Summary and Critique
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SUMMARY

The aim of the study is described by two research questions:

1) What is the nature of the communicative orientation in upper primary and junior secondary Japanese language classrooms in telematics mode?

2) Is the interaction observed in Japanese language telematics classrooms of the type that promotes second language acquisition?

There were three participating teachers but the number of students wasn't given, although it was stated: 'classes differed in terms of the year level, size, number of receival sites and socioeconomic circumstances'. There were twelve lessons (limited longitudinal study).

'Synchronous communication between teacher and students using telephone and computer links' was the form of telematics employed. Only the teacher had a visual connection; the students had only audio input and output. In other words, the only visual image was that of the teacher.

The study employed four 'stages' of data collection (multiple methods):

1) teacher questionnaires (Qx) (though no data involving content/evaluation is available in this paper)

2) transcripts of audio and video recordings of classroom interaction (analyzed using COLT--parts A and B though no statistical data is given).

3) teacher focus group discussion (no statistical data available)

4) follow-up teacher interviews (no statistical data available)

The results indicated that 'specific features of the telematics context appear likely to impinge on the communicative orientation of this delivery mode'. Three of these are mentioned here:

1) Only teachers had a 'visual connection' which was seen as promoting a 'directive' (less communicative) delivery style. Learner visual connections were recommended.

2) Not all features considered 'communicative' (in terms of COLT) 'were being mobilized'. Teacher implementation of a 'communicative orientation' was recommended.

3) Data revealed how focus on form was utilized. The study implied that the provision of language 'in context' was recommended.

It was found that 'teachers developed useful compensation strategies to overcome some of these limitations (“silences” were often filled with teacher talk—my insertion) such as using colour on the computer screen and tone of voice to highlight salient features. They also introduced games that promoted interaction between sites'. This point is relevant in that it suggests there are differences between telematics and FtoF classroom environments, a point addressed later in this paper.

Finally, a mapping framework was 'presented as a means to conceptualise an interface between the second language acquisition and telematics field'.

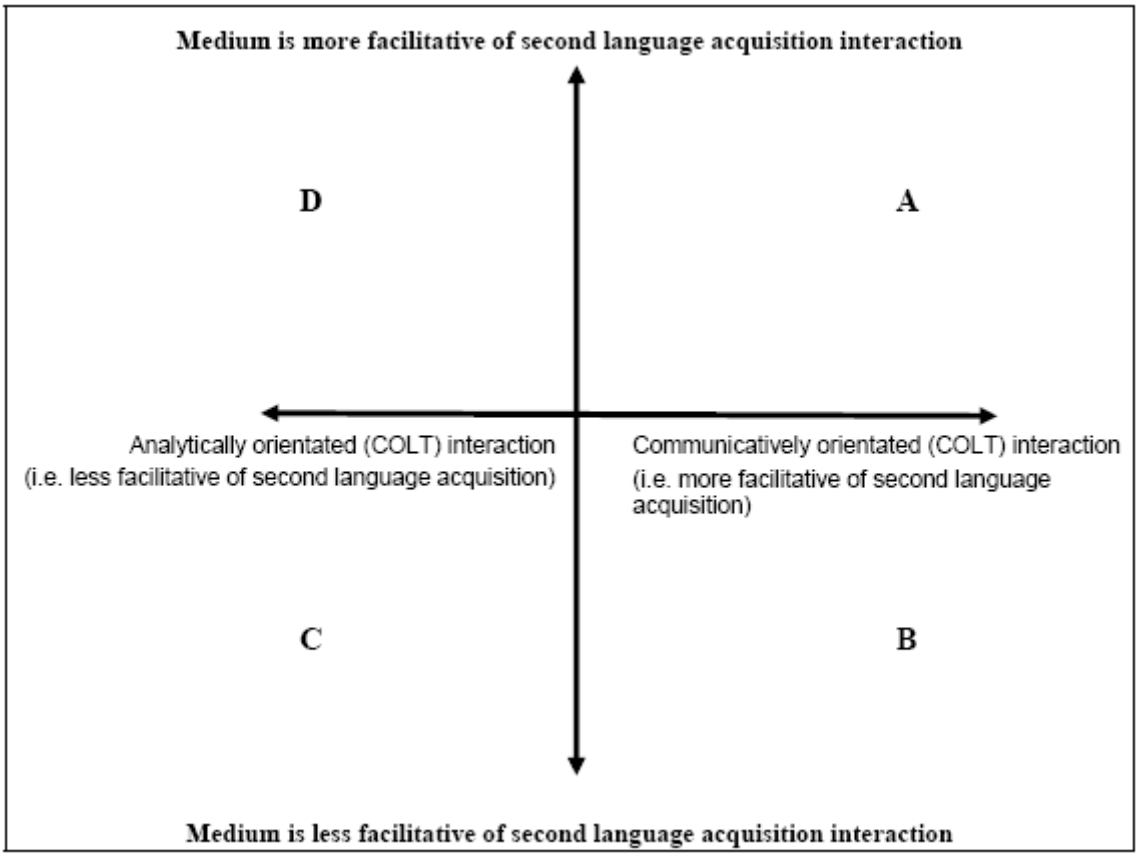

Figure 1: A mapping framework bringing together both SLA and telematics interaction

The horizontal axis was 'informed by COLT which was designed to determine the extent to which classes are more or less communicatively orientated'. The vertical axis was the 'result of not only the literature but also the findings of the teacher interviews and focus group data'.

The intention of this mapping was to provide 'one way of looking at both fields'. It follows that this study could be considered extremely macroscopic—a broad and general view—which will be addressed in more detail below.

STRENGTHS

Delcee Batt did a wonderful paper on a very recent phenomenon: telematics. The fact that telematics is a relatively new phenomenon and growing at an exponential pace is only overshadowed by the more impressive fact that learners, normally unable to reach mainstream metropolitan classrooms, now have a chance to participate in learning via the internet. In other

words, even if you live in the 'outback', you can study almost anything you have an interest in. This study is sincere and serious about bringing the level of second language instruction and interaction to more optimal levels for students in more remote locations, and this is its most salient and commendable feature.

Another 'strength' may be somewhat dubious but deserves mention: 'no other known study has specifically investigated whether the interaction evident in second language delivery via telematics promotes second language acquisition'. The fact that no other studies have attempted such a macroscopic sweep in telematics may be due to the fact that microscopic research in this field is still in its infancy. On the other hand, such an attempt does outline the work that lies ahead, namely, specific investigations into what constitutes an optimal telematics classroom (this topic will be covered below).

On the technical side, there are some specific aspects that deserve attention:

1) The subjects of the study varied 'in terms of the year level, size, number of receival sites and socioeconomic circumstances'. A broad subject base may provide more questions for further research and assures a proper representation of a population.

2) The study 'employed multiple methods of data collection' (mentioned above). Different types of data collection assure a more comprehensive view of the classroom environment.

3) The study revealed the all too common (and never too often stated) phenomenon that the 'results indicated a mismatch between what teachers believed was happening in their lessons and how communicatively orientated their lessons actually were'. These results themselves are significant and worthy of study.

WEAKNESSES

1) The definition of telematics remains rather vague until the end of the introduction and even then, the introduction only makes the definition partial. Therefore, I will present two different google definitions here:

a) the combination of computers in concert with telecommunications systems. This includes dial-up service to the Internet as well as all types of networks that rely on a telecommunications system to transport data.

b) Telematics was originally the combination of telecommunications and computing, but the term has evolved to refer to computerized automobile systems.

It may seem obvious we are referring to definition 1) (perhaps definition 2) is in your car).

2) An absence of student data was noticed in this study: a few examples follow:

a) The number of students in the study wasn't included. This would be important if statistical data were sought.

b) There were no pre/post tests nor Qx for students; therefore, there is no data regarding potential acquisition, student feedback on telematics nor feedback on teacher/student interaction from the learner's point of view. The best possible approach (though an invasive one) to find

out what is going on with learners in telematics classrooms would be to produce video of their interactions at their computers for each student and in every lesson.

2) Taking a van Lierian point of view: data should first be collected and analyzed; the research questions in this study indicate a formulation prior to collection. The researcher assumed the telematics environment and FtoF classrooms exhibit the same 'communicative orientation'. At the same time, the researcher assumed that all aspects of COLT were, a priori, features of this type of orientation in telematics. This approach brings to mind Nunan's assumption (set reading-- week one) that posing hypotheses before data analyses 'will create a particular mind set, a pair of mental blinkers, which may blind us to other, perhaps potentially more interesting aspects of the classroom'.

3) Data collected for teacher interviews (pre and post) and 'focus group discussion' was not available (perhaps in another version of the study?) This is problematic because it diminishes the validity of the multiple methods approach outlined in the study's methodology.

4) It was assumed that 'the impact of the absence of a two-way human visual connection led to teachers using a more directive style of teaching'. In other words, the study suggests that if students were also visual participants, there would be a more 'communicative orientation'. The problem is that the opposite may be true: if students must reveal their physical selves to 'cybermates' and teachers, they may indeed become self-conscious and clam up or react nervously to input. There is nothing 'communicative' about this scenerio. Further investigation would be necessary to determine the 'optimal' telematic conditions regarding visual connections.

5) While the mapping framework was clear and understandable, it assumed there was a significant correlation (if not cause and effect relationship) between telematics and FtoF classrooms (from which the COLT interaction analysis system was derived). The macroscopic design of this study assumes FtoF interaction and CtoC (computer to computer) interaction are identical. As implied previously, CtoC interaction needs its own network of investigation. The following discussion ('further research in telematics' below) includes such issues and ideas.

6) Even beyond the potential differences that seem likely in comparing FtoF and CtoC classrooms, there are problems regarding COLT itself (the main observation instrument in this study). Spada (1994) descibes three specifically:

a) '...the observer sees only those behaviors that coincide with the categories in the observation scheme' and that predetermined categories for observation may overlook 'behaviors that may be equally (or perhaps even more) important features of the teaching and learning environment'.

b) '...observation schemes tend to treat classroom language as discrete and isolated instances of verbal behavior rather than as extended discourse.'

c) '...insufficient effort has been devoted to demonstrating that the categories included in L2 observation schemes are valid predictors of learning outcomes.'

Interaction analysis then is in need of some assistance if we are to optimize the level of objectivity of our studies. It seems we need to turn to the learner for more information.

As was mentioned earlier, there was striking little data from the learner's perspective. Here are three ideas that could be implemented as observation tools:

1) online testing: pre-tests, mid-tests and post-tests could be administered online. Testing may be as old as the hills but it produces 'hard data'.

2) online student Qx: these could be tailored to student level and researcher needs.

3) online diaries: two forms need to be considered: private (for teachers' eyes only) and in a discussion-style format (which could be more informal and contrasted with the former type for a clearer picture of what *may* be going on in the learner's process).

I would like to suggest, at this point, a 'lead-in' for further research, which would most effectively be oriented in the multiple method tradition, including some of the observation tools just mentioned.

FURTHER RESEARCH IN TELAMATICS

As Batt suggests:

It is anticipated that this study will encourage other researchers to further investigate the benefits of a more communicatively orientated intervention which will ultimately lead to positive second language learning outcomes for all students in telematics environments and the broader virtual learning contexts.

As a macroscopic study, this research attempts to merge telematics with the notion of a 'communicative orientation'. While it is a noble effort, there is no substantial justification to assume a telematics classroom environment is the same or similar to FtoF classrooms.

In most cases, data need to be collected before 'research questions' are investigated. Therefore, microscopic studies (for example, Lyster and Ranta's error treatment model or selected elements from 'part B' of COLT) that set out to collect data as objectively as possible would be recommended. The investigation of specific features of interaction would be indicated only after a substantial amount of data had been collected. In this way, results could be compared to similar studies carried out in FtoF environments to determine if there is indeed a correlation between FtoF and telematics classrooms.

It appears it will be years into the future before we begin to comprehend the nature of telematics as it relates to second language learning. Most likely an interdisciplinary approach to this monumental quest would be most beneficial, and why not, FtoF classroom researchers have crossed the borders between disciplines on many an occasion and appear to have returned with valuable theories.

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