



Instructional Dialogic Behaviors in a Distance English Class

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Abstract

This study was carried out as a survey research to examine dialogic behavior of learners in distance English Education Class. English class was offered through 2013-2014 Fall semester in a higher education institution in the Aegean Region, Turkey. For the current study, the theory of instructional dialog (TID) offered by Gorsky and Caspi was used as a theoretical framework to evaluate interactions among various actors and components in a distance learning system. The TID is assumed that learning is mediated by intrapersonal dialogue and facilitated by interpersonal dialogue. Additionally, every resource in a distance instructional system (e.g. instructor availability, face-to-face meetings, synchronous and asynchronous communication systems, self-instruction materials, etc.) can be analyzed in terms of the dialogue it supports. The data was collected through the Turkish version of "Tactical Approaches for Learning Questionnaire" developed by Gorsky and Caspi in 2005. The questionnaire was administered to all 1,912 learners who registered for the class and 171 learners returned. The responses were subjected to descriptive statistics and the results were tabulated in tables and figures. The findings allows us not only to understand dialogical behaviors learners face with conceptual difficulties during the process of English learning but also interaction types and preferences in such a learning system.

1. Introduction

With the developments in information and communication technologies in 21st century, technology supported classes has started to replace the traditional ones and administrator, teacher and learner models has gone through some changes in parallel with these advances. Distance education, though still in debate, has taken an "essential" role for formal education in today's globalized world. Distantness of education herein doesn't refer to physical distance, but it stems from the stakeholders' being in separate places. It's aimed with distance education that learners make the most of learning by establishing effective technology-based communication channels, providing intensive advising and counseling services and administering objective assessment and evaluation methods.

This study, aiming to examine the dialogic behavior of learners in distance English Education Class, came out based on the issues regarding that unlike traditional education, there is no direct interaction between the teacher and the learner in distance education and it doesn't take place in physical classroom environment. One of the researchers of this study has been teaching to learners at Vocational Colleges of a higher education institution in Eastern Aegean Region in Turkey. This study has been conducted owing to the learners' complaints, they uttered during the so-called English course, in that they cannot adequately interact with her since they are in separate places during the lectures and they have been experiencing some problems from time to time. Researchers have questioned the terminologies "interaction" and "distance" before and during the study since there arouses a different kind of perception about "distance" in learners' minds and this comes up as a fact that may affect teaching and learning process negatively.

2. Theoretical Framework

According to Transactional Distance (TD) Theory developed by Michael G. Moore, "distance" perceived in distance education environments is not a geographical distance, but a psychological and communicational space [9]. In other words, transactional distance is "a psychological and communicational space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner". Moore in his theory explained three key interactive components related to transactional distance: Structure, dialogue and autonomy. In this theory, distance minimizes as structure increases and dialogue decreases and it maximizes as structure decreases and dialogue increases. Main way of minimizing the perceived "distance" of learners is increasing the dialogue, autonomy and interaction while decreasing structure [8]. Moore's TD theory has long been studied and also debated in various empirical studies in literature. Among these studies, especially, Gorsky



and Caspi present a critical point of view towards Moore's theory. Main inquiry here is that some studies in literature have focused on questions about the three components of Moore's theory and the idea of transactional distance; a) how are they operationally defined, b) how are they measured, c) how valid and reliable are the tools used for measurement. These two researchers have discussed these three questions with different research on Moore's theory and concluded that the components of the theory are not clearly defined operationally. Gorsky and Caspi [2], accordingly, have developed Theory of Instructional Dialogue (TID), which underlines that real distance in distance education is not spatial or temporal as an alternative to TD theory. Unlike Moore's TD theory, TID explains the mechanisms used in educational systems in a simple and accurate way and presents measurable operational descriptions [2]. Another prominent aspect of this theory is that it brings up empirically assessable hypothesis with high validity and reliability and thus, indicates the ways to create the most appropriate educational systems [5].

TID rests upon three assumptions explaining instructional systems as interpersonal and intrapersonal instructional dialogues which are;

1. Every element in an instructional system is either a dialogue or a resource which supports dialogue.
2. Certain structural and human resources, common to all instructional systems, relate with the type, amount and duration of dialogue that occurs, or may occur, both in- and out-class.
3. Specific, situated dialogues correlate with learning outcomes [5].

When the studies on instructional dialogue in distance education are considered, it's clear that they are very limited in number and the existing ones are conducted by the researchers themselves who developed the theory. For instance; Gorsky, Caspi and Smidt [4], conducted a study to find out the kinds of dialogic behavior engaged by learners while studying physics course at the Open University, UK. In this study, they both investigated the ways of problem solutions and correlated dialogic behaviors with several learner attributes such as age, gender and motivation to achieve a high grade. Results indicate that a large majority of learners dealt with both kinds of difficulty individually; they turned to interpersonal dialogue and to the instructor only when such efforts failed [4]. On the other hand, in another study investigating the dialogic behavior of 521 Open University of Israel learners as they studied undergraduate courses in Exact and Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities concluded in different findings. Results revealed that most learners registered in the programs in Israel initially dealt with both kinds of conceptual difficulty individually and they turn to interpersonal dialogue only when such efforts failed. Unlike the learners in Open University, UK, most learners turned to peers for help, not to their instructors [3].

Gorsky, Caspi and Tuvi-Arad [1], investigated the kinds of dialogues engaged in by Open University learners and the kinds of resources they used while studying an intermediate-level chemistry course. All learners initially chose individual study characterized by intrapersonal dialogue. Only when individual attempt failed did learners opt for interpersonal dialogue.

Even though these studies present information about the use of instructional dialogue and the kinds of dialogues used, they are limited to learners of physics and chemistry course or generally social and natural sciences. However, there are very few studies in literature on instructional dialogue and its kinds used in distance language education. Moreover, all of the current studies are conducted with bachelor's learners. This study, thus, is considered to pioneer the upcoming researches for being the first study conducted on TID in Turkey.

It is, besides, believed that exploring the dialogic behavior of the learners in Vocational Colleges of the higher education institution will help to better understand the difficulties and problems learners encounter in their learning processes. It's, thus, important to determine the learners' use of instructional dialogue so as to understand these difficulties and provide support to learners on these matters.



3. Research Method

This descriptive study is designed as a survey research to examine dialogic behavior of learners in distance English Education Class.

3.1 Participants

“English 1” course, in which different interaction types and technologies are used instead of traditional face-to-face instruction in classroom environment, was administered in a higher education institution in Aegean Region of Turkey in 2013-2014 academic year.

No sampling was employed in this study and all the learners in five Vocational Colleges of the institution registered in distance English Education Course (total 1912) were included in the study. However, only 171 learners participated by responding the questionnaire and sending it back.

Learners’ demographic information is:

- 104 female, 67 male
- Age range between 20-37
- 8 participants work beside studying

3.2 Context

In this English Course, the medium of instruction and course delivery took place through Adobe Connect web conferencing software that enables the lecturer and multi-users to attend the course at the same time in a live platform. Learners can both attend the courses synchronously and/or follow the previous courses’ videos from lecture archives asynchronously. In addition, a learning management system (LMS) embedded in the university’s port was also used by learners and instructor. This LMS allows the instructors to post announcements, assignments and information about the course, post messages to learners along with sharing documents and course materials.

All the materials used during the synchronous sessions along with the extra-curricular ones are all shared with learners weekly under the “files” feature in LMS. Moreover, this course has a Facebook page which is used for faster and more personal interaction. An e-mail and messaging system were also actively used for better communication between the instructor and the learners and among the learners themselves. At the beginning of every semester, instructors organize a face-to-face meeting in colleges so as to introduce learners the course system and inform them about different aspect of the course. Other than this meeting, instructors and learners meet twice during the midterm and final exams which makes three times in total per semester.

In this study, conducted to examine dialogic behavior of learners in distance English Education Class, there are mainly three questions sought to be answered: Related to course materials and assignments;

- a) Do learners encounter any conceptual problems?
- b) What do they initially do when they encounter any difficulties?
- c) What kind of dialogic behavior they present when they encounter a difficulty?

3.3 Instrument

So as to collect data in this study, “Tactical Approaches to Study” Questionnaire developed by Gorsky and Caspi [4] was translated into Turkish and used with some adaptation to research context with the permission of the authors. Questionnaire in general consists of nine main questions and related sub-questions. It is prepared using a web-based tool for building surveys and sent to participants via LMS messages and e-mails.

4. Results and Discussion

Findings of the study are presented here in accordance with the items in questionnaire.

To the question about their motivation to achieve a high grade in English 1 course, nearly half of the learners (43%) claimed “very high”, while only one student stated as “very low”. About the question “how difficult do you consider the course to be?”, more than half of the learners (99 learners) reported that it is “moderate”, as 14 tells it to be “very difficult and 6 of them “very easy”.

Learners are also asked how they prefer to learn during this course; independently or with others and 54% of the learners seems to prefer learning with others while the rest chooses to learn independently. Another question posed to learners in order to examine their dialogic behavior in English course was to find out whether they knew at least one student in the course before they



started. When the responses to this question were analyzed, it's seen that 111 of the learners knew at least one student; 59 learners, however, knew no one in the class prior to the course.

Strategies employed by the learners as they addressed conceptual difficulties that occurred while studying the course materials were also examined in this study. Eight actions undertaken in such situations were given in questionnaire and learners were asked to pick either "yes" or "no". According to results, 151 learners re-watch the record of class conference when they encountered any difficulties. On the other hand, learners who re-read the texts/instructional materials in case of conceptual difficulty are in the minority (39%). It is, thus, possible to tell that majority of the learners registered in the course prefer the visual materials.

Most of the learners (n=120) reported that they did not seek for or find alternative texts or instructional materials to address the conceptual difficulties. Similar to the results of the research conducted in Open University of Israel, most learners turned to peers for help in case of a difficulty, not to their instructors. They even reported that they contact with an acquaintance outside the course rather than the instructor. Besides, only 26 learners reported their problems to school management, while nearly 20% of them gave up looking for help.

115 learners reporting that they contacted another student from the course were also inquired about how they contacted with peers. Accordingly, all these 115 learners turned to "face-to-face meeting", 26 learners "social networks", 19 of them "e-mails", 16 learners "telephone" and 10 learners chose different ways other than these. These findings of the study, thus, are similar to the research results of Caspi and Gorski [3].

The number of learners contacting their tutor as they addressed conceptual difficulties that occurred while studying the course materials is only 72 and more than half of the learners (n=99) do not prefer such interaction. Of all the learners contacting their tutors in case of difficulty, 40% of them do this by "attending the course conference", 21% by "face-to-face meeting", 21% by "sending messages through LMS", 9% by "social networks" and again 9% of them preferred different ways other than these. According to this result, it wouldn't be wrong to infer that learners prefer to interact with their peers for help rather than their instructors.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study is believed to help the upcoming researchers gain a different insight related to TID and its implications to the field of distance education and pioneer to similar researches to be conducted in different institutions and with different participants since it is the first study to be administered on TID in Turkey. It's believed that examining the dialogic behavior of the learners who are registered in Vocational Colleges of this higher education institution will help to better understand the difficulties and problems that the learners encounter in their learning processes and the course, thus, will be re-designed based on these findings and information.

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