sociolinguists have been increasingly interested in linguistic features of CMC. Herring (1996) (as cited in Freudenberg, 2009) defines computer-mediated communication as communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of a computer. This type of interaction involves messages that are typed on a computer keyboard of one participant and read by another participant or participants on their computer screens either instantly (synchronous communication) or at later point in time (asynchronous communication). In synchronous learning, lectures, discussions, and lesson presentations occur at a specific point in time. Synchronous learning environments support learning and teaching and offer students and teachers multiple ways of interacting, sharing, and the ability to collaborate and ask questions in real-time through various synchronous learning technologies. Examples of synchronous online technology types include videoconferencing, webcasts, interactive learning models, and telephone conferences (Er and Arifoglu, 2009). Synchronous Communication allows users to communicate online in real time. It provides immediacy to communication and strengthens collaboration in distance education as teachers and students located in

rooms thousands of miles away may still spontaneously communicate together as if they were physically present. In synchronous chat, individuals can type messages to other individuals or groups of individuals from their computers and their messages appear instantly on the recipients' screen (Werry, 1996 as cited in Freudenberg, 2009). One of the largest chat systems on the Internet is known as "Internet relay chat" (IRC) where users can choose from many different "channels", which are essentially electronic communities and consist of people who have a particular interest such as sport, politics, music or simply meeting new people.

Synchronous Communication Technology (SCT) allows teachers to determine students' understanding of content and provide immediate feedback as well as enables teachers to ask questions to test students' understanding, test their ability, or get their opinion. It can also provide individual feedback and guidance to students outside the regular class time by allowing teachers to be available to students via chat (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2011 as cited in Kask, 2014). SCT enables students in the virtual classroom to have a social presence similar to a traditional classroom, empowers students to interact socially, generates conversation in a real-time online environment and provides teachers and students with the opportunity to know each other personally. Chat features of SCT allow multiple students to contribute to group discussions, resulting in increased class participation and social presence. Direct messaging creates a natural environment for students to conveniently and spontaneously express a range of emotions and socially interact (Murphy et al., 2011 as cited in Kask, 2014), which may activate quieter students to be more confident in socializing and expressing their own opinions. Moreover, quiet students, who rarely speak in a traditional class, may consistently interact in the virtual classroom. Synchronous communication is direct communication that occurs in real time and can be incorporated into distance education through instant messaging, chat rooms, audio and video conferencing and text messages.

Benefits of Synchronous Learning According to Carbajal (2014) interactivity is the key to synchronous instruction, online or on-campus, and it allows students to demonstrate their knowledge and practice their communication skills, ask questions to deepen their understanding, build relationships with their teacher and fellow classmates, engage students in discussions, problem-solving, and group projects. It also allows teachers to focus on class time on bridging skills' gaps and to build one-on-one relationships with students.

All these applications can serve several instructional purposes, but choosing a particular computer communication tool must be according to the language aspect or skill intended to be learned or developed. English teachers can use them to provide more opportunities for students to use English so as to learn and improve their performance in the language. They can also use these applications to interact with and give feedback to their EFL/ESL students which can make the process of learning

more beneficial. In addition, these applications can be used to foster collaborative learning among students, engaging them in the process of English learning and motivating them to participate in discussions more effectively than they do in face-to–face discussions. To make these tools more effective in the classroom, the teacher can use Video Projector to show any of the conversations among teams or groups on a screen so that anyone can observe any of the online conversations. They can observe and supervise the group conversations in order to monitor their progress (Clyde & Delohery, 2005).

Asynchronous learning emerged out of a perceived need by institutions to deliver curriculum to students who were unable to attend classes in a traditional physical setting due to factors such as distance. These correspondence and distance courses, which were delivered by mail, allowed students to complete readings and assignments on their own time regardless of the teacher's schedule and availability. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) define Asynchronous learning technologies have been defined as personalized learning tools with which the teacher can assess what the students understand and adapt future course assignments to facilitate a higher level and more in-depth understanding of the content. These online learning environments according to Garrison and Kanuka (2004) create an opportunity for online students to become highly self-reflective.

Asynchronous tools also provide a learning space where participants can confront debatable ideas and faulty thinking in more objective and reflective ways.

Benefits of Asynchronous Learning

Through asynchronous instruction and materials, students are able to learn at their own pace, work at their own level, moving as quickly or slowly through course materials as needed, review difficult materials as often as needed and explore resources that may be unavailable in the traditional classroom (Carbajal, 2014). In an asynchronous learning environment, students are able to actively participate in their own learning, giving them the opportunity to interact with their peers, provide peer feedback, and reflect on the status of their personal learning goals and outcomes. In many learning environments, there are learning activities and expectations that require students to create, synthesize, explain, and apply the content or skills being taught (Simonson et al., 2012). Asynchronous technologies support learning and allow more time for student reflection, collaboration, and student-to-student interactions (Meloni, 2010). A number of educational benefits can be observed from the use of asynchronous technologies in an online learning environment including: 1. enriched student products and portfolios, 2. student and teacher collaboration, and 3. learner specific pacing geared towards the individual student's needs (Meloni, 2010). Asynchronous tools enable communication over a period of time through a "different time, different place" mode. They include discussion boards, web logs, e-mail, and

social networking sites like Facebook. Erben, et al. (2008) claim that discussion boards are the best place for students to express their feelings and experiences, adding that by reading the posting of others and working on their writing before posting, their language can be improved. However, to make use of them more effective in teaching, teachers need to use them purposefully to meet the objectives of a specific course and to make them non-threatening in order to encourage students' participation.

Farreny (n.d.) observes that weblogs are personal interactive ediaries/journals which allow interaction through responses to a given topic and in relation to learning a language; they can be used to develop writing skills and abilities of students and reinforce reading skills. This was supported by Güttler (2011) who states that blogs can create opportunities for students to improve their reading and writing skills and build their vocabulary. He opines that using blogs in teaching EFL/ESL is useful for both teachers and students as they not only refresh, highly motivate, and excite the language learners but also create innovative ways of teaching language skills for language teachers as |well. Indeed, blogs are authentic, interesting, and communicative resources that can serve a variety of purposes in the foreign language teaching classroom. A medium to reflect on material, inquire into issues, and interact with others, blogs provide a rich and easy-to-use environment for both learners and instructors. Zhang's (2009) study also pointed out that blogs are effective teaching tools that can be used to improve students' English writing skills as well as give students' freedom for self-expression in English. They provide students with opportunities of social interaction, learning motivation and improve their writing and learning strategies as well as critical thinking skills.

Clyde and Delohery (2005) opined that Email is an Internet asynchronous tool that can be used for instructional purposes. David Crystal (2001) explains the uniqueness of email by equating to a quick letter or memo, but also like a phone call, in that it is a blend of talking and writing. Ultimately, Baron (2000) sees email as that which "lies at one end of the spectrum of computer-mediated communication, since it's primarily used for one-on-one message exchange between people who know each other's identity. Teachers can use it to enhance English language teaching and learning, provide services to generate students' work for teaching purposes, provide more contact time with and among students as well as provide students with opportunities for real life communication. The use of emails in teaching a language can improve students' grammar, vocabulary and writing skills.

Mubarak (2012) opines that social networking sites such as Facebook are synchronous tools that can be used in teaching English as a second and foreign language. Through this tool, students can have a lot of opportunities to use English language. For example, they can make discussions, write to friends, comment on pictures, etc. Teachers can use it outside the classroom to post links of useful videos

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and files to students and to send them homework they can do at home. They can also create their own groups that include their students and use that for instructional purposes, such as developing writing skills through posting topics for the students to write on and collaborative learning through setting topics for discussion. Blattner and Fiori (2009) highlighted how Facebook can provide language learners with opportunities to develop their socio-pragmatic competence and enhance a sense of community in language classrooms. Haverback (2009) stated that her students used Facebook collaboratively to discuss assignments, ask and answer questions in relation to their study. She found them more motivated to participate in discussions on Facebook. In fact, the Internet, with its synchronous and asynchronous tools, is an effective teaching tool. Message board forums are also popular asynchronous tools that allow students to post questions and responses to each other to develop content and ideas. It was found that message board forums helped students to build knowledge and new connections (Vonderwell, Liang, & Alderman, 2007 as cited in Kask, 2014).

Blending Synchronous and Asynchronous Communication Tools in ESLLearning

The term blended learning is used in diverse ways by different people. Overall, the three most common meanings are: the integration of traditional learning with web-based on-line approaches; the combination of media and tools (e.g. textbooks) employed in e-learning environments; and the combination of a number of teaching and learning approaches irrespective of the technology used (Driscoll, 2002 as cited in Klimova, 2009). Blended learning is a formal education programme in which student learns, at least in part, the content and instruction via digital and on-line media with some elements of control over time, place, path, or pace while still attending to school structure. In this situation, faceto-face classroom methods are combined with computer-mediated activities.

Blended learning is often used interchangeably as hybrid technology-mediated instruction, web-enhanced instruction and mixed-mode instruction in current research literature.

Currently, the use of the term blended learning mostly involves combining internet and digital media with established classroom forms that require the physical co-presence of teacher and students. In this method, teachers and professionals use online media to deliver notes, lectures and related course materials. Students review these materials at home and at their own pace. Classroom periods are then transformed into hands-on work periods where the teacher–who will have already delivered his or her lecture digitally, is free to field questions, engage class-wide discussions or offer other means of support. This reinforces student-centred learning, allowing students to master content individually.

Kask (2014) opines that blended learning can generally be classified into six models:

1. Face to face driver-where the teacher drives the instruction and augments with digital tools.
2. Rotation-students cycle through a schedule of independent online study and face to face classroom time.
3. Flex- most of the curriculum is delivered via a digital platform and teachers are available for face to face consultation and support.
4. Labs- the entire curriculum is delivered via a digital platform but in a consistent physical location. Students usually take traditional classes in this model as well.
5. Self-blend- students choose to augment their traditional learning with online course work
6. Online driver-all curriculum and teaching is[are] delivered via a digital platform and face to face meetings are scheduled or made available if necessary.

According to Murphy et al. (2011) as cited in Kask, (2014), the use of synchronous or asynchronous communication tools often depend on context. Synchronous tools were found to be effective in assisting a student with a specific problem, or to facilitate social interaction within the learning environment, specifically in 'virtual school' contexts. Teachers of older students feel that it is easier to communicate and distribute learning asynchronously, as students seem to prefer this approach due to the ease to communicate one-on-one and to work at one's own pace. Interactive media may also be ineffective if students prefer communicating in text-based environments.

A growing body of academic scholarship has focused on the benefits of combining synchronous and asynchronous communication tools into the design of online learning environments. According to Oztok, et al. (2013) synchronous and asynchronous communication tools should not be evaluated in isolation, but rather how they can supplement one another. There is the need to consider the learning value that these tools afford students, thus an informed pedagogy is critical in the development and use of these tools in online learning environments. As Oztok et al. (2013) argue learning - regardless of the context - is a social activity that is enriched through social interactions, collaboration and contextual experiences, thus positing the potential affordances of a blended synchronous-asynchronous online learning environment within a social constructivist framework that owes much to the work of Vygotsky (1978).

Studies have focused on the affordances that a blended synchronous-asynchronous environment would provide students. For instance, Pullen and Snow (2007) as cited in Kask (2014) argue that an online course that blends asynchronous tools with synchronous instructions and discussion provides students with improved support and guidance. Online learning environments that combine features such as voice interaction, group file sharing, whiteboard capabilities, video and

recording/playback provide a kind of virtual extension of a traditional classroom where mentor/teacher and peer-to-peer interaction is supported. This 'social presence,' according to Oztok et al. (2013), is an important factor in determining students' motivation, depth of learning and satisfaction with the course. Giesbers, et al. (2013) argue that students may feel less engaged with the course if the instructor relies primarily on the use of asynchronous communication. Regular online synchronous meetings are likely to increase student motivation to complete tasks (Pullen & Snow, 2007 as cited in Kask in (2014), and are likely to increase the quantity and quality of asynchronous discussion. They also specify that synchronous communication tools greatly benefit the social processes involved in learning, while asynchronous discussion may best support the development of higher-level thinking skills, for example, through the process of writing and enhanced reflection time.
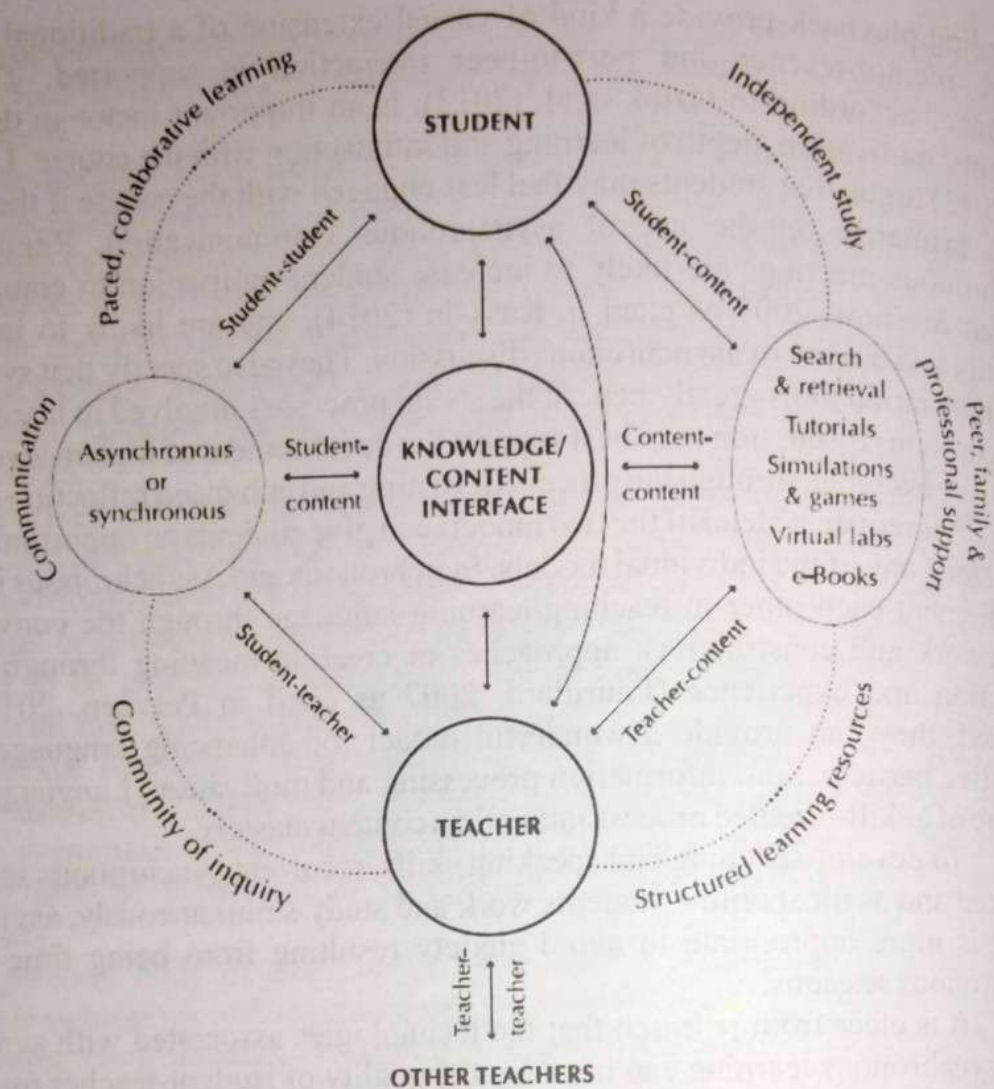
Moreover, a blend of the two models can give students an opportunity to learn better than any of the individual models. Synchronous and Asynchronous modes can complement each other in teaching/learning language through the conversational framework and constructivist approaches of creating meaning through dialogue, reflection and experience (Laurillard, 2007 as cited in Perveen, 2016). When blended, they can provide a wonderful model for enhancing language learners' cognitive participation, information processing and motivation. Language learning is more of a skill-oriented process rather than content mastery.

To develop listening and speaking skills, recurrent synchronous sessions are required and as most online students work and study simultaneously, asynchronous mode is more appropriate to avoid anxiety resulting from being time-bound in synchronous sessions.

It is clear from research that the technologies associated with synchronous and asynchronous learning can improve the quality of student-teacher interactions, foster increased student engagement, and improve learning outcomes. Both have strengths and weaknesses. Some students like a synchronous online learning environment because they need face-to-face instruction while for others asynchronous online learning environment provides more time to consider all sides of an issue before offering their own input. Both learning types have very unique benefits and limitations to online learning. Er et al. (2009) suggest that in order to overcome these limitations, the two learning types should be integrated and utilized to support student needs within an online learning environment.

The following diagram is Anderson's (2004) Model of online Learning environment involving synchronous and asynchronous communication tools.

STUDENT

Paced, collaborative learning

Independent study

Student-student

Student-content

Communication

Peer, family & professional support

Asynchronous or synchronous

Student-content

KNOWLEDGE/ CONTENT INTERFACE

Content-content

Search & retrieval
Tutorials
Simulations & games
Virtual labs
e-Books

Student-teacher

Teacher-content

Structured learning resources

Community of inquiry

TEACHER

Teacher-teacher

OTHER TEACHERS

According to Anderson, learning takes place through the interactions between student, teacher and content. Both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools can be used to facilitate learning collaboration between these groups.

Graham et al. (2003) as cited in Klimova, (2009) state three main reasons why blended learning should be used to include:

Improved pedagogy: blended learning contributes to the development and support of more interactive strategies not only in face-to-face teaching but also in distance education. It enables the development of activities to be linked to learning outcomes such as placing focus on learner interaction rather than content dissemination.

Increased access/ flexibility: access to learning is one of the key factors influencing the growth of distributed learning environments. Students can access materials at any

time anywhere. They can also proceed on their own pace. This means higher motivation and stimulation for students.

Increased cost effectiveness: the increased in cost effectiveness is particularly true for the corporate systems where people are permanently busy and hardly ever can afford to attend face-to–face full-time classes. The blended learning enables them to learn and attend to other engagements. Also, blended learning is an asset for distance learning courses or investment learning projects for universities.

Conclusion

Blended learning however has some disadvantages which according to Kask (2014) include its strong dependence on the technical resources with which experience is delivered- these tools need to be reliable, easy to use, and up-to-date in order for the use of the internet to have a meaningful impact on learning experience. Also, it may serve as a barrier for students attempting to get access to the course materials, making the availability of high-quality technical support paramount. It is therefore advised that English language teachers' traditional role in language learning should also be extended to blending learning environments. Many functions can be most effectively carried out by a caring and well-trained teacher. Teachers should therefore provide interactive activities in the classroom as well as help learners set achievable goals for language learning.

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