

Promoting Second Language Learning and Intercultural Communication between Engineering and Liberal Arts Tertiary Education Students

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Abstract - Second (L2) or foreign (FL) language e-communicators is essential because the non-native speakers of English are unequally distributed across the globe and the populations continue to expand greatly. Likewise, students at the tertiary level should be provided with the opportunity to develop the ability to communicate effectively in English in computer-mediated communication (CMC) settings. This is especially important for the students whose job may require them to collaboratively work in team across organizational and geographic boundaries around the globe. The current study explores e-communication between engineering students in Malaysia and Liberal Arts students in Japan leading to a project completion by both parties. The students work in small teams exchanging authentic evidence from both countries. Finally, they prepared a short presentation to wrap up their findings. The current study highlights the need for more similar research to understand how communication unfolds in CMC and how it can best be used to promote language learning and intercultural appreciation.

Keywords - *Computer-mediated interaction; higher education; online teamwork; company profiling*

I. INTRODUCTION

In second (L2) or foreign (FL) language learning and development, interaction is one of the key elements to determine its success. In the same vein, several engineering accreditation bodies have also formulated the learning outcomes for the engineering graduates to include effective communication ability [1]. Interaction between the learners of English via computer is even more pervasive because of the growing number of the e-communicators among this group of population made possible by the 24/7 internet connectivity. Researchers discovered that online interaction between the non-native speakers of English (NNS) promoted engagement in the learning and acquisition of the language [2]. Additionally, it was suggested that more research to evaluate the effectiveness of NNS/NNS interaction need to be conducted because it is common for the NNS to interact among themselves than with the native speakers [3].

In the countries where English is spoken as an L2 of FL, the use of English at the higher learning institutions is

somewhat limited and the students typically speak in English among themselves or their lecturers who majority share the same native language. As highlighted earlier, evidences of positive online interaction have been reported. Therefore, students at the tertiary level should be provided with the opportunity to develop the ability to communicate effectively in English and in computer-mediated communication (CMC) settings. This is also important for the students whose job may require them to collaboratively work in team across organizational and geographic boundaries around the globe [4]. In addition, offering such opportunity to the students enable them to experience intercultural communication from home.

II. COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Interaction hypothesis [5] posited that in addition to input (or exposure to linguistic information) and output (opportunities for language production), interaction serves as a driving tool in promoting L2/ FL as the interlocutors modify and negotiate for meaning to facilitate comprehension. Various studies have highlighted that language learning and development may take place during NNS/NNS interaction. As a result of the less threatening environment between the NNSs themselves, negotiations of meaning during the interaction are found to be frequent. Researchers also claimed that negotiation of meaning may orient L2/ FL learners' attentional resources to the gap between their L2 knowledge and/ or an L2 area in which they have little or no knowledge about [6]. Hence, NNS/NNS interaction may be beneficial in the process of L2/ FL learning.

The digital age has widen the medium of NNS/NNS interaction via various CMC tools and apps. CMC has been found to create a less stressful environment for the NNS as evident in an increase in the learners' participation during online interaction [7]. It also served as a medium for language and cultural exchange between the NNS [8]. The benefit of NNS/NNS online interaction is also highlighted in the previous study in terms of significant improvement in learners' interlanguage development [9]. Description of the complexity in learner language production during interaction