

COMPARING TWO IB-CALL CONTEXTS FOR WRITING IN A BEGINNER, POST-SECONDARY, FSL PROGRAM: ACHIEVEMENT AND LEARNER PERCEPTIONS

Kimberly A. MacDonald, Ph.D. Candidate
OISE/University of Toronto

ABSTRACT

The purpose of my study was to compare the writing achievement in French and the perceptions of two groups working collaboratively in an interactive, Internet Based-Computer Assisted Language Learning (IB-CALL) context: (1) a group interacting with francophone Acadians in another province via IB-CALL; and, (2) a group working with classroom peers of similar second language (L2) proficiency via IB-CALL. Participants were 75 beginning L2 learners of French-as-a-second-language (FSL) studying at the post-secondary level in eastern Canada. Research studies show that one of the most effective ways to foster L2 development is through face-to-face interaction with the target language group (Freed, 1995; MacFarlane, 2001; Warden, Lapkin, Swain, & Hart, 1995). However, face-to-face interaction is not always possible, especially for the student population described above. In this presentation, I examine this issue, and will report the preliminary results of an electronic exchange between university-level, FSL students and a francophone group, and compare this ‘exchange’ or IB-CALL group with students working collaboratively within a comparison IB-CALL group of similar language proficiency. My theoretical framework draws on the Interaction Hypothesis (Hatch, 1978; Long, 1996), the Output Hypothesis (Swain, in press) and current L2 writing theory. I compare overall writing in the two interactive writing environments and examine learners’ perceptions of the writing context, the text, the composing processes, and cultural awareness, based on five data sources: writing samples, questionnaires, semi-structured retrospective interviews, ongoing observations, and design experiment methodology.

Introduction

Bonjour tout le monde. Et, bonne journée de la Nouvelle Ecosse. Before delving into my presentation, I would like to provide an outline, a roadmap, if you will, of how I plan to precede. First, I will provide the rationale, “la raison d’etre” of my research. In this section, I will also identify the problem statement and propose a solution. Second, I will discuss the purpose of my study. Next, I will identify my research questions. Fourth, I plan to explain my research design. Then, I will speak about my participants and the context. Finally, I will report some preliminary results and provide a few concluding remarks.

Rationale, Problem statement, and Proposed solution

What is “la raison d’etre” for my work? To begin, I would have to say that among the various language learning environments I have experienced, I find that motivating and encouraging beginner language development at a post-secondary institution located

in a predominantly anglophone community is a challenging endeavour. This challenge stems from the fact that classes are comprised of students from varying backgrounds. Classes are extremely heterogeneous and can consist of up to 40-60 students. Some students have had little or no second language (L2) role models. It is important, therefore, that all students have access to an environment, which provides the needed Intensive exposure to the target language to make French come alive for French-as-a-Second-Language (FSL) learners, improve attitudes towards FSL, and enhance proficiency. Three contact hours per week in the classroom is only a starting point. There is a need for a variety of authentic interactive communication opportunities to support students' requests to continue their core French education at the post-secondary level.

Although research studies show that face-to-face interaction with the target language group is the best way to improve L2 proficiency (Freed, 1995; Lapkin, Hart, & Swain, 1995; MacFarlane, 2001; Warden, Lapkin, Swain, & Hart, 1995), face-to-face interaction is not always possible, as with post-secondary, beginning FSL students, who do not have the opportunity to participate in exchange visits.

As a proposed solution, I suggest Internet Based-Computer Assisted Language Learning (IB-CALL) as an alternative. One way to foster such exchanges with the target language group is by integrating L2 writing activities in an interactive IB-CALL environment using a collaborative approach. This approach is based on the Interaction Hypothesis (Hatch, 1978; Long, 1996; Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks, 1977), the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 1995, 2000, 2005), and current L2 writing theory.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of my study was to compare the FSL writing achievement and learner perceptions of two groups working collaboratively in an interactive, IB-CALL context: (1) Treatment Group: a group of beginner FSL university students interacting in pairs with francophone Acadians in another province; and, (2) Comparison Group: a group interacting in pairs with student peers of similar FSL proficiency at the university.

This phenomenological case study, aims to make a unique contribution and further research concerning Interaction, Output, L2 writing, IB-CALL, and design and development of learning environments for beginner, L2 learners, at the post-secondary level. More broadly, it concerns research on innovative pedagogical approaches related to L2 acquisition. To this end, it may serve to enhance the professional development of L2 teachers and, in turn, the effective implementation of IB-CALL within L2 learning environments.

Research questions

I have two main research questions. The first question is divided into parts (a) and (b), and ask: (a) What are the effects of working collaboratively in an interactive IB-CALL context with members of the target language group on the achievement of the written texts produced by beginner learners of FSL at the post-secondary level? ; and, (b) What is the achievement of their written texts in comparison to the writing of learners working in an IB-CALL group with classroom peers of similar language proficiency?

i) Are the texts produced in the treatment IB-CALL context different from those in the comparison IB-CALL context? If so, in what ways?

My second question asks: What are beginner FSL learners' perceptions of their L2 writing?

- a) With respect to the IB-CALL context?
- b) With respect to the text structure produced?
- c) With respect to the writing process?
- d) With respect to cultural awareness?

Research design

This research takes the form of a phenomenological case study, and, as such, is based on a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity emphasizing the importance of personal perspective and interpretation of human interaction (Geertz, 1973; Bogdan & Bilken, 1998).

Employing both qualitative and quantitative techniques, my research methods included elicitation and introspection (questionnaires and interviews), text data (analysis of writing samples), ongoing observation (journal), and design experiment methodology. Data analysis methods included some coding, thick/detailed description, and statistical analysis.

Two parallel forms of the same FSL writing lab component were taught during the Fall term (Sept. - Dec. 2004): one treatment IB-CALL group collaborating with francophone Acadians; and one comparison IB-CALL group of beginner FSL university learners paired with peers of similar L2 proficiency.

The first form included two different L2 writing activities (descriptive and narrative) implemented in an interactive IB-CALL medium using a collaborative approach with participants paired with members of the target language group (treatment group). The second form included the same two L2 writing activities; however, implementation took place in an IB-CALL medium with participants paired with classmates of similar language proficiency (comparison group). Participants were selected through non-random selection and groups (treatment and comparison) were created through random assignment.

Participants and Context

Participants were beginner, FSL learners at an anglophone university in eastern Canada. They consisted of 75 learners enrolled in ten language lab sections. Each section comprised of 6-8 students. Participants in each language lab section originated from two sections of a beginner, FSL class of students with similar language proficiency as determined by results of a language placement test at the time of enrollment.

IB-CALL: 2 approaches to Internet Based-Computer Assisted Language Learning

The treatment group collaborated on their learning and writing via computer-based communication with a partner class from a francophone Acadian junior high school in eastern Canada. These IB-CALL partners were of Acadian background and speakers of French as their first language. Each student in the treatment group was paired with 1 or 2 members of the partner class. At the same time, the comparison group members were

paired and completed their writing via IB-CALL with another lab member (in another lab section) of similar FSL proficiency at the university.

Preliminary results

L2 writing achievement – 1 Narrative writing sample

Preliminary results determining L2 writing achievement are based on the holistic rating of one narrative L2 writing sample from a treatment group participant and one from a comparison group participant. The writing samples were rated by two raters, using a modified version of an holistic rating rubric implemented by Kobayashi and Rinnert (1990). As this was a test of the holistic rating rubric, formal inter-rater reliability was not calculated. Instead, the raters discussed the results and came to a consensus (See figure 1).

The treatment group participant achieved a higher overall score (80%) than the comparison group participant (70%). However, the scores received for the individual components of the rating rubric reveal more interesting information.

For components such as Language and Vocabulary, the comparison group participant scored higher. However, for components such as Organization, Content, and Comprehensibility/Communicability, the treatment group participant scored higher. It appears the comparison group participant spent more effort on grammar, spelling, punctuation, and choice of words. Given the less authentic L2 learning situation, as well as the importance of marks at the post-secondary level, the comparison group participant may have been more concerned with “getting it right”, rather than actively co-constructing a well-rounded piece of writing. On the other hand, the treatment group participant seemed to focus more on cohesion, logical links between ideas, and clarity to form a unified whole. As well, the treatment group participant appears to have been more concerned with interest, richness, effectiveness of information and the message to be conveyed, creativity and originality. Overall, the treatment group participant achieved a more engaged, authentic, and participatory piece of L2 writing. Both participants showed evidence of reflection, hypothesis testing, and pushed output depending on their goals, which, in turn, appeared to be influenced by the type of interaction supported by their specific IB-CALL context...

	Treatment Group	Comparison Group
Language (grammar, spelling, and punctuation)	3	4
Vocabulary (choice of words)	3	4

Organization	3	2
Content	4	2
Comprehensibility and communicability	3	2
	16/20 – 80%	14/20 – 70%

Figure 1: Holistic scoring rubric (1-Beginner, 2-Developing, 3-Accomplished, 4-Exemplary)

Preliminary results

Learner perceptions – Stimulated recall interviews

Learner perceptions of their L2 writing, as collected via stimulated recall interviews, are consistent with the analysis of L2 writing achievement. When asked the following question, each participant responded accordingly.

INT. -- How did your specific IB-CALL writing context help or hinder the complexity of your writing in terms of meaning of the message that you were trying to convey to your partner, and writing him via email?

1. Treatment Group:

PART. -- Since in my case he was the message, I was trying to convey him and his father. That was my story. So that definitely helped it. I find that I am always limited using French; that it hinders it (getting the message across). But, specifically, if I were to compare it (writing via email) with speaking to someone in my class, then that (writing via email) would actually help it (getting the message across). I was motivated to represent him.

2. Comparison Group:

PART. -- I would say it helped it because even though we're at the same level, we're still in different classes...I think it helped because the more you do anything the more you improve at it. The more you do it the more mistakes you pick up on and understand them.

Concluding remarks

Preliminary results of my study, based on L2 writing achievement and learner perceptions from writing samples and stimulated recall interviews by one treatment group participant and one comparison group participant, indicate that interactive IB-CALL activities with members of the target language group can be effective to provide the Intensive exposure needed to make French come alive for FSL learners, improve attitudes towards FSL, and enhance proficiency. More complete analysis is required.

Merci et Bonne journée.

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