

A Myriad of Challenges: Exploring the Interaction Experiences of Language Students in Online Classes

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Abstract: This study explored the classroom interaction experiences of language students during the COVID-19 pandemic at the Cagayan State University-Carig Campus. It ventured to describe the classroom interaction experiences, the challenges, and the possible solutions to address these problems. The study used the descriptive-qualitative research method to gather the data. Responses from the open-ended questions were manually coded, interpreted, and merged into themes. Results indicated that limited classroom interaction was practiced because of poor internet connectivity, limited opportunities, and an unfavorable learning environment. The challenges encountered were technological sufficiency, technological literacy and competency, and self-regulation. Furthermore, the application of constructivism and scaffolding teaching philosophies is an extracted solution to these pressing issues in online learning. It is then displayed that to ensure the best learning outcomes for all students, technological complexities, social relationships, and community building in the online environment are to be considered. This facilitates an interactive and engaging online learning experience. Further, teachers, being the instrument to deliver quality instruction, need to create online tasks and activities that are cognitively engaging for students and be equipped with the technicalities and features of the official and other possible platforms used for online learning. Teachers will become more confident and innovative in designing and delivering interactive classroom instruction, be it synchronous or asynchronous.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 epidemic not only substantially damaged the world's social, economic, health, and business systems but also required the almost total closure of schools (Kumar et al., 2020). Most nations decided to temporarily close educational institutions in an effort to halt the spread of

COVID-19 (Armoed, 2021; Pelmin, 2020, & Tanveer et al., 2020). On January 12, 2021, 825 million students will be affected by epidemic-related school closures. According to UNICEF monitoring, national closures in 23 countries and local closures in 40 other nations currently affect almost 47% of the world's student population (Lorente et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis in the Philippines has impacted roughly 27 million students, 1 million instructors, non-teaching employees, and student families (Obana, 2020). In fact, both public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) have had to adapt to the new environment in which face-to-face communication and large-scale gatherings are forbidden. The top universities and colleges in the Philippines, especially those connected to the ASEAN University Network, are dedicated to their missions and have developed creative ways to carry out their three-pronged duties of education, research, and service. Everyone adapted to work-from-home arrangements, including administrators, teachers, and members of the operations and support service units (Simbulam, 2020).

The said epidemic has given people the chance to lay the groundwork for the introduction of digital learning (Dhawan, 2020). Blended learning has been used at Cagayan State University using online and modular platforms. The Learning Environment Network System, or CSU LENS, is the primary platform for offering online courses at all of the university's campuses. Asynchronous and synchronous interaction are the two types of online contact. While asynchronous online learning takes place without a set schedule for various students, synchronous online learning incorporates real-time interactions between teachers and students (Singh & Thurman, 2019).

Indeed, this new mode of learning presents great challenges to the delivery of instruction. These include self-regulation, technological literacy and competency, student isolation, technological sufficiency,

and technological complexity. According to her, "self-regulation" refers to a set of behaviors by which students exercise control over their emotions, actions, and thoughts to achieve learning objectives. Technological literacy and competency relate to a range of challenges about students' ability to effectively use technology for the learning process. Student isolation refers to the emotional discomfort that students experience as a result of being alone and secluded from their peers. Technological sufficiency refers to a set of challenges that students experience when accessing available online technologies for learning. Technological complexity involves challenges that students experience when exposed to complex and overly-sufficient technologies for online learning.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and students of the College of Arts and Sciences of Cagayan State University—Carig Campus have optimized their creativity to adapt to digital learning. As an initial move, the college has intensified its role by orienting the teaching mindset of the faculty members toward embracing uncertainty in learning. With this, teachers were exposed to several platforms in order to unlearn their conventional teaching and reform the way they engage with students online.

After discovering Moodle's customizable management features, the college decided to use it as the official learning platform. This platform has an intuitive dashboard and a graphical user interface that make teaching, learning, and using it easy. However, faculty members could maximize other modalities such as Google Meet, Facebook Live, Facebook

Group, Zoom, Stream Yard, Viber, Messenger, and the like in order to ensure interaction as well as collaborative engagement among students, regardless of where learning takes place.

Meanwhile, other categories were added, such as learning resource challenges and learning environment challenges. Learning resource challenges refer to a set of challenges that students face relating to their use of library resources and instructional materials, whereas learning environment challenges are a set of challenges that students experience related to the condition of their learning space that shapes their learning experiences, beliefs, and attitudes.

In premise, this study wanted to explore the classroom interaction experiences of the third-year Bachelor of Arts in Language Studies students of the Department of Arts and Humanities, College of Arts and Sciences—Carig Campus. The results of the study would help professors and neophytes in higher education become more responsive and innovative in their respective instructional responsibilities.

2. Objectives

This study explored the classroom interaction experiences of the Third-Year Bachelor of Arts in Language English Studies students at Cagayan State University for the school year 2021-2022.

Specifically, it aimed to:

- 2.1 describe classroom interaction during online instruction;
- 2.2 determine the challenges faced, and
- 2.3 find possible solutions to address the problems encountered.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative research design. A descriptive approach describes the current status of a phenomenon without intent to manipulate (Mertler, 2009), while a qualitative research design involves a discovery process that enables the researcher to develop details. It does not test a hypothesis but rather explores a given phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, this design is considered appropriate for its primary purpose of exploring the classroom interaction experiences of the third-year AB English Language Studies students in online learning.

Study Participants

The study chose the third-year Bachelor of Arts in English Language Studies students of the Cagayan State University-Carig Campus who were officially enrolled during the first semester of the school year 2021-2022 since they fully utilized online classes. A complete enumeration sampling technique was employed.

Data Collection Method

The study used open-ended questions to gather information from the third-year Bachelor of Arts in English Language Studies students. The three open-ended questions are: (1) *How would you describe online classroom interaction?*; (2) *What are the challenges faced?*; and (3) *What are the possible solutions to address the problems encountered?* uploaded to LENS, the college's official platform. It was announced ahead of time that the written outputs would be graded as part of their classroom

performance to encourage students to take it seriously and provide adequate information. After having done so, the uploaded responses were printed individually for better analysis.

Data Analysis

The researcher used a thematic approach in analyzing the data. The thematic analysis emphasizes pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (themes) within data. The researcher first read the materials and took note of the important details of the data. Then, the researcher listed the recurring themes from the data gathered. Finally, the researcher selected the final themes needed for the data analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

Experiences and comments were gathered from the whole class. Fifteen students participated. They were asked to write freely about their thoughts on online classroom interaction. The answers were gathered through an online questionnaire using LENS (Moodle), the official platform of the college, containing mostly open questions.

4.1 Interaction Experiences in Online Classes

Theme 1: Technological Literary and Competence

It is important for students to be technologically literate and competent in order to use technology for learning.

Classroom management is now dependent with technologies, and it becomes remote learning. The challenge is, there are lots of

teachers who are still lacking knowledge about technologies which limit them with their techniques, approaches, and skills in teaching. (Student 6)

One of the challenges in having this new normal in the educational landscape is the teacher's lack of knowledge and experience in technologies. Some teachers are still unsure how to use them. (Student 7)

According to research, just giving teachers professional development opportunities linked to using technology in the classroom does not result in increased levels of integration. They will only incorporate technology into the curriculum to maximize its benefits on teaching and learning if they are provided with the necessary knowledge, skills, resources, and support (Papanastasiou et al., 2003).

4.2 Challenges

Theme 1: Experiencing Limited Interaction

According to the students, they do not feel comfortable studying online. They had experienced limited interaction because of *poor internet connectivity*.

"I can say that classroom interaction through online is not conducive learning environment for everyone. As a student living in the remote areas, I am the most affected one. I couldn't understand discussions properly nor interact when the connection becomes weaker or poor. On the other hand, students having strong internet connection have the chance on being

active so long as they won't experience any interruption.
(Student 1)

"Learning to adapt to the medium of distance learning is a big adjustment for both students and educators. Both the learners and the teachers struggle to navigate technology. Some are not fortunate enough to have a stable internet connection, resulting in less effort in delivering their full ideas. Considering students are supposed to learn independently, most of the time, interactions are limited. Interactions happen only during virtual classes and in discussion forum. Questions and concerns are not set forward immediately". (Student 4)

Classroom interaction is sometimes stressing, especially when the internet connection isn't stable.
(Student 2)

This conforms to the survey of DepEd as cited by Santos (2020), which mentions that 2.8 million students have no way of going online, especially in rural areas where internet access and speed are challenges. Also, a study released by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) revealed that bad Internet connections are a more pressing problem in the Philippines compared to poverty and corruption (Ordinario, 2017).

According to the Akamai State of Internet Report for the 2nd Quarter of 2016, the Philippines ranks 6th out of 15 Asia-Pacific countries with an average mobile

internet speed of 8.5 mbps (Department of Information and Communications Technology, 2017). The report shows that the Philippines is still way behind in terms of internet connectivity.

The findings of this study are in line with that of (Mahyoob, 2020) study, which showed that technical difficulties were the main obstacles faced by EFL learners in online learning. Some students experienced issues with internet connectivity, class access, and downloading course materials. Mobile devices owned by students could not be used to access online tests.

Theme 2: Limited Opportunities Given

Another reason revealed why students were not engaged much in classroom interaction was *limited opportunities given*.

"Having online instruction is quite distressing, especially that some students are not privileged enough to learn alongside their classmates, ask for advice or clarity from teachers, and so on. For the reason that, they can only interact with each other through academic sites, Google meeting, zoom meeting, Google classroom, FB live, etc. Thus, classroom interaction is not promising because there are lots of barriers in this new mode of learning". (Student 6)

The only way we can interact as a class during online discussions is to listen to the teacher and respond; and if possible, the activities are only limited to those that can be

accomplished with the learning platform provided. (Student5)

As Boling et al. (2012) described, "it is now more important than ever for online instructors to provide students with experiences that challenge their higher-order cognitive skills as opposed to simply transferring content to them." The ability of an instructor to facilitate and develop student higher-order thinking skills is equally important in both online and face-to-face delivery modes, particularly when seeking to engage students in group activities.

In addition to internet connectivity, one participant revealed that a bad learning environment was another reason for the restricted contact. This result supported the findings of Barrot et al. (2021), which revealed that the learning environment posed the biggest obstacle for students to overcome, particularly noise distractions at home and space and facility constraints. Noise can make it difficult for someone to focus and complete difficult tasks.

This online learning is quite tough to us students. The perks of having online classes are that you can manage your time and lessen the burden to prepare for the online classes because you can always be flexible. Even though you're participating in such class, you can eat and worry not to have a bath. But online learning is difficult because of many hindrances such internet connectivity, loud surroundings, procrastination and many other things. (Student 3)

Learning environments are critical to students' achievement, according to research. It has been demonstrated that students who study in a supportive environment are more motivated, engaged, and have a greater total capacity for learning. For instance, using a computer tablet with a good display quality has been found to result in less visual fatigue than using one with a poor display quality when watching for extended periods of time (Chen et al., 2016).

Theme 3: Technology Sufficiency Challenge

When students use the available internet technologies for learning, they face a number of obstacles known as technological sufficiency.

In my own experience, turning on my camera during virtual classes makes my connection weaker especially that I am just using mobile data. This causes me to be less-focused on the discussion since I always have a noisy environment. It becomes a hindrance for me in participating to the class. (Student 1)

Since the Philippines is still one of the few nations in Asia with slow internet, internet connectivity is a common concern raised by instructors and pupils. Another issue is wireless access, as the country has seen on television or read in news articles about teachers and kids climbing up hillside or mountain slopes to acquire wifi signals for the internet (Amadora, 2020). As millions of kids and parents struggled to become familiar with the new learning platforms brought on by the recent coronavirus pandemic, Santos (2020) reported that teachers assumed that the decrease in class size was attributable to a

bad internet connection. Slow internet in the Philippines was a major problem for students, especially those from outlying areas.

Theme 4: Self-regulation Challenge

Self-regulation refers to a set of behaviors by which students exercise control over their emotions, actions, and thoughts to achieve learning objectives.

Social interaction is considered as one of the most classroom management challenges we are encountering right now. Students are encouraged to have maximum participation in class discussion, but because of this new-set up, it's too impossible to happen.
(Student 3)

The constructivist learning theory contends that students should have the chance to contribute to the process of making meaning for themselves. Discussions are a great way to let students compare and contrast different points of view on the material in order to build sense together. One of the best methods to introduce students to the variety of interpretations that are possible in a subject of intellectual research is through discussion forums online or in person (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

Furthermore, Okita (2012) pointed out that social interaction is a significant way for kids to learn on their own. It gives pupils the opportunity to examine and consider the cultural components of the subject matter and the varied viewpoints on it. Students must relate to, criticize, and

support one another's ideas in conversations, whether they agree with each other or not.

4.3 Possible Solutions to Address the Problems Encountered

A *teaching philosophy* is useful to have because it gives you a framework to decide how you will teach. It helps guide the teaching system you'll use. Two teaching philosophies were discovered to be solutions to existing challenges while researching online learning. These include constructivism and scaffolding.

Theme 1: Constructivism

Online learning, as we are already aware, is not only a mode of instruction where students interact with their displays. Instead, it is a multifaceted platform that gives students a variety of tools to expand on what they already know and what they wish to learn. Constructivism is a very effective educational strategy, particularly in the context of online learning, which presents significant difficulties for both teachers and students.

I think there's no need to require opening cameras to see if students were focused on listening. The instructor/professor may set document/spreadsheet that all students can access.

Questions/thoughts will be posted on it until there's a break for him/her to see the list. This will serve as students' recitation/participation on the discussion. (Student 1)

The online world can become too small and you need a physical space

where you can answer your queries and practice with real tools. Thus, to encourage personal interaction, webinars group work or forums are to be provided for students to discuss and resolve their queries. (Student 2)

Sustaining synchronous and asynchronous meetings or sessions are religiously sustained. This will help us interact not only to our teachers but among us students. (Student 3)

Community forums should be provided to require each student to respond to a question on that week's topic. (Student 5)

According to the participants' revelations, student engagement in online learning is deemed important. Possible activities could be promoted for meaningful classroom interaction. It is true that a student can engage in an online subject by clicking through the LMS subject site and reviewing the material (behavioral engagement), but might not be deeply engaging with it (cognitive engagement).

While these two types of engagement might not co-exist, through the design of their online learning environment and the activities within it, teaching staff can encourage and foster both behavioral engagement—reflected in the manipulation of the interface through actions such as clicking, navigating, submitting, and scrolling—and cognitive engagement—reflected by students thinking about and working through the learning materials at a deeper level (Kennedy, 2020).

Theme 2: Scaffolding

Scaffolding is a teaching strategy that gradually guides pupils toward more freedom and comprehension as they study. Similar to how construction workers use scaffolding to reach new heights, students benefit from instructional scaffolding, which makes it easier for them to complete assignments and navigate their material. This concept borrows from Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development, which is based on three stages of the learning process: what the learner cannot do, what the learner can do with assistance, and what the learner can do without assistance. According to Caruana (2012), "it's necessary to define the space (zone) between the student's ability to accomplish things independently and what the student can accomplish with assistance" in order to consistently support pupils.

Separate orientation and training for both teachers and students to adequately expose themselves in engaging interactive online classes. (Student 6)

According to the participants, because online learning is so complex, teachers and students alike need to be prepared to deal with their peers with confidence. Before initiating an online learning program, teachers should ideally undergo several days, weeks, or even months of thorough preparation, according to experts. Training should include techniques for engaging the audience and provide enough time for practicing the technology before going live (Adams, 2020).

The result of the study was supported by Zweig and Stafford (2016), who found that online teachers may need additional training in multiple areas in order to best support their students—in particular, in areas such as student engagement, in which effective instructional strategies may differ between online and face-to-face teaching environments and in which teachers are a critical factor in student support. Thus, mentoring and coaching may be effective ways to improve teaching practice and student learning (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Kraft & Blazar, 2016).

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The study discovered that the students had practiced limited classroom interaction because of poor internet connectivity, limited opportunities given, and an unfriendly learning environment. A myriad of other challenges was also faced by the students, such as technological sufficiency, technological literacy and competence, and self-regulation. A further solution to these pressing issues in online learning is the application of constructivism and scaffolding teaching philosophies. It is then displayed that to ensure the best learning outcomes for all students, technological complexities, social relationships, and community building in the online environment are to be considered. This facilitates an interactive and engaging online learning experience. Further, teachers, being the instrument to deliver quality instruction, need to create online tasks and activities that are cognitively engaging for students and be equipped with the technicalities and features of the official and other possible platforms used for online learning. Teachers will become more confident and innovative in designing and

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