

Asynchronous Written Online Interaction among Non-Native Speakers of English

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Abstract

The present study investigates asynchronous written online interaction among Korean and Japanese non-native speakers of English. In particular, bulletin board system (BBS) interactions are examined to determine the nature of miscommunication. The BBS postings, consisting of posting & question-answer-response format, are qualitatively analyzed for instances of miscommunication and whether it was resolved or not. Results show that miscommunication is prevalent but that learners do not employ strategies to overcome it. The present study, thus, indicates that miscommunication is often tolerated or ignored when non-native speakers communicate.

Keywords

Non-native English speakers, online communication, miscommunication

Introduction

E-learning has become widespread as an effective means to provide authentic interaction in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. Instantaneous means for interaction such as chat are prevalent. However, contrary to popular belief, recent studies have found that the majority of people prefer to engage in asynchronous rather than synchronous online interaction. The present study, thus, attempts to analyze asynchronous online interaction. Namely, non-native speaker online interaction is examined for instances of resolving miscommunication.

1 Method

1.1 Participants

The participants in the study were students enrolled in a jointly taught course titled “Cross-Cultural Communication in English I” on the Korean side and “Cross-Cultural Distance Learning (Social and Global Issues)” on the Japanese side in spring, 2011. 15 Korean learners of English and 11 Japanese learners of English were examined.

1.2 Data

The data consists of BBS postings in the following format: posting & question + answer/comment + response. There was a 100-word minimum requirement for the initial posting while the answer/comment and response were not constrained. A total of 6 postings, 6 answer/comments, and 6 responses per student were analyzed. The topics of the interaction were identical to those dealt with in class such as family values, happiness factors, and environmental problems, among others.

To foster awareness of potential miscommunication pitfalls, verbal strategies about how to resolve miscommunication were taught. The strategies were those provided in the course textbook, “Social and Global Issues” under the heading “Clarifying in English” (p.20).

2 Results and discussion

Due to the length limitations of the proceedings, an abbreviated discussion of the results will be reported here. First, results of a word usage analysis are presented to determine whether word usage is a cause of miscommunication. Next, results from an initial qualitative analysis of the data are given.

2.1 Word usage

The JACET 8000 program (JACET, 2003) was run to see what levels of words (tokens) are used by both Korean and Japanese students in order to determine whether word level may have been a factor in causing miscommunication. The JACET 8000 consists of eight levels, level 1 being the most basic 1,000 words and level 8 being the most difficult 1,000 words.

Results show that most of the words used by Korean students fall in level 1, level 2 and outside the JACET 8000 list and make up 62.02% of the total words used on the BBS. As for the Japanese students, words in level 1, level 2 and outside the JACET 8000 list make up 63.18% of the total words used on the BBS.

Thus, Korean and Japanese students showed a

very similar ratio of leveled words. The most basic, first 2,000 words were mostly used along with some difficult words that fall outside the JACET 8000 list. Despite the use of relatively difficult words which reflect the words which appeared in the tasks of the textbook, word level does not appear to be a contributing factor to miscommunication.

2.2 Resolution of miscommunication

An initial qualitative analysis of the data shows that there were no instances of attempts to resolve miscommunication. This could be because of a lack of awareness of how to resolve miscommunication in asynchronous communication (i.e., writing). The clarification strategies indicated in the textbook focused on verbal interaction (e.g., *I did not understand that. Can you write it?*), whereas the BBS data was solely in written form.

Another reason for lack of miscommunication may be because each of the postings ended with a question to which counterpart students responded to. The questions such as “Are Korean idols well known to Japanese people?” were so simple that there may have been no need to employ clarification request strategies, although students may have not completely understood the contents of the posting itself.

The following are some instances found in the data from the Korean students (K) and the Japanese students (J) regarding miscommunication.

(1) Appeal for understanding

K: *I hope you can understand.*

(2) Indication of understanding

K: *I find your summary clear.*

(3) Concern about miscommunication

J: *However, it was hard to communicate without being able to use gestures and face expression. Because all of the students aren't really used to speaking in English it was hard to understand what people were trying to say. By the time we end this semester I hope we are able to speak fluently with each other without having trouble to understand the words.*

(4) Offer to resolve miscommunication

J: *Today, I tried to be careful about my English speaking but I am not satisfied with what I did today. Also, sometimes I did not understand someone's saying because of the speed and because I was not sure who is talking, and I was unable to interrupt. Also, when I felt the topic is going out, I could not insist. How do you think? Should I become more aggressive? or other way to solve?*

As can be seen from the instances, the students are highly aware of miscommunication and are

wary about misunderstanding and being misunderstood. However, despite this awareness, the students do not employ strategies or make explicit attempts to resolve miscommunication.

3 Conclusion

The present study serves as a preliminary investigation of the nature of miscommunication in online written interaction among non-native Korean and Japanese speakers of English. While miscommunication is a potential source of discomfort, according to the results of this study, learners do not seem to make efforts to resolve misunderstanding. Rather, miscommunication is ignored. As to why this study yields such results, the reasons are not clear. Despite the instruction of verbal strategies on how to clear up misunderstanding, learners failed to apply the verbal clarification strategies to written online communication and continued to engage in miscommunication in writing.

There are several limitations to point out in this study. Like any small-scale study, the number of subjects is too small to warrant any kind of generalization. In addition, written online interaction is a different animal compared to spoken and face-to-face interaction. Further studies may compare spoken and written interaction and examine a broader range of non-native speakers from different backgrounds. Nevertheless, the present study can serve as a springboard for such further research.

Online communication can no longer be considered as a unique form of interaction. It is the norm and should no longer be compared to offline communication but rather be investigated in itself. However, for non-native speakers, interacting online in a foreign language presents formidable challenges. Explicit instruction in how to resolve miscommunication and to engage in effective meaningful communication is needed. In this light, the present study sheds light on asynchronous online interaction in written form among non-native speakers of English.

References

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