

16. Good Practices of the Use of Information Communication Technology in a Second Language Classroom: An Alternating Use of Small Group Learning and Computers for Independent Learning

FONG, Natalie, *English Centre, The University of Hong Kong*, fongsn@hkucc.hku.hk

Abstract. This presentation is going to analyse the good practices of the alternating use of small group learning and independent learning with computers in a second language classroom. It was a weekly Reading and Phonics lesson scheduled in the Language Learning room for the lower form of primary students. The room consisted of two rows of computers along the side and two small tables for group discussion accommodating around ten people including the teacher in the middle of the room. The class was divided into four small groups and each group of 8 students was assigned various tasks in the lesson. Two teachers, a native-English speaker and a non-native English speaker, and one teacher-assistant were in the lesson.

Different from the traditional use of computers for second language teaching and learning, the teachers made good use of alternating groups for independent learning and small group learning in the lesson. The use of alternating groups is effective in providing students with different in-class communicative activities which entail self-practice, small group learning, interactions with teachers, consolidations, and independent reading. The presentation will analyse the structure of the lesson and discuss the advantages of the use of alternating groups in a second language classroom. Factors like the reverse roles of teachers and students, dynamic classroom interaction and promotion of individualistic learning will also be examined.

Keywords: classroom interaction, good practices, small group learning, independent learning, use of information communication technology in English language

This ongoing research will provide accounts of and analyse the structure of a second language (L2) lesson in a primary school in Hong Kong. It was a weekly Reading and Phonics lesson scheduled in the Language Learning room. The objectives of the English lesson were to enable students to improve reading skills using computers through independent learning, to revise phonics with computers, and to practice speaking skills in a small group with the guidance of teachers. This paper will shed light on the good practices of the alternating use of small group learning and independent learning with computers in a second language classroom.

1. Structure of the Lesson

The room was set up with two rows of computers along the sides and two small tables for group discussion in the center of the room which were able to accommodate around ten people including the teacher. The class was divided into four small groups and each group of eight students was assigned various tasks in the lesson. As presented in Table 1, the teachers alternated between dividing the whole class into four groups in which two groups worked with computers to read electronic books and another two groups worked with a teacher to practice pronunciation, which were a combination of independent learning and small group learning. Two teachers, a native-English speaker and a non-native English speaker, and one teacher-assistant were involved in the lesson. Each teacher was responsible for leading the small group discussion and the teaching assistant offered any necessary assistance to the students who were practicing independent learning in front of computers.

Table 1: Assigned Group Tasks in the Lesson

Group	Assigned Tasks	Learning Items	Learning Mode
1	Students worked with CDROMs	To revise the phonics that they had learnt in previous lessons	<i>Independent</i> (with the help of the Teaching Assistant)
2	Small group discussion (Students sat around a table.)	To work through a phonics exercise book	<i>Small group</i> under the guidance of Teacher A
3	Small group discussion (Students sat around a table.)	To work through a phonics exercise book	<i>Small group</i> under the guidance of Teacher B
4	Students worked with CDROMs	To practice reading skills	<i>Independent</i> (with the help of the Teaching Assistant).

The whole lesson lasted for 35 minutes. For the first 15 minutes, each group completed their assigned task. After 15 minutes, group 1 swapped with group 2 and group 3 swapped with group 4. This change enabled each student to experience independent learning (reading and listening skills) and small group learning (listening and speaking skills) within the lesson. Students who were assigned to group 1 for this class would be assigned to group 4 in the subsequent lesson so that they could practice both phonics and reading skills in two weeks.

It was observed that when working in front of computers, i.e. with the use of CDROMs in the lesson, students were able to choose their own favorite stories to read, practice what they had learnt at their own pace, and improve their reading abilities. Students were able to take control of and mediate the flow of the text (Trushell, Burrell, & Maitland, 2001). In the other two groups (groups 2 and 3), students could listen to the teacher's pronunciation, practice their own pronunciation with the teacher, and experience collaborative learning with their peers.

2. Advantages of the Use of Alternating Groups

The alternating use of independent learning and small group learning in this lesson offered space for student learning. To fulfill the learning needs of individual students, alternating activities in this way are effective in providing students with a variety of in-class communicative activities entailing self-practice, group learning, interactions with teachers, consolidation, and independent reading. Such an arrangement of small group learning also enables the teachers to keep track of students' learning immediately after their solo practice. In addition, the teachers can take care of individual students' needs and give immediate corrective feedback to the students. As observed, teachers play a key role in leading students' learning. They did not wait for students' responses and feedback on their questions. Instead, the students spontaneously answered questions. The smooth flow of the lesson maximized the students' learning opportunities. It was also observed that there was no silence in the two small groups in the room.

In this example of an alternating lesson, teachers not only retained the central roles of teachers in small group learning, they also made use of computers to foster individualized learning. Such a setting engenders changing roles of teachers and students in a lesson and represents good use of computers to a promising practice in an English lesson. The teachers not only made a commitment to use technology, they also generated some new ideas for using technology in the classroom.

The findings support that ICT was used largely for receptive language skills (i.e. listening and reading) in the lesson. Students gained benefits in the area of spoken language skills from constant questionings from teachers and gained benefits in writing from completing exercises from their textbooks. What ICT may perform in L2 classrooms, however, is to provide part of learning. Other teaching modes, not necessarily in an ICT format, are also crucial to compliment the uses of other teaching tools.

3. A Reversal of Roles of Teachers and Students

The use of the computer room as a place for independent learning enabled students to read at their own pace and in their own way. In the observed lesson, the teachers did not interfere while the Group 1 and Group 4 students were working on the computers and left the students to work independently. The presence of the teachers in Group 2 and Group 3; however, highlighted the leading role the teachers play in a different learning context, small group learning. With an alternating use of independent learning and small group learning, the students and the teachers had their own roles to perform during the lesson. With an effective use of teacher's resources, this learning mode maximizes the learning opportunity of students because they both have autonomy in learning and receive feedback from teachers.

4. Classroom Interaction

There is an argument that computer technology is not an irreplaceable object in teaching and learning. People might think that computers can replace teachers and that there is no longer a need for the physical presence of teachers in lessons because students can learn online. Nevertheless, learning with or in front of computers inhibits student interaction with each other. In other words, the opportunity for interacting between students and students as well as students and teachers tends to be reduced. And I wonder if computers can achieve the same purpose as humans can in these interactions.

The physical environment of learning contexts is highly correlated with the loosening bonds between teachers and students. A classroom is not static place but is instead a sphere for interactions where dynamic learning takes place. The possible impact of classroom communication on interaction is the construction of more learning opportunities in L2 classrooms. The use of alternating groups in this case encourages students to learn in groups and independently with computers. With the unique learning environment and task design, students took turns to interact with the machines though they had minimal interaction and communication among participants in the lesson. In addition, in the same

lesson they could interact with their teachers and peers when they shifted to work in small group learning.

As observed, teachers could monitor the progress of individual students' progress in the alternating groups, the teacher-led small group learning followed by the independent learning. The use of alternating groups worked very well in the lesson, in which each learning mode played an important role to complement to one another. In the small groups, students could have more opportunities to interact with their teachers and peers through a variety of classroom activities, such as small group task, question sessions and pair work. The relationship between teachers and students is strengthened and engaging as students can express themselves in front of the teacher instead of the computers. Two-way communication relies on human relationships with each other rather than between humans and computers.

5. Individualistic Learning

It is no doubt that the physical environment in a computer-rich setting promotes individual learning amongst students themselves. Regardless computers are considered as a way of giving students opportunity for learning autonomously, such the machine-to-student setting restricts students from communicating with each other in the computer room. This potentially becomes an obstacle for verbal exchanges between students and students and between the teacher and students. As observed, the independent learning groups along the sides of the room might be discouraged to have face-to-face interactions with their peers and teachers, but the other two small groups in the centre of the room exchanged ideas spontaneously. Based on the discussion above, it is noteworthy that the learning environment can disrupt relationships between teachers and students; however, the special room setting in this case overcome this constraint.

The teachers in the case explained in the interview that they played an important role of guiding students and offering necessary help in the process of learning "to ensure that students' efforts are supported and conceptualized" (Mercer, 1993, p.37). They therefore organized small group learning as a form of collaborative mode followed by independent learning with computers. They believe that students can have more opportunity for speaking up in the small group on the one hand; they as teachers could also be devoted more time to each individual student on the other. Students not only can learn from the teacher's guidance, they can also learn from their peers when the teacher gives individual feedback to each learner at times.

In view of the fact that it is not possible to discourage computers from penetrating into our instructional setting, teachers might recognize that computers support a more systematic and structured lesson and enables them to plan classroom activities more easily. Yet, they should not ignore other useful learning modes when they are delivering their classes.

References

- Lee, J., Dineen, F., & Mckendree, J. (1998). Supporting students discussions: It isn't just talk. *Education and Information Technologies*, 3, 217-229.
- Mercer, N. (1993). Computer-based activities in classroom contexts. In P. Scrimshaw (Ed.), *Language Classrooms and Computers* (pp.27-39). London: Roulledge.
- Trushell, J., Burrell, C., & Maitland, A. (2001). Year 5 pupils reading an "Interactive Storybook" on CDROM: Losing the plot? *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 32(4), 389-401.