

ESL Online Courses: A New Space for Redefining Social Identities

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The emergence of online learning, as a relatively new mode of learning, has greatly contributed to the recognition of the need to create better conditions and means to achieve effective learning. Since collaboration is considered to be the major aspect of online learning, technology is no longer viewed as merely a cognitive delivery system. It is an effective means to provide learners with a new space to socialize. Researchers who are interested in exploring the socio-effective aspects of online environments have investigated some major issues related to online learning. This paper highlights the topics mostly discussed in the related literature about the influence of online courses on learners' social identities. It mainly investigates how anonymity, social presence and social identity are redefined in ESL online courses. The conclusion of the paper offers some recommendations to better utilize the online environment with ESL learners.

A 2004 study conducted among elementary school children in France concluded that face-to-face classes are not necessary to develop a "sense of community" among learners (Michinov, N, Michiov, E & Toczec-Capelle, 2004). This conclusion and many others have encouraged researchers in education to explore the potential of online learning as an alternative environment for teaching and learning. Harasim (2000) stated, "the 21st century begins with a paradigm shift in attitudes towards online education" (p.42). Online learning is simply defined as a "form of distance education. Online courses are delivered over the Internet and can be accessed from a computer with a web browser" (Keynote College, n.d). The most common tools used to facilitate learning online are chat rooms, video conferencing, e-mails and blogs.

The emergence of this relatively new mode of learning has greatly contributed to the recognition of the need to create better conditions and means to achieve effective learning (Harasim, 2000). Since collaboration is considered to be an important aspect of online learning, technology is no longer viewed as merely a delivery system. Technology is an effective means to provide learners with a new space to socialize. Harasim (2000) argued that the online environment can “support collaborative conversations about a topic and the ensuing construction of understanding” (p. 54). Researchers who are interested in exploring the socio-effective aspects of online environments have investigated some major issues related to online learning. In this paper I highlight the topics discussed in the related literature about the influence of online courses on learners’ social identities. More specifically, I focus on anonymity, social identity and social presence, and how these three themes affect the social identities of ESL learners. In the conclusion of this paper I suggest recommendations to better utilize the online environment to learn English as a second language and to develop a positive social identity among ESL learners.

ANONYMITY IN ESL ONLINE COURSES

Online learning is characterized by anonymity. This feature is the key that shapes the nature of the social identities that learners practice in online environments. Anonymity, social identity, and social presence cannot be approached and discussed separately. They are interwoven in that each one of them has a great impact over the other. Therefore, I begin by introducing anonymity as the point of departure from which the other themes will be approached.

Sullivan (2002) indicated that anonymity is declared by learners to be the most positive aspect of online learning. Learners in online courses do not know each other, and they have few assumptions regarding others’ backgrounds. A sense of anonymity is heightened when students are given the option to choose nicknames or pseudonyms instead of using their real names. In a 2004 study on social identification in online learning groups, Michinov and colleagues stated that anonymity can create a “greater closeness and intimacy” (p. 29) between students. They argue that when group members do not know each other, they tend to focus on the similarities they share rather than the differences within their group. Anonymity, in this case, contributes to the

formation of a positive social identity among learners. Several studies have emphasized that anonymity is a key factor that makes learners feel more comfortable and safe online (Fong, 2008; Gunn et al., 2003; Lam, 2004; Michinov et al., 2004; Sullivan, 2002).

In an online ESL classroom in which students are trying to practice a new language, this anonymous interaction can be less risky than the traditional face-to-face classroom (Fong, 2008). Freiermuth (2001) claimed that, because of online anonymity, language learners do not only participate more often online, but they also feel more comfortable contributing and less concerned about making mistakes. He noted:

Online non-native speakers feel less like outsiders and more like contributors. They do not have to worry about mispronunciation, accent or using the wrong word. As a result, they can focus attention to what language they can produce rather than allowing apprehension to keep them from participating. (p.190)

Ware (2004) also suggested that “weekly online discussions offer students an alternative and safe space to gain literacy skills” (p. 453). This safe space can be created based on the assumption that language learners who have different language proficiencies can keep their own level of proficiency invisible to others. For example, since most ESL online courses do not usually have a space for practicing speaking, ESL learners with low speaking abilities do not have to go through the feeling of embarrassment that can sometimes discourage them from participating in a face-to-face class. Even in the video conferencing format of online classes in which learners can speak with one another, anonymity may help timid students to participate more often in the daily online discussions. Anonymity allows students to overcome the intimidating aspects of asking question because they do not have to face the audience they address (Gunn, McSporran, Macleod, & French, 2003).

In addition, anonymity helps learners to better practice and develop their writing skills. Many studies (e.g., Harasim, 2000; Pagnucci & Mauriello, 1999; Ware, 2004) investigating the effect of online learning on writing abilities have concluded that this learning mode can be more effective in improving learners’ writing skills than traditional classes. Positive outcomes have been measured by the quantity of target language output and by student attitudes toward the target language (Ware, 2004). Being anonymous helps ESL learners

to freely express their opinions. They also have more time to review their writing before posting it. Pagnucci and Mauriello (1999), for example, studied pseudonyms and found that the participants enjoyed online reviewing. The participants thought that it was easier to critique papers online when the author was not known to others. In this case, the author can freely express a critique without worrying about hurting others students' feelings (Pagnucci & Mauriello, 1999).

SOCIAL IDENTITY IN ESL ONLINE COURSES

The concept of social identity refers to “how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (Norton, 1997, p. 410). Fong (2008) claimed that “Learning a language, specifically a second language, involves more than just learning the basics of reading, speaking, and writing, but also involves the experience of social and pragmatic situations in which L2 users interact” (p. 6). This statement corroborated Lam’s work (2004) indicating that literacy is not a “neutral medium” for establishing a cognitive or societal growth, but it is embedded in the power structures of the society. Language and social identity are inextricably linked. In the case of ESL classes, learners come from different social backgrounds and have different expectations. Consequently, a growing body of research has investigated the interrelation between learning a second language and the learners’ identities (Fong, 2008). Fong argued that discussing the social identities and how they are restructured in ESL online courses is significantly important. This importance is recognized when realizing that the social roles these students practice in traditional classrooms can be marginalized and therefore, membership in the local group of the second language speakers can be revoked. Online learning, on the other hand, gives ESL learners more space to express their identities without having the fear or stress of being judged by their appearance.

The interrelation between language and identity has been discussed repeatedly under the notion of language socialization. ESL learners in a ESL classroom need English as it is the only available medium of communication to express their own identity. In the ESL classroom where learners often come from different backgrounds and have different native languages, English becomes the lingua franca.

Thus, in order for a language learner to have meaningful interactions with others, the learner needs to have sufficient English language proficiency. Lam (2004) claimed that ESL learners' preference to work online when learning English is based on the emergence of new identities. That is because identity, as Norton (1997) stated, relates mainly to the desire for "recognition, affiliation, security and safety" (p. 410) and that is what ESL learners usually look for. For ESL learners, using English freely and without having the stress of making mistakes is a great opportunity to reconstruct their identities or build new ones. To illustrate this idea more clearly, I explore below the issue of gender and how it is manifested in ESL online courses. Although the literature related to the issue of gender and second language learning is relatively small, interest in exploring the effect of gender on second language writing has been clearly observed (Kubota, 2003).

A study conducted by Pagnucci and Mauriello (1999) indicated that some ESL students feel disempowered by their own gender. In particular, many women in online courses preferred a male pseudonym to gain credibility. The same study revealed that many learners enjoyed reading and responding to papers written by gender-neutral authors. By choosing to be anonymous, learners tried to avoid the conflict that might arise when responding to concrete identities. The researchers concluded that "By asking students to work in an environment of masked identities and gendered stereotypes; we inadvertently helped to sanitize their responses" (p. 149). Kendall (1998) argued that gender switching and the norm of gendered behaviors have continued to shape online learning. As a result, online classes are a good alternative to prevent us from carrying into cyberspace "entrenched misunderstandings of gender hidden in utopian visions of technology" (Pagnucci & Mauriello, 1999, p. 149).

SOCIAL PRESENCE

The lack of physical presence in online learning has led many researchers to investigate the concept of presence when learning online (Stodel, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2006). Shin (2002) defined social presence as "the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships. It is also "feeling intimacy or togetherness in terms of sharing time and place" (p. 122). Tu and McIsaac (2002) defined

social presence as the “degree of awareness of another person in an interaction and the consequent appreciation of an interpersonal relationship” (p. 133). Social presence is a key factor that determines the success of an online course. A study conducted by Picciano (2002) revealed that there is a strong positive relationship between the level of social presence of learners in an online course and their perceived performance in the course. In other words, the students’ success in an online course was dependent on the nature of student to student and student to faculty interaction.

One of the most common critiques of online learning is the absence of physical presence (Ng, Yeung & Hong, 2006). Some critics argue that without the physical presence of the teacher, the teacher-student interaction is likely to suffer. This interaction between teacher and student is believed to be crucial to language teaching. However, Ng, Yeung and Hon (2006) identified two primary issues that affect teacher-learner interaction. The authors stated that the extent to which the students interact with the teacher depends on the teacher’s input, beliefs, and teaching goals. Secondly, Ng and colleagues noted that language learning “inevitably involve[s] teacher–student interactions as well as student–student interactions. Especially in classes with students having a range of abilities, computer technology and appropriate teacher–student interactions may complement each other” (p. 222).

To illustrate the advantages of ESL online courses, I will briefly discuss in the following section the use of use of blogs as a common tool in online learning.

BLOGS IN ESL CLASSROOMS

Since 1998, weblogs have gained increasing notice in the cyberspace community because even people without programming experience can easily use blogs to update their personal webpages (Wu, 2005). A blog (a web log) is a frequently modified webpage containing individual entries listed in reverse chronological order (Herring & Paolillo, 2004, P.440). The most interesting feature blogs have is that they usually incorporate visuals, audio, and links to videos (Simpson, 2012). Bloch (2002) argued that for language learners, blogging can be a potentially useful tool for creating a space to discuss issues that may not be the focus of the traditional classroom. Blogs

allow language learners to select the readings they prefer to read, add topics they are interested in and willing to discuss, and design their webpages the way they like (Campbell, 2003). Thus, blogs can give learners some control over their learning which contributes to developing a positive attitude towards learning. This advantage is also highlighted by Simpson (2012) when he added that “A consensus in pedagogic descriptions of blogs is that they lend themselves to easily accessible publication and dissemination of student writing, to information-sharing, to the collaborative construction of meaning, and, significantly, to learner control” (p. 4). Campbell (2003) also emphasized that the simple customization of templates can encourage learners to build “a sense of ownership” (The learner’s blog section, para. 1) and unique online identity. Most students will be more careful when they know that they are going to publish their articles online in the blogs that represent them and for authentic readers who may comment on their postings (Wu, 2005).

FORCED INDIVIDUALISM AND MUTING IN MAIN-STREAM ONLINE COURSES

Despite the aforementioned positive impact of online learning on the social identities of ESL learners, the issue of muting as a common drawback of online learning has been a recurrent topic in the related literature. In this context, muting is the state of being silent or rarely participating in online conversations. The completion of an online task is usually done alone with a student sitting in the front of the computer screen and isolated from fellow classmates. Such a task might be challenging for those who are not accustomed to working alone in a language classroom (Harrington, 2011). In addition, ESL learners who prefer collective work might find themselves unable to defend their argument when heated and argumentative debates take place online. This could lead to forced individualism or muting.

Harrington (2010) also argued that the resulting conflicts with identity and individualism that may exist in ESL online courses can result in muting. Harrington discussed two types of muting. The first is self-muting. Self-muting occurs when ESL students choose to mute their voices by limiting their participation or excluding themselves from the online community. This type of muting happens when ESL learners experience a certain level of anxiety over the extent

to which their language production is understood by others. The second type of muting occurs as a result of others' actions towards ESL learners. Imposed muting is a result of insensitivity and it usually instills feelings of intimidation and inferiority among ESL learners. Harrington (2010) emphasized that "Imposed-muting can result from NES students excluding ESL/EFL students from discussions, ignoring their comments or questions, or actively discouraging them from participation in a variety of ways" (Muting section, para. 3). This implicit exclusion will eventually discourage ESL learners from participating in the online discussion and make them feel inferior to the native speakers of English.

CONCLUSION

Using online courses with ESL learners has the potential to help these learners develop a sense of positive identity due to anonymity. The online environment is a new space for them and a good alternative to help them overcome the problems they usually face in the traditional language or mainstream, content classroom. Yet, such major issues as muting should be considered when designing and running ESL online courses. To better realize the potential of an online learning environment and based on what has been mentioned in the literature, I offer some recommendation below.

- Teachers need to make certain that learners have access to the Internet and are familiar with the course and the tasks assigned to them. This will reduce the level of anxiety that might exist as a result of working in an unfamiliar online environment.
- To avoid or minimize the effect of muting on ESL learners, teachers need to monitor the online participation and constantly encourage those who are not actively participating to engage in the group discussion. Moreover, teachers are encouraged to familiarize themselves with ESL students' cultures, so that they bring in topics that are of interest to ESL students.
- To compensate for the physical absence, teachers are encouraged to use blended learning. Through having a combination of both traditional and online delivery in the ESL courses, learners can take advantage of both settings (Ng et al., 2006). They should also set clear objectives and activities that enhance teacher-student and student-student interactions.

More research is needed for the sake of finding the best practices that can be implemented in ESL online courses and identifying those which can help learners enhance and develop positive social identities. In the age of technology and cyber communication, ESL learners around the world can take advantage of language courses offered online. These courses are less demanding and more flexible than traditional classes. Therefore, it is of significance to attend to the potentials of online courses in helping language learners improve their linguistic and interpersonal competence.

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