A Critical Case Study on a Computer-mediated Multiliteracies Program: Three Different Tales of Students’ Learning Participation in an EFL Classroom

Kyungmee Lee & Clare Brett
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada
kyungmee.lee@mail.utoronto.ca, clare.brett@utoronto.ca

In the age of globalization, there has been a growing educational emphasis on global communication skills based on English as a global language, multicultural understanding and multimedia technologies. Thus, previous lecture-based English classrooms in English as a foreign language context have been turned into student-centered multiliteracies programs, which facilitate students’ English speaking utilizing communication technologies. In such context, most forms of students’ participation in English conversation and media production tend to be rather praised without critical evaluation. The authors, therefore, re-examined students’ participation in a computer-mediated multiliteracies program regarding different socio-cultural factors. Taking up three epistemological lenses, constructivism; critical pedagogy; and postmodernism, three different explanations are suggested to broaden our understanding of common, and often taken-for-granted, educational practices.

Background

The age of globalization asks young people to understand and utilize new forms of knowledge and communication across their cultures, languages and media technologies. In this context, the importance of English as a global language has been more stressed than during any other times (Crystal, 1997; OECD, 2011). The pressures of international communication using English have breached monolingual societies based on their own dominant domestic languages (such as Korean and Persian).

In South Korea, there have been political movements and national efforts to designate English as an official language although English is learned as a “foreign” language (Yoo, 2005). This growing importance has also influenced English as foreign language (EFL) education reform to provide students with situated English communication opportunities (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003; Shim & Baik, 2000). In parallel with the government efforts to improve public education, parents are facing higher expenses for their children’s private education. One social phenomenon becoming more recognized is “wild goose family”: parents send their children abroad to English as “second” language (ESL) learning settings alone or with their mothers while husbands remain in Korea working to provide financial support (Kim, 2010; Park & Abelman, 2004; Shin, 2010). Not all families, however, can afford this educational mobilization since it requires a substantial investment of resources. Students who could not go abroad tend to participate in alternative forms of private EFL education offered by different institutes and tutors who are native English speakers (Industry Canada, 2007).

Meanwhile, there has been emerging educational emphasis on improving students’ multiliteracies to negotiate the multiple linguistic and cultural differences in current societies (New London Group, 1996). To this end, an increasing number of multiliteracies programs have
been implemented in public schools and computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies are playing a central role in this context.

**Problem**

The authors in this paper have attempted to develop the computer-mediated multiliteracies learning program (CM²LP) based on social constructive learning theories (Vygotsky, 1978). It aims at improving students’ English language abilities, cultural understanding, and new media skills (Metiri Group, 2003) through active learning participation and interaction. While we utilized the CM²LP, however, realized that the patterns of student learning participation are much more complex than what constructivist learning theorists suggest. Further, such a learning context can be a challenge for students either without sufficient English communication abilities or with a lack of prior collaborative learning experiences.

Although there have been a large number of studies to support students’ active learning in CMC environments with the belief that technologies can be the most effective tools for EFL teaching (Bonk, 2009; Hsu, Wang, & Comac, 2008; Lamy & Hampel, 2007), minimal research has been conducted in multiliteracies education within EFL settings. Furthermore, most researchers have restricted their interpretation to social constructivist perspectives rather than offering comprehensive explanations of students’ learning attitudes that include socio-economic factors embedded in original EFL settings. This critical case study fills this gap by investigating students’ learning practices in the CM²LP through three different perspectives: social constructivism; critical pedagogy; postmodernism.

**Methods and Data**

This study was conducted in a grade 9 EFL class in South Korea. Before implementing CM²LP, we first observed the teacher-centered lecture-based English class for three weeks, which is the most common format of EFL instruction in Korea, to better understand students’ learning attitude and behavior changes in the new program. In three week-long CM²LP, 2 EFL classes in South Korea and Iran each were connected through a CMC environment having various online communication tools (see Figure 1). 2 EFL teacher-researchers, 1 Korean and 1 Iranian, and 23 Korean student and 22 Iranian students participated. The students in 2 classes worked on collaborative projects to introduce their own culture to each other via a series of learning activities (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Goals</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>e-Profile Writing</td>
<td>[Individual writing assignment]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To write an English profile about me</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Individual</td>
<td>e-Text Reading</td>
<td>[Individual reading assignment]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td>To read a hypertext document about different cultures</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Collective</td>
<td>Collaborative Media Project</td>
<td>[Group project]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td></td>
<td>To develop media products about my culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Communication</td>
<td>Class to Class Communication</td>
<td>[Class conversation]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To exchange cultures in asynchronous conversation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One to One Communication</td>
<td>[1:1 conversation]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To exchange cultures in asynchronous conversation</td>
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</tbody>
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The most important data source was the 2 teacher-researchers’ field notes, which described students’ behaviours in detail through their participatory observation. There was recursive discussion between teachers and researchers to reflect on our teaching experiences. The second major data source was students’ learning outcomes consisting of five short video clips and CMC environment transcripts that include students’ profiles, discussion threads and chatting records. Even though there was no formal interview with participants, informal conversation and discourse among teachers and students were collected.

Analytic Framework

We utilized three epistemological lenses: constructivism (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978); critical pedagogy (Freire, 1971; Giroux, 1981; Sandoval, 2000); and postmodernism using Foucauldian concepts of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1976; Dean, 2010). As Tate (2007) argues, the task of the analyst is reflexive translation, how we make sense of a particular event or discourse as a researcher could be entirely dependent upon which theoretical and epistemological lens we take to listen to different voices. Bryson and De Castell (1998) also suggest how understandings of educational computing in school contexts can be contradictory to one another according to researchers’ epistemological stances. Therefore, we want to translate the students’ active participation in the CM²LP using three different lenses. We also refer to the design principles and the evaluation criteria for technological intervention in multiliteracies education suggested by different scholars (Cummins, Brown, & Sayers, 2006; Jonassen, 1999; Wood, 2001)

Results and Discussion

1) Romantic tale based on Constructivism

Kahn and Friedman (1998) suggest the democratic possibilities of educational computing as a way to achieve constructivist approaches to education. For them, educational computing provides powerful tools for improving students’ interactions and self-control, which are fundamental mechanisms of constructivist learning.

From Instruction to Construction: In the CM²LP, we gave the class neither a language lecture nor a specific instruction for learning projects. Students were asked to search, collect and utilize all necessary knowledge and resources by themselves. Through collectively producing video clips to introduce Korean culture, nevertheless, students increased their understanding of Korean culture as well as developed their English language and media skills.

From Reinforcement to Interest: Five video productions represented different parts of Korean culture such as traditional foods like Kimchi; popular music and sports; travel information of the capital Seoul; traditional clothing Hanbok; and controversial political issues around an island, Dokdo, between Korea and Japan (see Figure 2). Each group brought the topics based on their
own interests and searched the entire information to write their scripts, and used multiple media tools to present the information. When they had an opportunity to participate in online conferencing with an Iranian teacher, students also asked what they found curious about Iranian culture. Here, all learning activities were guided by students’ emerging inquiries.

**From Obedience to Autonomy:** Having the shared ground about openness and flexibility of the class, students were asked to control their own learning according to their own learning needs and competencies. Therefore, we received diverse questions and help requests from students. Since the working progress of each group was not always same, we also allowed students to have their own learning pace as long as they were moving forward. All students autonomously contributed to the course projects although there was no course evaluation to affect their school performance.

**From Coercion to Cooperation:** For the collaborative project, students shared individual ideas and questions with their group members and figured out how to work together. Each group showed different strategies for working on their tasks and negotiating opinions; and although it took some time as they faced various issues, they eventually came up with their own solutions.

2) **Tragic tale based on Critical Pedagogy**

According to critical pedagogists, schools have been playing a major role in reproducing hegemonic power relations between dominant and marginalized groups of students through their curriculum and instruction (Giroux, 1981). In this perspective, positive interpretation of constructivists can be reappraised.

**Issues of Inequality:** Since there were irreducible gaps among the cultural and linguistic capitals individual student brought to the class, students’ final products unsurprisingly reflected the original imbalance within the class. Min who had lived in New Zealand for two years showed higher confidence than other students and took the lead in her group work. Jang having very low level of English confidence, by contrast, did not express himself in classroom discussions, although he showed a certain level of enthusiasm for producing the video clip within his small group. It cannot be said that the program provided students with equal opportunities and accessibilities to similar learning experiences; rather each learner’s participation and contribution was directly based on his or her prior knowledge and educational experiences.

**Reproduction of Power Relationships:** When students were asked, students having similar levels of English speaking abilities formed groups together, and the complexity of the theme each group selected corresponded to the level of their English. Min became a member of the group dealing with complex Dokdo issue, whereas Jang simply introduced his favourite Korean soccer player. A more critical difference among groups was their collaborative process. Students in Dokdo group knew exactly what and how they could work together from both an English language perspective and a media technology perspective. By contrast, the Kimchi group could not effectively collaborate without teacher’s intervention. Inevitably, the students in the formal group were more engaged in the whole learning process and produced better outcome than the latter group. That is, the program may fail to free the students from their social status.

**Social Identification:** Students in the CM²LP as an active knowledge producer can face different moments to speak up their thoughts and identify themselves. These experiences may
provide students with meaningful opportunities to critically reflect upon their identities and further liberate themselves from socio-cultural constraints. However, there were also negative possibilities operating in this context in which a particular group of students could be oppressed through social identification. Different forms of tension among students were observed through the program. By opening this space, students were able to acknowledge their English levels compared with their peers’ ones and it discouraged the students with lower self-confidence from active participation.

3) Incomplete tale based on Postmodernism

Foucault (1976) suggests that institutional power governs peoples’ thoughts and behaviours through different forms of social control. Discourse, a set of knowledge, rules and regulations is a central concept to analyze the power relations between institutions like schools and individuals who participate in institutional practices.

In the CM²LP, teachers held very different belief that education should engage students in collaborative and self-regulative learning from the pedagogical approach to teacher-centered lecture. The ways how the class was managed and how teachers and students interacted were radically different in two forms of instruction. For example, teaching norms were not to deliver a lecture, but to facilitate students’ learning; at the same time, students’ roles were changed from silent listeners to active participants who were asked to be active in pursuing their learning needs and regulating their learning processes. Therefore, the teacher in the CM²LP, used different languages such as “YOU should speak up!”, “What do YOU want to do?” or “Be an active learner in YOUR learning”, contrary to the languages used in previous lectures like “Your answer is wrong”, “Turn off your cellphone” or “Be quiet! Don’t talk to each other”.

According to the postmodern interpretation on teaching and learning practices in the CM²LP, it is not a matter of whether the program was effective or ineffective. Although the program has positive effects on improving learners’ multiliteracies, a Foucauldian analysis shows how social constructivism as a new legitimate form of knowledge has transformed teachers’ and learners’ institutional experiences. As a consequence, individual teacher and student are self-governing and self-correcting their own behaviours by internalizing new norms and expectations rooted in certain educational discourses. Also, more fundamental question we should ask may be why, how and in which discourse, EFL education has become very important to Korean students’ lives.

Conclusion

We tried to provide critical explanation and considerations for students’ learning participation in current educational settings although we admitted that there is no single interpretation. Nevertheless, taking a critical perspective, we must keep questioning our educational practices to avoid being trapped in a single taken-for-granted understanding.

References


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**Figure 1.** A CMC environment.
Figure 1. Students’ video productions.