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Discussions on Reading Instruction: Do Learners Prefer Face-to-face or Online?

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Abstract: Although many students opt for the convenience of online study, there is a paucity of literature documenting the rationale for students' choice of face-to-face or online learning format. As such, this study examined learner preferences for discussions on reading instruction. The study also compared the discussions generated by different sub-groups of students and explored the variances within students' discussions generated from online and face-to-face learning formats. The following research questions guided the study: (a) What are learners' preferences for discussions in reading instruction? (b) Does one discussion format facilitate meaning-making more than the other for various sub-groups and (c) Do patterns of discourse and learners preferences stay consistent across time with learners' sub-groups or do differences occur due to diversity? Results indicated that majority of participants preferred face-to-face discussion format to online discussion format in reading instruction. Participants also professed a belief that face-to-face discussions facilitate meaning-making more than online discussion. While such perception does not apply to all learner groups in the study, the results further showed that patterns of discourse and learners preferences stay consistent across time and learners, but differences occur due to learner diversity. Recommendations are made on how to facilitate learner inclusion and collaborative learning in both learning formats.

Keywords: meaning-making, online learning format, collaborative learning.

INTRODUCTION

Learners construct meaning during the reading process by among others, making an inference, monitoring, summarising, and generating questions. Inference involves making predictions before reading and during the course of reading. The inference is like reasoning on given information. A reader is said to be monitoring while reading, that is, if the reader can determine whether what he or she is reading is makes sense. Advanced readers construct meanings as they read; they anticipate problems as they read and can correct the problems as they occur. Summarising has to do with bringing important information together during the reading process. The reader identifies the main ideas and crucial elements in the reading material. In generating questions, the reader formulates questions he or she will answer as the reading progresses. Such questions facilitate meaning-making [1-6]. Reading instruction has largely been done through face-to-face learning format, but online resources now facilitate reading instruction and promote collaborative learning through the use of computers [7-9].

Teachers have used computer-mediated communication to facilitate reading instruction and learning in various disciplines [10]. Such technological advancement offers new instructional opportunities for literacy learning. By allowing the flow of information to and from multiple computer users, the internet encourages learners to discuss by writing and responding to posts [10-13]. Although researchers have looked at reading instruction through face-to-face and online formats, they have not done much to examine learner preferences in learning format (i.e., face-to-face or online). As such, this study sought to examine learner preferences for discussions on reading instruction. The study also compared the discussions generated by different sub-groups of students and explored the variances within students' discussions generated from online and face-to-face learning formats. The research questions that guided the study were: (a) What are learners preferences for discussions in reading instruction? (b) Does one discussion format facilitate meaning-making more than the other for various sub-groups? (c) Do patterns of discourse and learner preferences stay consistent across time and learner sub-groups or do differences occur due to diversity?

BRIEF REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Allen and Seaman [14] indicated that learners' preferences for online learning have increased. There has been a steady growth in the number of students enrolled in online courses since 2003. Post-secondary online education has rapidly increased at a rate which may have outstripped the growth of the overall higher education [15]. It seems that more students are opting

for the convenience of online study than the traditional face-to-face format. Statistics have also shown that many face-to-face, hybrid courses also have an online component. Considering the vast number of learners involved in online learning, it is imperative that those who design and teach these courses become knowledgeable about what works for various learner groups in relation to how they make meaning.

Some studies have looked at the value of online collaborative learning formats versus online individual learning environments, particularly in reading instruction. In a meta-analysis of 36 of such studies, Susman [16] contends that collaborative online environments facilitate greater increases in higher-order thinking than do face to face learning format; thus, identifying online collaborative discussions as a valuable tool that contribute to student learning. Parallel research suggests that face-to-face classes also benefit from discussion-based approaches to learning [17].

Other studies exploring factors that impact on student's online discussions suggest some relevant variables. Graddy [18] found that facilitating active online discussion is complicated. The large numbers of factors that have been set forth as important variables impacting online discussions indicate that this is a complex and multi-layered topic [19]. Perhaps, the complexity of these factors explains why some researchers assert that online discussions lead to collaborative cognitive growth.

However, other researchers have stated that online discussions, which contain substantive social interactions that can lead to cognitive development are rare [18, 20-22]. In fact, some researchers believe that online discussions are shallow in content [23].

Kay [24] shows that the first questioning-prompt sets the direction of the ensuing discussion. Questions designed to promote higher-order thinking have been found to increase collaboration and quality in online discussions [25]. Muilenburg and Berge [26] developed a framework for designing online questions to facilitate thinking that involves higher-order mental processes. Considering these perspectives, the prompts used in this study were developed to promote meaning-making.

While numerous studies have examined online discussions, few researchers have compared electronic collaborations to face-to-face classroom collaborations. Tutty and Klein [27] found that electronic collaborations generated significantly more questioning behaviours than were exhibited in the face-to-face collaborations. On the other hand, the students who worked together in a face-to-face format outperformed their online counterparts on the individual post-test, indicating that both formats have strengths and weaknesses. As such, Tan and Tan [28] suggest that instructors should take advantage of the unique strengths of both online and face-to-face environments. From their mixed results with online discussions, Ferdig and Roehler [29] suggest that online discussion forums facilitate in-depth discussions for some students but may not be the best tool for all students. In his comparison of online and face-to-face discussions with second language learners of English, Warschaurer [30] reported an equal participation in electronic discussions and face-to-face interactions. However, Warschaurer [30] compared only one online discussion with one face-to-face discussion using the same students. In another study that compared four online and four face-to-face discussions, Heckman and Annabi [31] found that students' online discussions included as much, if not more, higher levels of cognitive activity. Researchers of the current study believe that this study will refine our understanding of the value of the online versus face-to-face formats by exploring and comparing the discourse of students' contributions in both environments.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study links theories regarding second language acquisition to those within the realm of sociolinguistic theories of learning. Such linkage is necessary because written and spoken languages are important in the learning process [31-35]. As learners express their thoughts and ideas that come to their minds while encountering new concepts, they have the opportunity to amalgamate prior understandings and new insights. As classmates respond to one another with oral or written feedback and challenge one another with alternative interpretations, they engage in a meaning-making process [36].

Study Participants and Setting

Participants in this mixed study included 40 first-year undergraduates who were taking the Reading component of an Academic Literacy course at a regionally accredited university in Southern Africa. Some participants identified themselves as first speakers of English language whereas others considered themselves as speakers of English as a second language. The participants differed in age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Research Design and Data Collection

Transcripts of online and face-to-face discussions of course contents generated by the participants were the primary source of the data for this study. Participants were divided into eight (8) groups (i.e., five students per group) with all groups participating in weekly discussions over three (3) semesters. At the end of each semester, after experiencing both online and face-to-face discussions, participants responded to the researcher designed Reading Discussion Preference Questionnaire (RDP-Q),

which sought for information about each student's access to technology and attitude toward the discussion formats. Finally, a smaller subset of students who volunteered, participated in four (4) focus-group discussions where they talked about their preferences and experiences about the discussions. It must be noted that discussion prompts were provided to the participants by the researchers because the kinds of teacher prompts can make a difference in the quality of the students' postings [37].

According to Wang & Woo [38], it is important to allow enough time for thoughtful responses. Hence, the online discussions in this study followed a prescribed tiered structure wherein each of the students submitted an initial posting, then responded to their peers' postings on two subsequent days. This structure was also influenced by Northover's [40] description of multi-stage discussions. For course grading purposes, students' contributions were evaluated both on adherence to the format and on the quality of their postings. Quality was defined as contributing to collective knowledge building, and examples were provided for the students. By communicating clear expectations [25] and basing evaluation on quality [39], investigators followed recommendations from the literature.

DATA ANALYSIS

Transcripts of students' online and face-to-face discussions were read, reread, coded and categorised using the framework proposed by Bogdan and Biklen [41], to determine how the students' language functioned within the discussions. Values were ascribed to each student's contributions to both their online and face-to-face discussions, which were analysed quantitatively. Transcripts from focus group discussions were also coded using Bogdan and Biklen's framework [41], and themes relating to students' preferred discussion format were extricated. Simple frequency count and percentile distribution were used to analyse the structured survey responses to the RDP-Q.

Considering the language functions and levels of potential for building meaning as defined by Wells [36], the researchers read and reread transcripts. The researchers also coded the transcripts to examine the kinds of functions and moves found in the students' exchanges and their potential for building meaning within the discussion. These codes were then collapsed into very broad categories: relationship building, restating, expounding, and inviting. Numeric values were ascribed to each category according to its potential for building meaning. Each paragraph of an individual's contribution held the possibility of being awarded points for each of the four categories.

After several training sessions, an inter-rater reliability was established over the coding with 96% agreement. During the analysis, 16 discussion transcripts were subjected to agreement coding ranging between 88% to 94% agreement. In this study, individual students and their contributions to the discussions were considered the units of analysis. The value ascribed to each student's individual written and verbal contributions (valuing process described above) were entered as quantitative data into an Excel spreadsheet along with numbers standing for each student's demographic information and preferred discussion format.

Data entered into the Excel spreadsheet were transferred to SPSS for quantitative analyses. The quantitative analysis looked at the total value of each student's contributions in each discussion as well as the total value of each category (relationship building, restating, expounding, inviting) for each student's contributions. Quantitative analysis of these data included descriptive statistics, a series of paired samples *t*-tests (Online, Face-to-face and Online and Face–to-Face) and repeated measures MANOVA for (Online, Face-to-Face, and Online and Face-to-Face). The analysis examined 100 of these small group discussions (i.e., 50 for online and 50 for face-to-face).

RESULTS

Results from the quantitative component of the analysis suggest that the majority of student's face-to-face contributions earned more points than their online contributions. As such, the participants in this study have a high preference for the use of face-to-face discussion for reading instruction. The implication of such finding is that the participants in this study hold the belief that face-to-face discussion format facilitates meaning making for them more than the online discussion format. Additionally, the relationship building, expounding and requesting categories were also significantly higher in the face-to-face format. Such finding further shows that participants in this study firmly believe that more opportunities exist in face-to-face discussions for meaning making during reading instruction than in the online discussion format. Due to sub-group differences, the most significant finding was of participants who identified themselves as second language learners of English and those who identified themselves as first language speakers of English. It follows therefore that patterns of discourse and learner preferences do not stay consistent across time and student sub-groups because differences occur due to the diversity of learner population.

The contributions of participants who identified themselves as English language learners earned considerably more points in the online format compared to the face-to-face format. However, some of the English language learners cited the face-to-face

format as their preferred learning format even though their online contributions earned more quality points. Qualitative evidence found within the focus group discussions indicated that participants who described themselves as shy or less outspoken favoured the online format. As such these participants' online contributions earned consistently more points than their face-to-face contributions. About 80 percent of the participants (n=32) in this study indicated a strong preference for the face-to-face discussion format whereas the remaining 20 percent (n=8) preferred the online format. The participants, who identified themselves in focus group interviews as being less verbally reticent, consistently earned more quality points for their online contributions than in their face-to-face contributions.

While most participants stated a preference for the face-to-face format, only one sub-group; the English language learners, showed a statistically significant difference in the quality of their contributions between the two formats with those who identified themselves as first language speakers of English earning significantly more quality points for their contributions to the face-to-face discussions. It is also important to understand which format that yields more meaningful contributions among sub-groups of students who may find the university experience challenging.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The majority of the participants in this study prefer the face-to-face discussion format to that of online in reading instruction. They also profess the belief that face-to-face discussions facilitate meaning-making more than online discussion. While such a perception does not apply to all learner groups, results from this study showed that patterns of discourse and learners preferences stay consistent across time and learners, but differences occur due to learner diversity. As such, we recommend that lecturers engage in differentiating discussions of course content in hybrid courses to make discussions more accessible to all student population to facilitate meaning-making. Learners should also be encouraged to take advantage of discussions in both learning formats (i.e., face-to-face and online) to facilitate collaborative reading activity, which encourages learner inclusion and collaborative learning.

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