

Exploiting Asynchronous Discussions in Class for Improving 3rd Grade Students' Writing Ability

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research was to examine the impact of asynchronous discussions' usage in students' writing ability. It is proposed that critical thinking skills could be cultivated through electronic discussions and through dialogues students have the opportunity to construct meanings, interact with others and thus acquire knowledge through meaningful communication. In support of this view, the present study was conducted with 3rd Grade students in a primary school in Athens, participating in the creation of an electronic, interactive newspaper through online discussions. The activity was implemented using the DIAS system, an asynchronous discussion platform with integrated Interaction Analysis tools, exploited in this case to facilitate the researcher's analysis. The results indicate that students made significantly fewer mistakes in the online environment, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Additionally, they took initiatives, worked individually and were engaged into a purposeful interaction with others, therefore reinforcing autonomous learning. Finally their social skills were also facilitated, through the online discussions.

Keywords: 3rd Grade, Asynchronous Discussions, Integrated Interaction Analysis Tools, Primary School, Writing

INTRODUCTION

People have been trying to find ways for communicating with one another, through the ages. The vast growth of technology, especially during the past 30 years has not only enhanced the traditional communication forms, but has

introduced new ways of interaction, collaboration and communication. For example, people communicate with their friends via social networking services almost every day, even with friends which they wouldn't have, if such services hadn't been developed. These new forms of communication take place regardless of time and space limits, while utilized, at the same time, in distance education approaches in

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order to improve students' achievements. In this vein, Internet has become a global collaboration and communication platform, allowing severe interaction to take place.

It is supported that people interacting through computers can develop high order thinking skills (Wegerif, 2002; Garrison, 2003). Having in mind that the cultivation of such skills is always an educational goal, the utilization of the collaborative nature of Web 2.0 services has become a research goal for the scientific community. Thus, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) Tools for synchronous and asynchronous communication are used by educators, under the scope of Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL). This, in conjunction with the student-centered educational approaches and the sociocultural theories, has increased the interest in researching the use of network-based applications in class.

The current paper examines the use of asynchronous discussion tools in educational activities, aiming at improving students' writing skills, as well as their social skills. In particular, the presented research examines if and at what extend the production of written language through asynchronous discussion platforms can affect (positively, negatively or neutrally) the cognitive level, but also the social behavior of students. The DIAS system (Bratitsis, 2007), an asynchronous discussion platform with integrated Interaction Analysis (IA) tools was used for implementing educational activities, involving 3rd grade students.

The paper is structured as follows; initially the theoretical background is deployed, discussing issues related to internet-based educational approaches, involving interaction and communication. Then the state of the art is presented, examining research approaches based on CMC tools, mainly in Primary education, as well as the educational practices used in language teaching. Following, the methodology of the presented research is described, before formulating the research questions. Finally, the results are presented, before the concluding discussion.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

One of the core issues in education is that of learning and sustaining students' progress (Kress, 2004). In fact, learning is connected with *Critical Thinking* which is related to dialogue, educational discussions and students' writings. Critical thinking is described as the intellectual and emotional activity through which a person evaluates the reliability of the perceived information (Matsaggouras, 2002). According to Wegerif (1998), thinking skills enable students' ability to: a) evaluate what they read, hear and do, b) rationalize opinions and actions, c) draw inferences and make deductions, d) explain what they think, e) ask relevant questions, f) pose and define problems, g) generate and extend ideas, h) suggest hypotheses, and i) apply imagination.

Moreover, Matsaggouras (2002) supports that a student can develop critical thinking via interaction with other individuals. Students learn how to learn, therefore they acquire metacognitive skills. Metacognition is crucial when new knowledge is produced and thus for the overall educational process, as it helps individuals to regulate their learning (Panteliadou, 2002). Reflection, a metacognitive skill, is applied when a student examines the validity of information and draws conclusions, based on his/her research (Bratitsis, 2007). Reflection is directly connected with Critical Thinking, as students, through collaborative activities, are able to comprehend their errors, share knowledge and better understand a subject, while negotiating common meanings and posing common aims.

Kuhn (1999) argues that metacognitive skills are related with critical thinking since these skills concern the knowledge a person has for himself. Paul and Elder (2000) support that critical thinking is a self directed and self controlled thought and a result of communication skills and problem solution abilities as well. Additionally, Muirhead (2004) supports that self directed learning aims to create an environment which could enhance the critical thinking. At the same time, through critical thinking a

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