Disinhibition in a CSCL Environment

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore the IRC Français foreign language learning environment. This environment offers little more than a text-based chat system with a few features to make writing in a foreign language easier. Despite the limited structure, conversations online exhibit strong differences from conversations in the classroom, even when the teachers and students remain constant. We offer some explanations for these findings based on interviews conducted with a number of the teachers and students.

Keywords

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), Inhibition, Foreign Language Learning, Text, Equality, Chat

IRC FRANÇAIS

Over the past two years, we have involved students in online language learning conversations using text-based chat in a number of ways. Typically, seven to ten students participate in a conversation hosted by a teacher or a native speaker. This host, who is not necessarily the teacher of the students participating, acts as a party host would: s/he provides the seed to start the conversation and then participates like any other conversant. The host periodically takes more control of the conversation if the discussion seems to be waning. These conversations take place using IRC Français[(1)], a real-time, text-based chat client that allows students to converse over the Internet. The design of this system is described in (Hudson & Bruckman, In Press). The ehtory of this project can be found in the electronic version of this paper. Below, we briefly describe a study using two language classes over the course of a semester. These studies involved observing conversations in the classroom and online. Interviews were also conducted with a subset of the students participating. These teachers – Marie[(2)] and Philippe – illustrate the changes that occur in the discourse patterns of students using this type of online environment.

CONVERSATION IN THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM

In talking about her French class, one student succinctly summarized the trend seen in a number of classrooms:

> [The teacher] talks most of the time, actually. Literally, I maybe get in two to three sentences in class of me actually speaking. […] It's a bit awkward sometimes because she'll pose these questions. It's supposed to be a free forum for anyone to answer and try to get a discussion started. Maybe we're just not comfortable enough with each other yet to actually do that. So, everyone just kind of sits there and she'll go around the circle prompting you to respond to the question. Everyone takes their seven seconds in the limelight and says something. And that's it.

This pattern of interaction occurs in conversations in many foreign language classrooms. Typically, a foreign-language instructor plans to have a classroom conversation on a given topic. Therefore, the conversation begins with the instructor asking a general question to the class in order to start discussion on that chosen topic. The instructor, then, waits while the students quietly struggle to avoid eye contact. Eventually, the teacher calls on a specific student; the general question is repeated and aimed at the chosen student. The student gives the professor an answer and then breathes a sigh of relief as another "victim" is chosen. This pattern continues with the instructor varying aspects of the general question while calling on specific individuals. As such, the instructor usually comments between each student comment, initiating a question and frequently reiterating the student answer. This is not unlike the traditional initiate-respond-evaluate (IRE) cycle seen in many classrooms in all academic disciplines (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989). Not only does this lead to instructors saying significantly more in classroom discussions than the students, it leads to instructors acting as the gatekeeper to conversations. All comments must pass through the teacher. Also, student inhibition naturally leads to instructor dominance even with the best of instructors. The teachers we observed were both excellent instructors, but were unable to avoid being the dominant voice in the classroom.

CONVERSATIONS USING IRC FRANÇAIS

IRC Français-based conversations, however, seem to have little in common with classroom discussions. The same group of instructors and students (though in different combinations) approach conversations differently depending on whether they

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(1) http://www.cc.gatech.edu/elc/irc-francais/

(2) All teacher names have been changed.

are held online or in the classroom. Students tend to talk more; instructors, less. More complex conversations arise. Marie,

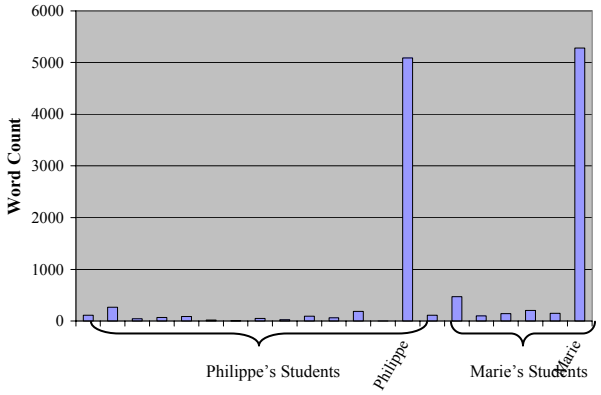

Figure 1: In the traditional classroom, teachers (Marie and Philippe) speak significantly more than any student.

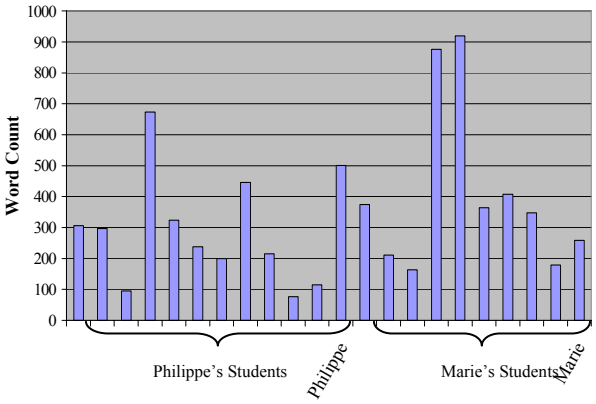

Figure 2: In the online environment, participation is much more egalitarian.

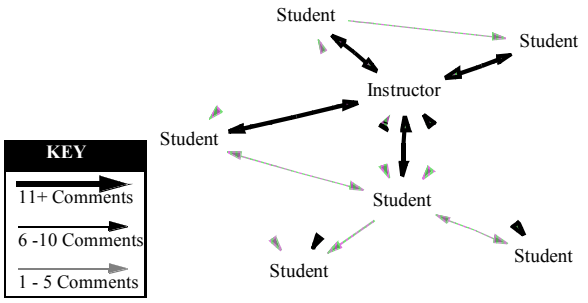

Figure 3: In Marie's traditional classroom, a social network analysis illustrates that she is the pivotal figure.

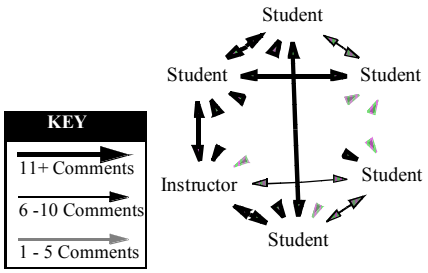

Figure 5: In Marie's online discussion, a much more democratic relationship between all participants emerges.

for example, became the pivotal figure in the *classroom* largely because no one answered her attempts to begin discussions. When she asks a general question *online*, however, she frequently receives a flood of responses. Almost all students seem to participate in the conversations with no provocation. As a result, she could relax control and let the conversations develop among the students.

DISCUSSION

These studies lead us to suggest that inhibition is reduced online in a number of ways. Particularly salient is the fact that discussions occur in almost real-time. Comments are not shown until the student decides to submit them. Struggling to formulate a grammatically correct comment does not hold up other in the class. As one student said, "People are not staring at you when you're talking. You're not put on the spot, basically. If you want to respond to something someone says, you can. And if you don't, you don't." The lowered inhibitions, subsequently allowed to the students to feel more comfortable sharing information with one another. As a result, a better, more supportive community of learners developed. Another student felt, "It's ok that I was going to make mistakes speaking French [online]. I'm not a native speaker and even if I were, I would make mistakes. That helped me realize that I could speak and that I wasn't going to be ridiculed for anything I said. … I'm not scared to speak French now." Further research is necessary to analyze why these changes occur in the online environment.

REFERENCES

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