Online Teaching and Learning: When Technology meets Language and Culture

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Abstract

Technology and high accessibility to networking media in both private and professional contexts have made online teaching and learning a norm and reality for tertiary education across the world. Online teaching and learning do not only apply to distance education and Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs), but they also apply effectively to on-campus education as an integral component of blended teaching and learning. Current instructors and students communicate in a wide range of "contact" situations from face-to-face classroom interaction, seminar or tutorial activities, individual or group consultations, to various forms of online communication. In this paper, I shall focus on online teaching and learning of language and culture courses using commonly adopted management systems, e.g., Blackboard and Moodle in two educational contexts including Hong Kong and Melbourne. Research questions include 1) what do instructors and students actually do in online synchronous discussion forums? 2) what language and cultural issues are involved in the discussion forums? and 3) what are the pedagogical implications of using technology for teaching and learning language and culture? Empirical online discussion forums data from four courses are collected and analyzed. Research findings show that both explicit learning and implicit learning take place actively in the online discussion forums; and that various language and culture issues emerge and are competently dealt with in online learning environment. Towards the end of the paper, I shall also explore the pedagogical implications of using technology for teaching language and culture courses in the online learning forum (OLF) environment.

Keywords: *online teaching and learning, educational technology, language and culture, pedagogical implications*

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Introduction

There have been new trends in the tertiary education sector across the world, including incorporation of technology into teaching and learning, globalization and super-diversity, and new conceptualizations of what constitutes effective teaching and learning.

Technology has been one of the driving forces for the transformation of teaching and learning. Instructors and students have daily access to networking media in their private and professional contexts. They explore new ways of teaching and learning. In the meantime, teaching and learning management systems, such as Blackboard and Moodle, have been widely adopted and taken advantage of by increasingly tech-savvy generations of educators and learners. The online communication for teaching and learning purposes is no longer a form of innovation, but it has become a norm and reality.

Another trend in tertiary education is globalization and super-diversity. This is reflected in the internationalization of universities, where interdisciplinary cross-campus programs and courses are increasing, and students from diverse cultures stay in contact through various networks, and they become increasingly mobile both in terms of shuttling across campuses and shifting between reality and virtual worlds. The majority of the issues of globalization and super-diversity are related to language and culture, for example, what language(s) is/are used as lingua franca for communication or used as a medium of instruction, and how to manage intercultural communication in educational settings when communities of practice involve super-diverse faculty members and students.

In addition, there have been new conceptualizations about effective teaching and learning. Traditional views focus on explicit learning in the classroom and knowledge transmission from instructors to students. Teacher-centered "goals" and "aims" rather than student-centered learning "outcomes" used to be more salient in the curriculum. With the advancement of educational technology, and the increasing contact of different languages and cultures, people conceptualize teaching and learning as ongoing, sustainable and life-long interactions between educators and learners. More attention has been given to student and class centered teaching (Senior, 2006), blended teaching and learning (Xu, 2012), and implicit learning (Kaufman, DeYoung, Gray, Jimenez, Brown and Mackintosh, 2010). According to Kaufman et al. (2010, p. 321), implicit learning is regarded as an ability, and it "takes place on a daily basis without our intent or conscious awareness, and plays a significant role in structuring our skills, perceptions, and behavior".

While classroom teaching and face-to-face interaction are still predominant in university context, there is another "front" in which technology meets language and culture in the sense that educators and learners use various functions of learning management systems, such as Blackboard and Moodle, to implement teaching and to enhance learning outcomes through collaborative construction of the subject matter knowledge.

Through empirical data collection and analysis, this paper aims to find out 1) what instructors and students actually do in online synchronous discussion forums 2) what language

and culture issues are involved in the discussion forums, and 3) what pedagogical implications of using technology with special reference to online discussion forum are for teaching language and culture courses in different sociocultural contexts including Hong Kong and Melbourne.

Literature Review

Technology has been one of the driving forces for the transformation of teaching and learning across disciplines all over the world from science and engineering to social sciences and humanities. Governments and education departments have invested funds and allocated resources to online teaching and learning. In Turkey, "computers and information technologies have been integrated into instruction in every field of education as well as foreign language teaching both by the central government and individual institutions which aim to provide modern learning environments and better learning opportunities for their learners" (Öztürk, 2012, p. 217). Current literature on online teaching and learning mainly focuses on distance learning and the increasingly popular Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs). There is also literature on blended or hybrid teaching and learning involving both Face-to-Face (FTF) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) instructions.

In terms of definitions of online learning, Krish (2008, p. 113) defines online learning as "the access and exchange of information as part of the learning activities in a course delivered through the network". The term "online learning" refers more specifically to an approach to teaching and learning that includes the use of Internet technologies. Learners use the online learning environments not only to access information and course content but also to interact and collaborate with other participants in the same course. Smith and Kurthen (2007, p. 457) have proposed four distinct categories of online learning, including "web-enhanced, blended, hybrid learning and fully online". They define a blended course as one in which instructors do not only upload course-related syllabus and files onto the designated learning management system, but also add significant online learning activities, e.g., online quizzes and discussions, which account for a certain limited percentage of the course grade. The four courses that are selected for this research paper belong to the "blended" category of online teaching and learning. Synchronous online discussion forums are important components of the four courses.

Online teaching requires considerable amount of design and preparation. Arbaugh (2004, p. 179) has investigated students' perceptions of technological, course conduct, and course outcome variables as they participated in multiple online courses over a 4-year period in a Midwestern U.S. University's MBA program. While Arbaugh has found significant differences in perceptions of variables, such as flexibility, interaction, and delivery medium satisfaction, he suggests that "both subject experience and subject matter effects should be examined". In addition, Ke (2010, p. 808) points out that instructional design dimensions for online teaching include "collaboration, interactivity, reflection, experiential learning, and sense of community". Online learning can sometimes be as simple as mere online chatting, but it can also become as sophisticated as involving multiple variables and factors as far as "subject experience and subject matter effects" are concerned.

Ke and Xie (2009, p. 136) argue that in an online learning environment, an "integrated" course model based on content and support promotes learning satisfaction. They favor the idea of "deep learning" (p. 137), which means "highly collaborative, integrative, self-reflective, and application-centered". They regard learning process as a "continuum ranging from the stage of *surface learning*, where the learner simply memorizes new ideas, to *deep learning*, where the learner actively integrates new ideas into his or her cognitive structure through learning in a social negotiation environment". They argue that deep learning should "engage the whole person – cognitively, socially, and affectively – in the learning process" (p. 137).

This "whole person" approach to deep learning also reflects successful higher educational experience, which, according to Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2000) and Ke (2010, p. 809), "is embedded within a Community of Inquiry where learning occurs through the interaction of three core elements: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence". Different from teacher's online presence (TOP) and student's online presence (SOP), cognitive presence is the extent to which students and instructors are able to construct meaning and critical thinking through sustained online communication. Social presence is the ability of individuals to project their personal characteristics into the online community, presenting themselves as "real" people. Teaching presence involves primarily the instructors, but also active online learners, who may assume "teaching roles" while interacting with other participants. Teaching presence begins before the course commences as instructors, acting as instructional designers, usually plan and prepare the courses, and it continues during the course, as the instructors facilitate online interactive activities, and provide direct instructions throughout the online teaching and learning process.

All of the three types of "presence" are essential for online learning, because "knowledge not only exists in individual minds but also in the discourse among individuals, the social relationships that bind them, the physical artifacts that they use and produce, and the theories, models and methods they use to produce them" (Hrastinski, 2009, p. 78). The synchronous online discussion function of both Blackboard and Moodle enables instructors and students to engage in dialogue, which in turn enhances learning. Hrastinski (2009, p. 78) points out that "learning is dialogue, both internal and by social negotiation". In online learning, both instructors and students play essential roles. Ke's (2010, p. 818) research shows that instructors should "generate an effective teaching presence with supportive features to reinforce the emerging of cognitive and social presence in an online learning environment."

As far as the students in online learning environment are concerned, apart from the social and interactional skills they are required for effective online learning, Kerr, Rynearson & Kerr (2006, p. 91) have found through a three-year investigation of online student learning that characteristics for successful online learning include "reading and writing skills, independent learning, motivation, and computer literacy". It is worth noting that independent learning and motivation are important characteristics for successful online learning. Unlike classroom FTF teaching and learning, online CMC learning through discussion forums comprises considerable amount of implicit learning. Kaufman et al. (2010, p. 321) argue that implicit learning is an important ability as it "takes place on a daily basis without our intent or conscious awareness, and

plays a significant role in structuring our skills, perceptions, and behavior". Learning through "interaction", e.g., interacting with lecturers, peers, and print and online resources, learning through sharing about cultures, and learning through self-reflections, constitutes the strengths of online learning, given its flexibility and egalitarian learning discourse and construct. According to Kaufman (2010, p. 337), implicit learning ability is "related to openness to experience and the associated construct, intuition, and to the tendency to make decisions without premeditation."

There are many ways of conducting online learning. As far as synchronous online teaching and learning are concerned, Krish (2008, p. 113) suggests that instructors should carefully "plan, implement, and reflect on the activities, while remaining flexible in coping with the complexities of learning in a virtual environment". Indeed, online learning can be full of challenges. Krish (2008, p. 113) points out that "teaching and learning language in an online synchronous mode lacks the nonverbal and paralinguistic signals which are normally present in a face-to-face classroom. Hence learning through the online mode may pose more challenges to the learner as well as the instructor".

Current research literature has identified a number of issues surrounding online teaching and learning, e.g., Krish (2008, pp. 117-123) has raised the issues of what "skills and preparation" are required for online learning, how to boost "learner participation" or how to motivate learners, and what feedback to provide for developing collegial relationship with peers and instructors in an online environment. Hrastinski (2009, p. 80) defines online learner participation as "a process of learning by taking part and maintaining relations with others" He also points out that "it is a complex process comprising doing, communicating, thinking, feeling and belonging, which occurs both online and offline". Hrastinski (2009, p. 78) has also proposed a "theory of online learning as online participation", arguing that online learner participation (1) is a complex process of taking part and maintaining relations with others, (2) is supported by physical and psychological tools, (3) is not synonymous with talking or writing, and (4) is supported by all kinds of engaging activities. He emphasizes that "participation" is the key to online learning, because participation and learning are "inseparable and jointly constituting."

Song, Singleton, Hill, and Koh (2004, p. 59) have also identified similar issues. Their study has indicated that "course design, learner motivation, time management, and comfortableness with online technologies impact the success of an online learning experience". Their research participants have indicated that "technical problems, a perceived lack of sense of community, time constraints, and the difficulty in understanding the objectives of the online courses as challenges."

In addition, another issue that is specifically related to online teaching and learning is about the roles of the instructors and students. Krish (2008, p. 125) reiterates the conducive role of instructors in an online environment, arguing that "instructors need to maintain a conducive climate to weave ideas, draw attention to relevant parts at the appropriate time and to provide expert advice when and where necessary." Xu's (2012, p. 3) research findings show that "in the blended ELT environment, while the traditional roles of the teachers as information providers, knowledge transmitters, supervisors and assessors, and the students as learners, participants, and respondents are still dominant, the teachers are also increasingly putting on new 'hats' as expert

learners, facilitators, course designers and organizers. Apart from being learners, the students are also taking on new roles as topic contributors, meaning negotiators, information providers, strategic communicators and monitors".

As far as the question of what instructors and students do in the online discussion forum context, Xu and Wang (2010, pp. 289-291) have investigated both online CMC and classroom FTF interaction data collected in Hong Kong, and adopted discourse "acts" framework to explore what acts teachers and students in Hong Kong perform in the actual classroom and online environment. They have discovered that regardless of what subject contents the courses involve, both teachers and students make statements, inform, evaluate, provide opinions, question, greet people, agree, suggest, request, answer, alert, react, confirm, invite, accept, query, object, apologize, and call-off, among other acts they perform. Xu and Wang have also discovered that in online learning environment, students are more likely to "inform", "opine", "question", "evaluate", "suggest", "react" and "answer" than they normally do in classroom FTF interactions.

In relation of online teaching of language and culture courses, issues such as multilingualism and multiculturalism may emerge. According to Li and Zhu (2013, p. 518) "multilingualism plays an essential role in the interchanges between individuals of different origins and makes it possible for people who may not share cultural assumptions or values to (re)negotiate their relations and identities". English has increasingly been used as a global lingua franca for academic communication (Jenkins, 2012; Mauranen, 2012). In globalized multilingual and multicultural online environment, it is of pivotal importance to develop students' "metacultural competence" (Sharifian, 2013, pp. 9-10), which Sharifian defines as "a competence that enables interlocutors to communicate and negotiate their cultural conceptualizations during the process of intercultural communication." He also further elaborates on the notion of metacultural competence as involving "conceptual variation awareness", "conceptual explication strategy", and "conceptual negotiation strategies". In an online discussion forum involving students and instructors from different cultures, it is essential to be aware of conceptual variation across cultures, and to adopt appropriate strategies for successful interaction and learning.

The current literature on online teaching and learning also includes pedagogical implications. Song et al. (2004, p. 69) point out that "1) there is a need for effective instructional design for online courses; 2) there is a need to work with learners to assist them in the development of time management strategies; 3) there is a need to work with learners to assist them with establishing community or feelings of connection in online contexts." In addition, Xu (2012, pp. 8-9) has found out that 1) the blended ELT environment facilitates the paradigm shift from teacher-centered to student-centered teaching and learning; 2) the blended ELT environment enhances the sustainable relationship between the teachers and the students; 3) the blended ELT environment reinforces the multiple and changing roles of the teachers and the students.

In this paper, I adopt relevant theories and notions that have been reviewed in this section as an analytical framework, and address a number of research questions, including: 1) what do instructors and students actually do in online synchronous discussion forums? 2) what language and cultural issues are involved in the discussion forums? and 3) what are the pedagogical

implications of using technology with special reference to online discussion forum for teaching and learning language and culture?

Methodology

In order to address the three research questions, I mainly collected data from online discussion forums that took place in two universities, one being in Hong Kong, and the other in Melbourne. The Hong Kong data involve two courses, including Vocabulary Studies, and Language and Societal Modernization; and the Melbourne data involve also two courses, including Language and Globalization, and Writing across Cultures.

All of the four courses in two different geographical and sociocultural locations are offered in the blended mode of classroom FTF teaching and online CMC instruction. The ratio of FTF and CMC is usually 80% to 20%, meaning that the majority of the lectures and tutorials are classroom based teaching, whereas a number of sessions are conducted online through synchronous discussion forums.

The topics for the discussion forums include: exploring useful vocabulary learning resources; language policies and planning in Hong Kong; the history of human communication; and vocabulary learning strategies (from Hong Kong data), and meanings of globalization; globalization and linguistic creativity; experiences of learning English writing, and the relationship of writing and cultures (from Melbourne data).

The total amount of online discussion forums data amounts up to approximately 12 hours, and 82,300 words. The total number of participants is around 150, while 3 instructors are involved (including the author of this paper). The Hong Kong participants (around 80) are primarily university students from either local Hong Kong or the Chinese Mainland. There are also a small percentage of international students coming from Southeast Asia, and America and Europe. The Melbourne participants (around 70) are primarily international students from East Asia, Southeast Asia, America, Europe, and local Australia.

This paper aims at a qualitative analysis of the synchronous online discussion forums data through identifying the major discourse "acts" of the instructors and students; exploring the major issues involved in teaching language and culture courses, and drawing on implications for online teaching and learning of language and culture.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, I report on the findings based on the examination and analysis of empirical data collected from online synchronous discussion forums. The findings are grouped according to the first two research questions, namely 1) What do instructors and students actually do in online synchronous discussion forums? and 2) What language and culture issues are involved in the discussion forums? The third research question about the pedagogical implications will be addressed in the next section. I also discuss the findings to see whether there are variations between the two sets of data, and whether there are different issues involved in teaching language and culture courses in the two different linguistic and sociocultural educational contexts.

What do instructors and students actually do in online synchronous discussion forums?

Both Hong Kong data and Melbourne data show that across the four courses within the disciplines of language and intercultural studies in the two universities, instructors and students do a wide range of discourse "acts" in their synchronous online discussion forums. These include: greeting, stating, informing, evaluating, opining, suggesting, questioning, answering, confirming, reacting, agreeing, objecting, thanking and a few other discourse "acts". Examples of these "acts" and their analyses are as follows:

Greeting:

Hong Kong data	Melbourne data
Good afternoon everyone! Have lunch yet? Full now ☺?	*Good Morning Everyone! Excited to be here!*
Hey~ Alan, where are you ^^?	*Good afternoon guys!*

Both Hong Kong and Melbourne data show that participants in synchronous online discussion forums "greet" each other in a range of formal and informal expressions, e.g., *Good afternoon everyone!*or*Hey~ Alan*. It can also be noted that the Hong Kong data also show culture-specific expressions, such as asking others whether they have had meals, and there they are. In addition, the use of expressions typical of Internet communication, e.g., ~, ^^, ☹, and u (meaning 'you') is also evident in Hong Kong data. Greeting acts are common at the beginning of discussion forums. They serve as ways of projecting "social presence", in Garrison, Anderson & Archer's (2000) terms, as participants interact among themselves in "real" face-to-face situations. Greeting acts also serve as markers of interactivity and sense of community.

Stating:

Hong Kong data	Melbourne data
I have found something from the Encyclopedia.	*I actually quote that from my assignment :P*
I still remember how cheerful I was when I received my permission from a university!	*Having been born in a multi-cultural country such as Australia, I believe that I've been able to experience Globalization first hand.*

In synchronous online discussion forums, participants, both in Hong Kong and Melbourne contexts, "state" what they do, or what has happened to them, or what they believe to be true.

"Stating" is one of the common acts in the forums, as participants are generally in a sharing mode, making statements of what they do, how they feel, and what they have found. Arbaugh (2004, p. 179) argues that online learning is both about "subject experience" and "subject matter effects". In this case, "stating" acts serve as indicators of participants' "subject experience". Ke (2010, p. 808) also points out that "experiential learning" is an essential element of online learning.

Informing:

Hong Kong data	Melbourne data
This pdf file is about the relation between socio-economic policies and language planning both in Hong Kong and mainland China.	*The 'old' pop culture may appear to be very classical now, like the old pop songs in the 50s and 60s (in the Chinese context, those songs were pretty much Russian songs, not English ones at all).*
Hong Kong has a government department which is responsible for language planning, implementing and reviewing: Education Manpower Bureau (EMB).	*I know in Italy they read the same magazines as those in America and therefore their idea of mainstream is influenced by American culture.*
The earliest recognizable examples of written Chinese date from 1500-950 BC (Shang dynasty) and were inscribed on ox scapulae and turtle shells – "oracle bones".	*The phrase "Long time no see" has been greatly used by native and non-native speakers. But it originally came from Chinese Pidgin English.*

"Informing" is one of the most common acts throughout the synchronous online discussion forums. Participants inform each other what they know or that they believe constitutes new information or new knowledge. As can be seen from the above examples, informing acts are directly related to "subject matter" knowledge and effects, which is defined as one of the key aspects of online learning by Arbaugh (2004, p. 179). In addition, informing is also an act in which "teaching presence", in Garrison, Anderson & Archer's (2000) terms, is activated. Informing acts, in the synchronous online discussion forums context, are performed by both instructors and students. They are a joint effort of collaboration, and integration of "new" knowledge and information sharing. They also foster the notions of "deep learning" (Ke and Xie, 2009, p. 137) and "implicit learning as an ability" (Kaufman et al., 2010, p. 321).

Evaluating:

Hong Kong data	Melbourne data
You're right, Tess. There are certainly social and economic reasons to justify the 'biliterate and trilingual' policy in Hong Kong.	*This seems to be a very comprehensive response. It's good that you've incorporated what we've discussed so far into your response.*
This is a very comprehensive website on vocabulary learning and teaching.	*When I read the first sentence of your post, I couldn't help associating it with a Chinese saying, which is 'One cannot appreciate Mountain Lu, simply because s/he is in the mountain'. What you said is absolutely right, in that, we may not be able to fully appreciate what globalization brings to us.*

"Evaluating" is common among instructors in the synchronous online discussion forums, due to the instructors' roles as "supervisors and assessors" among others (Xu, 2012, p. 3). Evaluating acts constitute an important part of "teaching presence" (Garrison, Anderson & Archer 2000, Ke, 2010, p. 809). Krish (2008, p. 113) suggests that online teaching instructors should "plan, implement, and reflect on the activities, while remaining flexible in coping with the complexities of learning in a virtual environment". Therefore, evaluating is not only an act that reinforces deep learning, but also an act that can be flexibly performed to project teaching presence in terms of coping with the complexities of online learning.

Opining:

Hong Kong data	Melbourne data
As part of China, Hong Kong people should also learn to speak fluent Putonghua.	*I think that the spread of the English language is a way of determining the magnitude of globalisation in our world today.*

I would properly think that children develop their speaking and listening skills from the environment (family and society), however, they gain writing skills mostly in school.	*In my opinion, globalization is no longer national or regional, but extends to the whole world.*
The matter of 'mutual intelligibility' is vita in communication. Using numbers and letters to replace words will have its advantages, but if the recipients cannot understand what we, as 'senders' of messages, are talking about, the quality of communication will be affected accordingly.	*I think simplicity is important for effective cross cultural communication. It is best to keep our English simple and avoid using slangs or idioms, because we want to make sure that people from other cultures can understand us.*

"Opining" or providing personal views is also one of the most common acts in synchronous online discussion forums. Similar to "stating" and "informing" acts, "opining" acts also relate directly to the participants' subject experience as a means of experiential learning. Opining acts are also indicators of "cognitive presence", in Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (2000) and Ke's (2010, p. 809) terms. Cognitive presence is the extent to which students and instructors are able to construct meaning and critical thinking through sustained online communication. In both Hong Kong and Melbourne data, opining acts constitute the majority of the interactions, through which participants put forward their views and opinions, and other participants react on a sustained dialogue basis.

Suggesting:

Hong Kong data	Melbourne data
To find these two articles, you can either look for the hardcopies of the journal(s) in the library, or you can try the e-journals option on the university library website.	*Hahaha, so what is popular culture? if we see that as a 'question' or a problem, then 'Google it' can be an easy fix, or an immediate solution.*
To avoid confusion, I suggest we should make a new theme whenever we start discussing a new topic.	*Google seems to fix everyone's temporary questions in this era!*

"Suggesting" is one of the acts that participants perform in synchronous online discussion forums as a way to indicate answers or solutions to a problem, or alternative ways to address particular issues under discussion. "Suggesting" acts are performed by both instructors and students. They reflect the extent of successful online learning experience in terms of Ke's (2010, p. 808) dimensions of online teaching and learning, including "collaboration, interactivity, reflection, experiential learning, and sense of community".

Answering:

Hong Kong data	Melbourne data
-- *What should I write in the report?* -- *Report the results that you have got, using tables, and write 500-600 words of commentary.*	-- *How about 'we brother two, who and who'? haha!* -- *Well, these could be Chinglish expressions. They haven't gained much currency yet among non-Chinese speaking English speakers :).*
-- *So who is the website mostly suitable for?* -- *A good question! For Games and 'Vocabulary Studies' lovers, I guess.*	-- *What does 'popular culture' mean to you?* -- *To me popular culture is a culture that transcends international borders, and can be seen as a global culture that people across many countries and nations wish to be a part of an associate with.*

"Answering" acts are usually common in classroom face-to-face teaching discourse, where teacher-student interactions generally follow the pattern of initiation-response (answering)-feedback. However, in synchronous online discussion forums, answering acts are not as common as those in the classroom setting. Online synchronous forums are discussion based, with instructor(s) and all students as participants contributing to the different "threads" or topics of the discussion synchronously. Another noticeable feature of "answering" acts in discussion forums is that these acts can be performed by both students and instructors, because questions can be asked by instructors, and they can also be asked by students, in which case, instructor(s) are most likely to be the ones who post answers onto the forums.

Questioning:

Hong Kong data	Melbourne data
To adopt an economic concept, how much time/effort/money should we 'invest' before we can have the 'returns' (in social and financial terms) of becoming a biliterate and trilingual person?	*You know it's interesting that you and Saaya feel that it's easier to write in English on fb. I wonder why? Is it because it's like a lingua franca for you and all your friends on fb? Or is it because fb is an English site, and it just feels more right?*
About the online activities, what should we do during this online tutorial period?	*I like the idea of 'main stream'. Well, what does 'main stream' mean in the current era of globalization? :)*
Do I have to complete all the tests from the Compleat Lexical Tutor website or just a particular part?	*What does 'popular culture' mean to you? What roles does English play in 'popular culture' across the globe?*

"Questioning" acts may include simple questions for clarifications or straightforward answers, but they may also include questions that are used as prompts to keep the discussions going further and deeper. Questioning acts are indicators of participation and engagement in the discussion forums. They also initiate or elicit interactions among the forum participants to strengthen the "social presence", a notion proposed by Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2000) and Ke (2010, p. 809). In addition, questioning acts, particularly those acts that are used as prompts for further discussions facilitate deep learning.

Confirming:

Hong Kong data	Melbourne data
-- Have you checked the website?	*-- I think "Sorry" is also common.*
--The site is quite interesting ~ especially the pictures! XDDD~	*-- Yea, I've heard "sorry" a lot too!*

-- *Well, so, you are not the one that I met at the Mid Summer Night's Dream party?*
-- *I am the one you met at the party. Remember those 2 dogs.*
-- *Yes, the two dogs, the CATS (I mean the musical), and the nice food and people.*
-- *You finally come!!! En???*
-- *I have posted something constructive!!! How come u find me so late?? Ha?*

-- *Hahaha, I like the 'oh no' expression. In Hong Kong, my colleagues and friends sometimes say 'aiya' to express some disappointment or embarrassment.*
-- *Haha that's true. We always say aiya.*

-- *In addition, international relationships have taken a new dimension.*
-- *Yes, that's true. Now the world is pretty much mapped in three or four dimensions, longitude, latitude, and altitude.*

" Confirming" acts are used as positive responses to preceding acts that request confirmation or seek assurance. Unlike face-to-face interactions where confirmation can be revealed in non-verbal cues such as nodding one's head, back channeling, or showing affirmative expressions. Explicit "confirming" acts are elicited in synchronous online discussion forums because of the lack of paralinguistic signals. In addition, confirming acts help make the discussions more cohesive and therefore build up sense of community and mutual rapport among the participants.

Reacting:

Hong Kong data	Melbourne data
-- *We don't need to submit it online, right?* -- *Well I heard we don't have to submit it online ... ^^``` Haaa soli Ka Yuen for the wrong infoormaatioon.*	-- *Hi there, where are all the previous responses?* -- *Hi, Chinta. I've hidden them, because they belong to a different group :).*
--*Angus, where are you now? I am in the library. Are you in the ITSC?* -- *Yes ar ~ Come to meet us la!*	-- *In Spain we say that we are 'happy' to refer to being 'drunk'.* -- *In China, or some parts of China, people would use the word 'high' to mean 'drunk'.*

> *-- We actually use 'high' too, but with the connotations of hyperactive or of being under the influence of stronger drugs.*

"Reacting" is one of the main acts participants perform in synchronous online discussion forums. The Hong Kong data shows certain local phonological, lexical and syntactic features in the English they use, for example, *soli* for sorry, *infoormaatioon* for information, the use of *right* as a question tag, and the use of *a r*and *la* as discourse particles to indicate certain mood, attitude and meaning. The Melbourne data, in comparison, shows that the English that the participants use focuses on intelligibility associated with ELF (English as a lingua franca) context. The reacting acts are performed in the form of responding to relevant posts in the forums, not necessarily answering questions, but reacting to requests and relevant topics.

Agreeing:

Hong Kong data	Melbourne data
I do agree that parents play a very important role in children's language(s) development, otherwise, we wouldn't call the language that we're most confortable with the 'mother' tongue! ☺	*Yes I agree Stef! And I believe that the world is always changing and we are always adapting.*
Yes, I agree with you. Haha. Those words are not very commonly used.	*I agree! Globalization does shrink our distance from each other.*
I think I will agree 100% with the use of other media than paper, concerning the limited resources.	*I completely agree with you Marc, we should not let go our first language.*

"Agreeing" is one of the most identifiable acts in synchronous online discussion forums. In both Hong Kong and Melbourne data, "agreeing" constitutes the majority of the posts in the forums. Participants tend to agree with each other, by following up with affirmative responses, or further evidence. Agreeing acts serve to indicate the degree of collaboration and interaction, as well as social and cognitive presence, and sense of community.

Objecting:

Hong Kong data	Melbourne data
Tony, this is not a matter that we should discuss here~ By the way, I didn't think of taking German as a minor, because I can learn it in Goethe! Auf Wiedersehen!	*-- The only time i speak Cantonese is when i talk to my mum on the phone once a week, which is not very helpful since the conversations are all pretty much the same.* *-- But not with my mom!!! She is always confident with my first language. So what she is worrying about is basically how is my English.*
I don't think we still use this kind of communication, but maybe in the remote areas of Indonesia as it is quite traditional. [Referring to hitting/drumming a hollow wood to create loud sounds to wake people up.]	*[indirect objecting] I do agree that globalization involves bridging cultural differences between countries, while in the meantime, as different cultures come into contact, there can also be tension and misunderstanding, and sometimes even conflict, as meanings of words, notions and concepts, such as face and sorry, may vary across cultures.*
Oh Chris, I do agree with you, but I think telegram can cause mistakes easily sometimes, because occasionally there are no punctuation marks in a telegram.	*I appreciate your willingness to communicate with larger audience, but being a multiligual I find it hard sometimes to transform a particular arabic words to english ones I feel the translation is not accurate and does not serve the exact meaning so i just use the arabic word instead.*

"Objecting" acts are those that are posted to oppose certain views or ideas. These acts are relatively difficult to identify, as the overarching atmosphere of the discussion forums is

"agreeing". However, certain degrees of "objecting" can be detected in between the lines of the posts. Such acts often appear in disguise, for example, *I do agree with you, but ...*; *I agree that ... but in the meantime ...*; *I appreciate your ... but ... .*

Apologizing:

Hong Kong data	Melbourne data
SOOOOORRRRRYYY~! I get the wrong meaning la! You are very concerned about your classmates wo!! *Sorry to get back to you so late.* *Ah! Stupid mistake ~~ should be Chun Jie ~~* *sorry ~~*	*(I'm sorry that) I am a bit late because my home wi-fi was taking a rest.*

"Apologizing" acts are not as common as other acts that have been discussed so far. These acts are performed by participants to show regret, awareness of mistakes, or self-consciousness of slight offences. What is noticeable is that the Hong Kong data shows more instances of participants feeling "sorry" than the Melbourne data does. The only "sorry" post from the Melbourne data is an implicit one, showing sorry for being late for joining in the discussion forum due to a technical wi-fi issue.

Thanking:

Hong Kong data	Melbourne data
Thank you for providing so useful information.	*Thanks for presenting the two sides of the coin about 'globalization'.*
Thank you for your online research on the percentage of Hong Kong people's interest on speaking Putonghua.	*Thanks, Chinta, for joining us, and for sharing your views on Asian Popular Music.*
*Thanks for the FAQ Marc^^*	*Thanks, Steffen, for your post. I find it very interesting.*

"Thanking" acts are generally common in both Hong Kong and Melbourne data. The instructor(s) usually show appreciations of the students' posts and participation. In the meantime,

students also thank the instructor(s) for the constructive input they provide. Thanking acts by the instructor(s) in a way also show the teaching presence, and showing the facilitating, leading and managing roles of the instructor(s) in the synchronous online discussion forums. Towards the end of the forums, thanking acts become more common, showing the satisfaction of the participants, and their appreciation of joint effort for the forums.

What language and culture issues are involved in the discussion forums?

Close examination of the Hong Kong and Melbourne data for synchronous online discussion forums shows a number of language and culture issues. As all of the four discussion forums are embedded in language and culture courses, including *Vocabulary Studies*, *Language and Societal Modernization*, *Language and Globalization*, and *Writing across Cultures*, issues of language and culture are largely salient in the forums. These issues involve 1) multilingualism and multiculturalism; 2) features of Internet language, and local features of different varieties of English; and 3) interface between technology, language pedagogy and culture.

As far as multilingualism and multiculturalism are concerned, online synchronous discussion forums are one of the best ways to provide a platform for participants from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to interact on the same interface. Instead of regarding multilingualism and multiculturalism as issues to be dealt with, instructors and participants may well embrace multilingualism and multiculturalism in the online environment. They can actively refer to linguistic expressions in languages other than English, and relate to as many different cultural norms, behaviors and practices as possible. Both Hong Kong and Melbourne data show that participants are primarily bilingual and multicultural. They use expressions other than English and they explicate them to make novel contributions to the forums. Multilingualism and multilingualism play an important role in the interchanges between individuals of different cultures and they make it possible for people to "(re)negotiate their relations and identities'(Li & Zhu, 2013, p. 518). In multilingual and multicultural contexts, such forums help participants to develop their "metacultural competence" (Sharifian, 2013, pp. 9-10) in terms of improving their "conceptual variation awareness", "conceptual explication strategy", and "conceptual negotiation strategies".

As far as features of Internet language, and local features of different varieties of English are concerned, it is intriguing to notice that Hong Kong data shows more local features of the Hong Kong variety of English, from phonological, lexical to grammatical and discourse features. However, Melbourne data shows less phonological features of a particular variety of English, although features at the discourse level, e.g., posts about Italian cultural practices, Spanish foods, Chinese traditions, Australian terms, Japanese and Korean worldviews, are evident. Like multilingualism and multiculturalism, local features of different varieties of English are not issues either, but they are natural manifestations of the participants' dynamic identities both in real and virtual environments. In a global context, English has increasingly been used as a global lingua franca for academic communication (Jenkins, 2012; Mauranen, 2012). Synchronous online

discussion forums become an ideal interface for technology and its associated applications, e.g., Blackboard and Moodle learning management systems, to meet various languages and cultures. The empirical data collected for this research paper testify that local features of varieties of English are not issues of concern for intercultural communication. Instead, they are rather useful in creating a sense of community as in the case of Hong Kong, and opportunities for intercultural communication as in the case of Melbourne in particular, where the majority of participants come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This implies that local features of varieties of English are legitimate manifestations of actual language use in the online environment and therefore, they should not be considered as instances of interlanguage or barriers to successful intra- and intercultural communication.

As far as the interface between technology, language pedagogy and culture is concerned, it can be argued that appropriate use of technology enhances language pedagogy and culture learning. Blended teaching and learning with the assistance of technology and increasingly tech-savvy instructors have become the "norm" now in the tertiary sector. In the disciplines of language and culture education, subject experience and subject matter effects on the participants can be foregrounded to the advantage of both instructors and students by the appropriate use of learning management systems. Online learning and learner participation have become an essential component of successful tertiary education experience. Technology related issues of online learning, e.g., lack of technical support, perceived lack of sense of community, time constraints, insufficient access to the Internet, and comfortableness with online technologies (Song et al., 2004, p. 59) have become less of an issue in the current era of tech-savvy learning environment. New challenges for online teaching and learning in this global borderless educational context are increasingly associated with language pedagogy and culture, e.g., how to make sensible pedagogical decisions to enhance implicit learning and deep learning; how to manage intercultural communication in online learning environment; how to improve the social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching/learning presence, all of which are considered as contributing to successful tertiary language and culture education experiences. Apart from the nature of collaboration, integration, self-reflection in online learning, Ke and Xie (2009, p. 137) argue that deep learning is also "application-centered". Therefore, the application of technology to language and culture teaching and learning, and the application of participants' subject experience to their subject matter knowledge acquisition and construction pose new challenges to researchers and educators for online teaching and learning.

Pedagogical Implications

The third research question for this paper is regarding the pedagogical implications of using technology for teaching and learning language and culture. Data discussion and analysis in the previous section indicate that synchronous online discussion forums are constructive supplements for classroom FTF teaching in that they provide an alternative channel for learners

to collaborate and interact as a community of inquiry in relation to subject experience and subject matter effects.

Other implications include: 1) In designing the online discussion forums, instructors should be aware that such forums serve as a platform not only for social presence, but also, more importantly for cognitive presence and teaching presence, in order to enhance subject (i.e., participants) experience and subject matter (i.e., course-related content) effects. Therefore, instructors should set the discussion topics prior to the forums. They should also align the discussion topics with the course curriculum well. In addition, instructors should also consider topics that readily relate to the online resources the participants may have access to, and to the participants' own personal experiences; 2) In order to motivate the participants to participate in the online discussion forums, instructors should inform the participants prior to the forums what they are expected to do, and how they can contribute to the forums. It is important to integrate discussion forums into the overall assessment of the courses. In addition, keeping the participants informed of the notions such as implicit learning in the online environment is an ability, and online learning can also promote deep learning, may help participants understand that online discussion forums are not mere "chatting" about everything, but subject-matter related "learning" and "deep learning"; 3) Instructors may also challenge the participants in the online synchronous discussion forums in the form of questioning, interacting, and eliciting more informing, evaluating, opining, and even objecting acts from the participants. This will facilitate subject matter effects, deep learning and critical thinking.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored online teaching and learning of language and culture courses using commonly adopted management systems including Blackboard and Moodle in two educational contexts. I have reviewed the current literature on online teaching and learning. Based on empirical data collected from online synchronous discussion forums for four language and culture courses, I have addressed three research questions, involving discourse acts of online interactions; language and culture issues in online teaching and learning, and pedagogical implications of using technology for teaching and learning language and culture. Research findings show that instructors and students perform a wide range of acts in synchronous online discussion forums in relation to social presence, cognitive presence and teaching and learning presence. Various language and culture issues are involved in online teaching and learning, including multilingualism and multiculturalism, features of Internet language, and local features of different varieties of English, and the interface between technology, language pedagogy and culture. In addition, I have discussed new challenges for online teaching and learning, and I have also explored the implications of applying technology to the teaching and learning of language and culture in the online environment.

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