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Analysis of Interactions in a Synchronous Hybrid English Class

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Introduction

Interaction plays an essential role in teaching and learning, whether in face-to-face, online, or blended-hybrid settings (Anderson, 2003; Smith & Kurthen, 2007). While hybrid learning has gained its popularity since the COVID emergency, the discourse nature of hybrid classrooms remains less explored. Current literature mainly focuses on the discourse analysis of hybrid interactions in higher education. However, there is limited research in the context of synchronous hybrid instruction for young English language learners (Lin et al., 2017).

In China, hybrid learning programs built by non-profit organizations have increased in order to address the scarcity of English instruction for rural young learners. Under-resourced rural schools, especially those in ethnic minority regions of western China, lack qualified English language teachers and an adequate curriculum. Despite English classes being compulsory for all Chinese elementary students, they are not offered in many rural schools due to the shortage of teachers. Research shows that English is the subject with the largest achievement gap between urban and rural students (Hao, 2015). Apart from limited access to quality English education at school, over 60 million rural Chinese children (the so called “left-behind children”) also have minimal home learning support resulting from the large migration of rural adult labors to cities in recent years (UNICEF, 2018). Studies have found that these children tend to have less self-confidence and motivation to learn, important characteristics for L2 learners (Zhao et al., 2014). Therefore, it is particularly challenging for many rural Chinese children to learn English as a new

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language both cognitively and social-emotionally (Li & Yang, 2015). This study examines a leading non-profit hybrid English learning program in an ethnically mixed, rural village school in southwestern China, where over 70% of the students' both parents have migrated to cities.

Research questions

The study explored the following research questions:

1. What are the discourse patterns of synchronous hybrid interactions in a hybrid English as a foreign language (EFL) class for rural Chinese elementary school students?
2. How do the teachers and students perceive their synchronous hybrid interactions?

Literature review

Anderson (2003) and Martin et al. (2012) propose that the study of online and hybrid interactions should focus on different forms of online dialogues (e.g., text and video chat) between students and instructors. Previous studies have examined the instructional discourse in asynchronous online language classes (for instance, Heo et al. 2010; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003) and hybrid language instruction that combines online discussion forum interactions and face-to-face classroom interactions (e.g., Meskill & Anthony, 2005, 2018; Xu, 2012, 2014). These studies have largely focused on computer mediated text communications rather than video communications.

IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) is the talk pattern often used in classes in which teachers present more dominance. Despite its prevalence and efficiency, it is not the only interactional pattern in classrooms (Cazden, 2001); neither it is the single sequence type applicable to classroom teaching and learning. Student-initiated interactions have attracted

increasing attention from scholars who advocate for learner voice in classroom discourse research (e.g., Aukerman, 2007; Waring et al., 2016). Studies have shown its success in increasing student participation, encouraging student agency, and democratizing the classroom (Dolce & van Compernelle, 2020; Waring 2009). However, there is still limited empirical research on younger EFL students' initiation in classroom settings.

Therefore, this research addresses the existing gaps in three ways. First, it examines the classroom discourse patterns in a synchronous hybrid language class, an emergent form of instruction during the global pandemic. Second, it focuses on underserved young Chinese EFL learners, a population less examined in the current academic literature on classroom discourse. Third, it investigates patterns where students agentively initiate and follow up. Specifically, by exploring the classroom discourse patterns and the underserved EFL children's perceptions in a fifth-grade synchronous hybrid English class in a Chinese rural village, this research echoes the call of increasing student initiatives and engagement in classroom practices (Sert, 2017; Waring et al., 2016).

Methods

The participants in this study are an online English teacher (OT), a local classroom teacher (CT), and 19 students (S) in the fifth-grade hybrid English class. The class adopted a dual-teacher model in which the videoconferencing tool was used to connect the online English teacher and the rural class, with the facilitation of a local classroom teacher. In each class, the students participated altogether, at the same time in the computer lab of the village school.

The classes were observed and video recorded for eight weeks, for a total of 320 minutes. Half of the classes were observed online and half onsite. The video recordings were transcribed

and analyzed using classroom discourse analysis (Cazden, 2001). Semi-structured interviews with the teachers and students were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Although the traditional teacher-initiated and teacher-dominant IRF turns were adopted in this hybrid English class during most of the time, we also found new patterns of interactions initiated by the students (As shown in Table 1). The student-initiations took the form of spontaneous and self-directed collaboration amongst the students themselves, always stimulated by the technological affordances.

It is important to note that the student interaction and collaboration were found to be very dynamic and fluid, in that there were not only group discussions but also cross-group interactions. For instance, instead of being confined to the online teacher’s group assignments, the students also attempted to seek help from other groups when problems could not be solved within their original groups. Moreover, when one student was called upon by the online teacher, others would actively provide help if they noticed that the student was having difficulties either technologically or intellectually. These kinds of student-initiated interactions were often covert and involved private talks that could not be observed from the online teacher’s perspective. The students took advantage of their distance from the online teacher to take more self-directed activities and become more autonomous in their learning in the hybrid English class.

Table 1. Teachers’ and students’ interactional patterns in the synchronous hybrid English class

| Interlocutors | Ave. time per class (%) | Initiation | Follow-ups | Sample classroom activities |
|---------------|-------------------------|------------|------------|-----------------------------|
|---------------|-------------------------|------------|------------|-----------------------------|

| | | | | | |
|-----------------|-------|--------|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Teachers' moves | OT-S | 69.34% | Questions; Discoursal moves | Questions; Discoursal moves; Evaluative moves | Delivering lectures; Guiding class discussions; Calling on students; Providing feedback |
| | OT-CT | 0.94% | Discoursal moves | Evaluative moves | Addressing technological and disciplinary issues |
| | CT-S | 0.97% | Discoursal moves | Discoursal moves | Addressing disciplinary issues |
| | CT-OT | 0.03% | Discoursal moves | No follow-ups | Addressing technological issues |
| Students' moves | S-S | 20.32% | Discoursal moves | Evaluative moves; Discoursal moves | Participating in overt/OT-guided group discussions; Seeking help through cross-group discussions; Initiating covert talk to address OT's questions; Addressing technological issues |
| | S-OT | 8.4% | Questions; Discoursal moves | Evaluative moves | Seeking clarifications; Reporting disciplinary and technological issues |
| | S-CT | 0% | Discoursal moves | Evaluative moves | Reporting disciplinary and technological issues |

Our interview data showed that the students felt more motivated and relaxed participating in hybrid classroom learning activities than in their regular face-to-face classes, because the technological affordances provided them the flexibility to initiate interactions that could benefit them for their own learning purposes. The students also expressed that the synchronous hybrid English class allowed them to “communicate and collaborate with peers” in ways that they felt more comfortable with. Similarly, the teachers recognized the benefits of hybrid language instruction in promoting young learners’ participation and motivation in English language learning. However, they also highlighted the challenge of maintaining control and managing the class.

Discussion

From a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), students learn through participation in social interactions and activities (Mercer, 2007). In this study, the students in the synchronous hybrid class learned L2 English through various online and face-to-face interactions, including raising questions, negotiating, co-constructing knowledge with teachers and peers. Apart from the common teacher-controlled IRF sequences of classroom discourse, we found that new patterns emerged in the hybrid classroom talks in which students take active roles. The students initiated many in-group and cross-group discussions among classmates and actively interacted with the online English teacher. These student-initiated new patterns of interaction allowed them to feel motivated and empowered in participating in language learning and discussions. The findings suggested that the “democratization effects” (Thompson & Nutta, 2015; Waring et al., 2016) of hybrid instruction for adult language learners also adapt to young, beginning level EFL learners.

Conclusion and implications

The “voices of children” are particularly important when teaching traditionally marginalized groups, and in this context, the rural children who do not have access to English education in remote Chinese villages (Alldred, 1998). Hybrid instruction provides the rural children the autonomy and flexibility to create a dynamic and collaborative learning environment that promoted the young underserved EFL learners’ language development as well as their confidence towards language learning. However, despite these affordances of hybrid language instruction, challenges may also rise for teachers who are concerned about effective classroom management and young learners who have not developed self-regulation skills for distance

learning. Therefore, online language instructors should provide necessary guidance and nurture students' self-directed learning dispositions to help them succeed in hybrid language classes.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit

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