Face-to-Face Interaction in ODE Language Courses in Iran

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ABSTRACT :

This study investigated the issue of interaction in learning English in open and distance education. To do so, fifty- two distance language learners evaluated the quality of learner-content, learner-teacher, learner-learner, learner-interface, and learner-self interactions in general English courses. The results showed that the quality of overall interaction was of middle quality with an asymmetrical pattern in which learner-interface interaction was of the least quality. The results also revealed significant differences among the qualities of most interaction types which, in turn, indicated that offering blended courses for enhancing face-to-face interaction could compensate for learner-interface interaction resulted from the low-tech environment.

1. INTRODUCTION :

The world is experiencing rapid changes in the realm of education in response to increasing demands for learning. In addition to such demands, information-bearing technologies are paving the way for changes and innovations in this field. In spite of these demands and facilities, there are still inequalities both between and within nations. The major contributors to this phenomenon are cost, time, and place; learners should overcome the high cost of education, work and family commitments, and geographical distance to attend on-campus classes in conventional systems of education.

Open and distance education as an alternative to conventional systems aims at coping with the given barriers. This brand of education confirms a need for an instructional environment which can provide learners with cost effective professional development while accommodating their busy lifestyles and avoiding excessive strain on them (Strambi & Bouvert, 2003). These capabilities have extended its scope to cater to community of learners with different skill levels and different domains of interest.

EFL domain is one of those domains whose courses are being delivered through distance education beyond the boundaries of campus. High demand for learning English academically or non-academically, for occupational or general purposes has given EFL courses an outstanding status among others. In fact, learning English cost-effectively with negligible restriction of time, place, and other considerations has opened new horizons to the community of learners who see its mastery costly, time-consuming, and demanding in conventional systems (Ariza & Hancock, 2003).

What these new EFL courses offer is not error-free in nature. Their efficiency is mostly hindered by a major threat: relatively low level of interaction in the limited personal contact environment. In literature on second language learning, learners' active involvement in interaction with others has been considered as a fundamental aspect of the learning process (Strambi & Bouvert, 2003). In other words,

EFL courses in open and distance learning systems tend to meet the learners' needs at the expense of the most indispensable element of language learning process.

Both opportunities and threat are inherent in EFL courses in open and distance education. We have less interaction in this system because learners cannot gather together in campuses or attend classes. But it doesn't amount to getting along with the status quo and refraining from taking action to get rid of this destructive threat. This study views lack of interaction as the major threat to the achievement of distance education in EFL classes at Payame Noor University, as an open and distance educational system, in Iran. It specifically aims at shedding some light on the present status of EGP (English for General Purposes) courses in terms of interaction and the ways the existing barrier can be removed for promotion of better achievement.

1.1 Definitions and Features of Distance Education

In keeping up with modifications in conceptualizations and realizations of distance education, the terminologies used for naming this phenomenon have also changed. Each terminology focuses on one dimension of the whole concept. According to Maxwell (1995), distance education as an umbrella term refers to "a mode of delivery with certain characteristics that distinguish it from the campus-based mode of learning" (p. 46). It covers both distance learning and distance teaching and may not be based on open learning ideas. In line with the concept of removing some barriers open learning entered the literature. It is defined as "a student-cantered approach to education that removes all barriers to access while providing a high degree of learner autonomy" (Maxwell, 1995, p. 43). Connotation of this term is its accessibility to all community of members with the least number of barriers. Flexible learning is another term which means that this mode of education is more adaptable and versatile in terms of access, timing and duration, location of study, curriculum factors, and

learning support. All these terms which delineate one or more characteristic features of this alternative mode of education constitute the most general term which is called open and distance learning (Tella, 1997).

Open and distance learning (hence, ODL) contains some features that are most likely absent in conventional classroom settings and these features set it apart from its traditional rival. Physical separation and consequently lack of face-to-face interaction between learners and instructors, and among learners themselves is one of the most conspicuous features of an ODL system. In this system an educational organization is responsible for planning, preparation, or delivery of material while in conventional system this responsibility is taken by the course professor. Another defining feature is the widespread use of technical media- a component which Keegan deemed typically absent in most on-campus courses (as cited in Spooner, Jordan, Algozzine, & Spooner, 1999, p. 132). In fact, the lack of opportunity for face to face should be compensated for by technology in a high-tech environment.

1.2 Second Language Learning in ODL Systems

Following the trend of distance learning courses in other domains, distance learning courses for second or foreign language learners are on the rise throughout the world (Ariza & Hancock, 2003). The courses in this domain are so much prevalent because there is an immense appeal among people throughout the world to learn or improve proficiency in another language at universities or in non-profit institutions. Such an earnest request for learning another language may not be satisfied by getting a certificate or degree as a job requirement. What second or foreign language learners expect from these courses entails optimal level of quality. Therefore, such courses in ODL system should meet learners' needs both qualitatively and quantitatively.

White (2003) believed that language learning distance courses present learners with new opportunities compared to face-to-

face on-campus courses. The opportunities are those that are common to all distance courses like long-life learning without constraints of cost, time, place, or everyday commitments. These new courses encounter challenges and threats that are more manageable in language courses in the conventional systems. It can be said that these challenges and threats are inherent to ODL system and can be considered as the direct upshots of these new opportunities.

Learners who enter distance language courses enjoy many opportunities. They are provided with more flexible programs in terms of access to courses with the least amount of constrains (Keegan, 1990). There is also the possibility for learners to develop skills in self-direction and management of learning experiences and consequently to enhance autonomy and independence which help them to take the initiative in their practices. Whites (2003) has argued that learners' autonomy which aims at developing learners' capacity to look after their own learning needs is considered as the most important criterion for success in ODL system.

The previously-mentioned opportunities are also potential sources of challenges. Among various challenges, some are more commonplace among community of members. Firstly, as Hara & Kling (1999) has emphasized, distance language learners must solve most problems independently and often operate in a low-structured environment with scarce monitoring and feedback from their instructors, so they should spend more time working on the materials. Second, as a result of the limited opportunities for interaction with the instructor or other learners, distance students may feel disconnected and isolated (Egbert & Thomas, 2001), experience feelings of frustration and anxiety (Hara & Kling, 1999). Therefore, it is relatively likely that distance learners develop negative perceptions of their learning environment and experience a decrease in motivation, unless a great deal of support and guidance is provided (Strambi & Bouvert, 2003). Finally, the major criticism against language distance courses is believed to be the paradox between the

scarcity of interaction on ODL courses due to loss of face-to-face interaction (Berge, 1999; Saunders & Weible, 1999) and the significance of interaction and negotiation of meaning in language learning courses (Doughty & Pica, 1986).

1.3 Interaction In Distance Language Learning

Shale & Garrison (1990) has stated that "in its most fundamental form, education is an interaction among instructor, student, and subject content" (p. 1). In particular, this view is derived from social-interactionism perspectives. This view has been integrated with cognitive approach which sees learners as active meaning-makers and problem-solvers and both have constituted social constructivist approach. As Williams and Burden (1997) has noted, in this perspective learners are seen as constructors of their own knowledge through interaction with the parties involved in the social context.

The concept of interaction has been realized in different SLA theories. Krashen's (1985 ; 1994) theory can be considered as the first theory that focused on the interaction between input and the learners. His scaffolding $i+1$ hypothesis maintains that second language is acquired unconsciously when the learners receive information which is a little bit above their current level of knowledge (Ariza & Hancock, 2003). Teachers should make language input comprehensible through a variety of strategies, such as linguistic simplification, and the use of real objects, pictures, graphic organizers, and other strategies.

While Krashen's theory accentuates one-way interaction, emergence of "output hypothesis" made some theorists like Pica (1994) and Long (1985) acknowledge the role of two-way communication. In Long's view, what learners need is an opportunity to interact with other speakers, in ways which lead them to adapt what they are saying until the learner shows signs of understanding. He believes that interaction is necessary for language acquisition mainly because it provides comprehensible input

that promotes acquisition. The model he proposed to explain the relationship between interactional modifications, comprehensible input, and language acquisition stresses the importance of conversation (interaction) in producing comprehensible input. It also implies that modification which takes place during interaction is more useful to learners than mere linguistic simplification or modification which is planned in advance (Long 1983).

Another perspective on the role of interaction is Vygotsky's sociocultural theory which assumes that cognitive development and learning originate in a social context (Vygotsky, 1986). Critical to his theory is the notion of the zone of proximal development, the level of performance which a learner is capable of when there is support from interaction with a more advanced interlocutor. This may be observed in a variety of strategies used by more advanced speakers to creative supportive conditions for the learner to comprehend and produce language (for example, repetition, simplification, and modelling). So, in this theory it is highly believed that learners gain access to new knowledge about language when they have support from an interlocutor.

Recognizing the importance of interaction in learning language, distance educators have proposed different classifications for types of interaction. Moore (1989) identified three types of interaction: a. learner-learner, b. learner-instructor, and c. learner-content. Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena, (1994) added "learner-interface" type as the forth type of interaction to the previous ones. Moore's first and the second types of interaction are not easily realized in distance courses as instructors and learners do not interact in the same physical and temporal space. In learner-content interaction which is the most basic form of interactivity in distance education, the student interacts with the carefully-designed materials. The fourth type of interaction, proposed by Hillman et al. (1994), is unique to distance education. It is the interaction that takes place between the learner and the technology. The students

must use the technology to interact with the content, the instructor, and the other students. Another proposed type of interaction is "learner-self" interaction which emphasizes the importance of self-talking when engaging with learning content (Soo & Bonk, 1998; Robertson, 2002). This type of interaction is realized when the learners are engaged mentally with the learning materials. Sutton (2001) has suggested the sixth type of interaction labelled "vicarious" interaction which takes place when the learner actively observes the interaction between other interlocutors. This type of interaction happens in conversation courses in which the distance learners watch the film episodes containing conversational activities.

1.4 Course Evaluation In Distance Education

There is a compelling need for those institutions which offer distance courses to evaluate the quality of their programs. Such evaluation needs a conceptual framework for us not to trap in the problem of thinking about distance education as some amorphous mass. The conceptual framework shows our perspective towards the significant components and the way they interact with each other. In addition to making decision about the significant components, deciding on the agent of evaluation is also of vital importance. Faculty members and learners are two groups of reliable sources of feedback about the quality of distance courses. Keegan (1990) believed that student attitudes are one of the most important factors when assessing the quality of a distance education program; nevertheless, the adequacy and appropriateness of this source of feedback has not been recognized because few studies can be found that examined the use of student attitudes in evaluating distance education (Biner, 1993 ; Cheung, 1998).

In higher education institutions, courses are often evaluated by a standardized instrument that is administered at the end of a course for summative evaluation. These instruments often contain a series of Likert-type questions and probably also a series of

open-ended questions. The instruments available in the literature for distance course evaluation do not abound and the available ones are not so applicable in other contexts of study. This can be attributed to a variety of distance courses in terms of the course objectives, course requirements, and the course components involved.

Variety in distance courses is so immense that it has led to some deviation from the norm. For distance education "distance" has a pivotal role but some distance institutions deviate from this principle and offer on-campus course. As Stella and Gnanam (2004) have pointed out it is becoming difficult to differentiate traditional and distance education. This is evident in the courses in Payame Noor higher education which is the context of this study. In this ODL system, considerable amount of time has been allotted in each course for students to take part in face-to-face sessions in learning sites to get help with their problems. Therefore, these courses are blended or hybrid courses which share the characteristic features of both conventional and ODL system.

This blended form of distance education gives rise to both new interests and concerns. In other words, attendance in learning site which was both threats for busy learners and opportunity for face-to-face interaction is moderated in this hybrid system. As far as interaction is concerned, the new circumstances modify the pattern of interaction types, mainly thanks to physical presence of learners and teachers on campuses. Whether these courses are of high or low quality has not been investigating as far as the researchers know. Distance language learning courses, in which interaction is indispensable, can be the most appropriate context for assessing the quality of this breed of distance courses. Accordingly, this study tries to answer the following questions: 1. Are EGP blended courses at PNU of high quality in terms of the five types of interaction? 2. What is the pattern of interaction types in these courses? and 3. Does providing opportunity for face-to-face interaction in blended courses compensate for the scarcity of learner-interface interaction?

2. METHODS :

A convenience sample of 52 distance language learners of Payme Noor University from four different branches took part in this study. Thirty-one of them were juniors and twenty-one were seniors who had passed the EGP courses when they filled out the items of the questionnaire

The only instrument used in this study was a researcher-made questionnaire which was designed, developed, and validated in a pilot study. Based on the literature review, under five categories of learner-content (L-C), learner-teacher (L-T) learner-learner (L-L), learner-interface (L-I), and learner-self (L-S) interaction, forty-eight items aimed at evaluating the quality of interaction were written. For the sake of content validation, the items were given to five faculty members who had taught the EGP courses at PNU. Based on their comments, some items were omitted, replaced, or modified. The final questionnaire contained forty-two five-point Likert scale items under five categories.

In a pilot study, questionnaire was answered by eighty-seven distance English language learners of PNU. Their answers were plugged into SPSS (version 17) and confirmatory factor analysis was run to remove the unrelated items from each category. Following Aday (1996), the value of $r < 0.40$ (p=.05) was set as the minimum value correlation. The factor analysis resulted in omitting twelve items whose factor loading value was considered as low. To evaluate the reliability of the resulting questionnaire, *Cronbach's alpha* was calculated for each scale separately and in combination. These values were 0.74, 0.77, 0.81, 0.80, and 0.79 for learner-content, learner-teacher learner-learner, learner-interface, and learner-self interaction respectively and 0.83 for the whole questionnaire.

After validating the questionnaire, it was distributed among participants. Some participants received it via e-mail and the other checked its items in a pencil and paper test. Total of 52 (83% of distributed questionnaires) questionnaires provided the data for the further analysis. The data were

imported to SPSS for descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics was used for evaluating the quality of interaction types in a range of 1 to 5 scoring scale with low (1- 2.33), middle (2.33 – 3.67), and high (3.66 – 5) as defining bands. The inferential statistics employed was repeated measures ANOVA for testing significant differences among categories and paired-samples t-tests for locating the differences among categories.

is an asymmetrical pattern which is evaluated by the participants as unsatisfactory especially in learner-interface dimension.

Results of one-way repeated-measures ANOVA (see Table 2) reveals significant differences among these five types of interaction $F(3.52,179) = 176$, $p<.05$, [with Huynh- Feldt correction].

3. RESULTS :

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 shows mean scale-item scores of all types of interaction based on the participants' assessments. Among these types, learner-interface interaction is evaluated as low, and other types of interaction as medium. Altogether, the quality of interaction in the context of study is of middle quality type (M= 2.528; SD= 0.84).

The second research question dealt with the pattern of interaction types in the context of the study. As Figure 1 shows, the pattern of interaction in the context of study
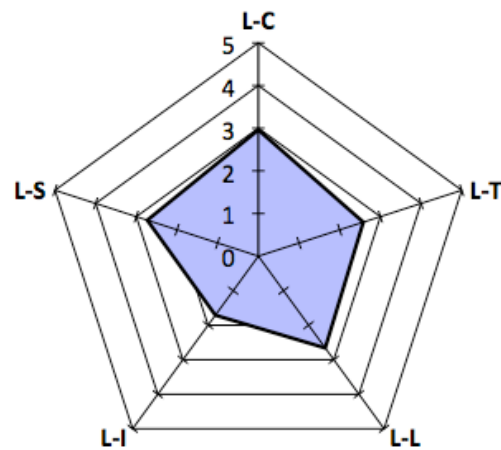

Figure 1 : Pattern of interaction

Table 1 : Mean and Standard Deviation of Types of Interaction

Interaction	L-C	L-T	L-L	L-I	L-S
M	2.96	2.58	2.66	1.71	2.73
SD	0.8	0.93	1.03	0.57	0.91

Table 2 : Test of Within-Subject Effect

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
interaction	Sphericity Assumed	3967.67	4	991.91	176.64	0.000
	Huynh-Feldt	3967.67	3.525	1125.47	176.64	0.000
error	Sphericity Assumed	1145.52	204	5.615		
	Huynh-Feldt	1145.52	179.79	6.371		

To find where these differences are located a series of correlated groups t-tests were conducted, one for each pair-wise comparison because SPSS does not have the option of a Tukey test for repeated-measures ANOVA. As Table (3) shows, the results of paired samples t-tests reveals significant differences among all types of interaction except for T-L and L-L; L-T and L-S; and L-L and L-S. The level of significance for pair-wise comparisons was set p< 0.005 because ten paired comparison were run. (p< 0.05/10). The results of multiple comparisons shows that providing more opportunity for face-to-face interaction reflected on learner-teacher and learner-learner interaction types can compensate for the scarcity of L-I interaction which is supposed to be the salient form of interaction.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION :

The premise behind this study was that providing interaction as the most important ingredient of foreign language courses is the major concern of distance language courses. Lack of face-to-face interaction between learners and teachers and among learners themselves is supposed to be compensated

for by other types of interaction. If face-to-face interaction is provided in a blended course, the quality of other types of interaction may change especially when the learners are experiencing a low-tech environment. Distance English language courses in the context of the study are hybrid courses which offer opportunities for face-to-face interaction in on-campus classes.

The participants' assessment of five types of interaction indicated that the system is not rich enough in terms of overall quality of interaction. Learner-interface interaction, among others, is of the lowest quality which indicates that the system is suffering from a low-tech environment. Such scarcity of learners-interface interaction makes learners invest on other types of interaction. Learner-content interaction which scored the highest is the most immediate one. Results of pair-wise comparisons showed that the quality of this interaction type is significantly different from all other types especially from learner-interface (t =29.28; df = 52; P<.001). This shows that in poorly technological circumstances, course books are the first source on interaction for distance learners. The quality of learner-learner, learner-teacher interaction types is also revealing. The difference between the

Table 3 : *t*-Test of Paired Samples

Interaction type	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
C-T	10.68	51	0.000
C-L	8.50	51	0.000
C-I	29.28	51	0.000
C-S	8.16	51	0.000
T-L	- 1.01	51	0.313
T-I	19.79	51	0.000
T-S	- 2.50	51	0.016
L-I	18.08	51	0.000
L-S	- 0.73	51	0.468
I-S	- 17.59	51	0.000

qualities of these two types was not proven to be significant (t = – 1.01; df = 52; P = 0.313). It can indicate that providing face-to-face interaction in on-site classes caters for both types of interaction equally in blended courses. Moreover, the quality of learner-self interaction was not significantly different from learner-learner (t = – 0.73; df = 52; P = 0.46) and learner-teacher interaction types (t = –2.5; df = 52; P = 0.01). No significant difference among the triple of learner- learner, learner-teacher, and learner-self interaction types shows that these types of interaction contribute evenly to the overall quality of interaction.

It can be concluded from the findings that the overall quality of interaction in blended courses of PNU is evaluated as middle by the distance learners. Technology, which is supposed to play the most important role, provides the least opportunities for interaction. Teachers and classmates as other sources of interaction were ranked as the second and the third least applicable sources of interaction even in blended courses with opportunities for physical presence. Content and learners themselves (L-C and L-S) occupied the first and the second sources of interaction in this rank. Based on these results, the present study recommends that PNU provide more technological facilities to remove the geographical distance between learners and other sources of interaction. Improving this type of interaction facilitates other types of interaction, as well. Occupying the second rank by learner-self interaction shows that distance learners evaluated their autonomy and self-efficacy as relatively high. To develop these features, content of the course books as the most applicable source should be designed carefully to pave the way for the intended goals. Finally, offering on-campus classes for providing face-to-face interaction in blended courses seems to be able to compensate for the scarcity of interaction in the low-tech environment of the research context. The distance learners' high reliance on their course books and on themselves shows that the contradiction between necessity of interaction and its scarcity in their EFL courses can be resolved by offering blended courses.

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