Construction of Seamless English Language Learning Cyberspace via Interactive Text Messaging Tool

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Abstract—The widespread network information technology represented by Blog, QQ software, mobile devices provides opportunities for the innovation of technology-enhanced learning. On the basis of the theories of seamless English language learning, immediacy behaviours, and online learning community, the author constructs an English QQ Group with the name Growing-up among her students and other learning assistants in order to create a seamless online learning community featured by the combination of knowledge and entertainment via English medium. The paper depicts the process of its creation and operation, inclusive of the preparatory questionnaire, the establishment and adjustment of group regulations, and its routine activities. Along the way, the paper stresses the organization of this community, the main tasks of the QQ group leader, and the appropriate evaluation system as well. To the end, the author puts forward the positive effects, the existing problems, and future plan of the Growing-up, proposing some recommendations for its further improvement.

Index Terms—seamless English language learning, immediacy behavior, online learning community, Growing-up QQ Group

I. INTRODUCTION

The students of the late 1990s have been growing up in a world intervened with physical and digital space. As with the application of network into our daily lives, such as Blog, social network, and digital information, our campus life has become multidimensional and multicultural. However, these technological media and social activities cannot be integrated into our formal teaching activity completely. Under the current educational system, there still exists discrepancy between formal and informal learning, though the confines become blurred (Cook, 2008). The widespread network information technology represented by network diary, Blog, QQ software, mobile devices, provides opportunities for the innovation of technology-enhanced learning. These potentialities can be summarized as seamless learning space (Chan, 2006) which is characteristic of constant cross-text and cross-scenario learning experiences.

QQ software, thanks to its simple grasp, convenient operation, friendly interface, and zero fee, has become the new favour of the youth. At present, it grows to the most frequently used tool to realize online communication, online interaction, and online learning. On the basis of the QQ principle, QQ Group, as the newly-invented communicative system for a group of people with the similar educational backgrounds, the common learning goals, or similar academic concentration, rises into our views. It converges various communication means on the network together to construct an advanced and speedy communication platform consisting of communication tool, such as e-mails, group chat and personal chat tools, video conversation tool, and group forum; collaborative tools, such as: role-play tool, virtual whiteboard, file-sharing and file-transfer tool; trace evaluation tools, such as QQ log file, and personal home page zone.

Palloff and Pratt hold that when teachers and learners are working in collaboration with each other and constructing new knowledge, they are knitting a net of interactive learning and mutual progress (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Through creation and widespread use of Blog and QQ software after class, teachers can build a seamless learning cyberspace for the whole students. When entering the cyberspace of Blog or QQ Group, they are equal partners, being required to use English as a lingua franca so long as they are participating in the communication or learning activities in group. This typical feature will contribute to constructing a net for English language learning with perfect embodiment of seamless interaction, equal communication, and joyful learning.

II. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING OF SEAMLESS ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING VIA TEXT MESSAGING SYSTEM

A. Grounds and Necessities to Launch Seamless English Language Learning Cyberspace

The main problems of the traditional English language learning consist in excessive non-circumstance information, direct and abstract knowledge transmission, and second-hand experience confined to the classroom environment (Jiang, 2000). In view of these practical problems, the theorists in language learning commenced to advocate the integration of formal and informal language learning (Titone, 1969). This kind of integration is conducive to enhancing learners'

autonomy in learning, which represents the mega trend of the current language research. To put it in a nutshell, autonomy learning refers to the learners' mastery of their own learning (Holec, 1981). As to language learning, Little summarized three principles to serve as the classroom teaching purpose: learner's involvement, learner's reflection, and target language use (Little, 1999). Text messaging systems, such as Blog, Mobile telecom equipment, and QQ software can evolve to learning center encouraging, supervising and assisting learners' involvement in different learning space. The learner's reflection and the target language use are not restricted to classroom environment as Little supposed, on the contrary, they can extend to every corner of their living space. The Seamless English language learning cyberspace aims at establishing a constant English language learning platform which centers on the learners' fluid learning demands through appropriate learning program, advanced network technology and active online supervision.

B. Theory of Immediacy Behaviour under Network Space and Its Functions

Immediacy has been defined by social psychologist Albert Mehrabian as the degree of perceived and/or psychological friendliness among people (Mehrabian, A, 1967). He stated that people are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluating highly, and they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluating negatively. Ten years later, Andersen (Andersen, 1979) introduced this psychological concept into educational circle through conducting several studies to analyze the use of instructional immediacy behavior. His early investigations concluded that immediacy relates to approach and avoidance behaviors which can be thought of as the perceived distance among people; the immediate teachers were viewed by students as more positive and effective ones, which led to enhanced trust on the instructor, and dense interest in the course itself. As a result, the instructional immediacy has been taken as a potentially effective factor in improving teaching quality and learning effect. Gorham brought the instructor's language and behaviors conducing to improvement of relationship into immediacy behaviors (Gorham, 1988). According to the presentation given by Kelly Rolla of St. John's University in the 2007 Workshop Student Motivation and Attitudes: The Role of the Affective Domain in Geoscience Learning in Carleton College, instructional immediacy is the behavior that brings the instructor and the students closer in terms of perceived distance. The results from these studies indicate that the teacher immediacy behaviors have the significant influences on student learning outcomes.

Although the advanced communication media is the powerful support of the modern education, it cannot solve the problem of psychological barrier, for instance, the students' sense of strangeness toward the instructor leading to inactive cooperation with teaching activity; the instructor's inadequate supervision toward the students leading to lack of learning motivation and low-efficiency of teaching (Gould, 2000).

In view of the negative effects deriving from modern technology, it's of necessity for instructors to figure out some effective and practical strategy intended to construct friendly relationship beneficial to both sides. The previous studies indicate that the instructor's immediacy behaviors under the network environment can make the students repossess the sense of belonging through being focused on and highly expected by their instructors, and therefore, arouse them to have more active leaning motivation and enthusiasm. The immediacy behaviors can be fully applied and reflected in Blog and QQ Group, the instant and constant communication systems. Through common concentration on and timely comments about the digital information, language learning, cultural immersion, and humanitarian solicitude will be fulfilled in better ways. The teachers' cordial greetings, immediate encouragement, timely instruction for the students' materials in Blog and Qzone will completely alter inhuman relationship, producing positive effects on students' learning process and results.

C. On-line Learning Community and Its Functions

As to on-line learning community, there has been no commonly recognized definition in the world up to now. According to Chinese scholar Jianwei Zhang, on-line learning community refers to the learning community with definite learning goals constituted by learners and learner's assistants including classroom teachers, experts and tutors under the virtual environment of network (Zhang, 2011). The author holds the view that the essence of learning community is that the community members regularly communicate and collaborate with each other under network environment in order to fulfill common learning tasks, sharing individual learning resources, experiences and results through which community members can build up the positive social relationship that influences and helps each other.

The main functions of on-line learning community are reflected by the following three aspects: (1) cognitive information support. The community members can obtain a large amount of knowledge information contributing to solving learner's confusion from other members and on-line resources. Besides, members can enhance their capability of reflection and recombine their train of thought. (2) interpersonal support. In the interpersonal relationship formed through learning activity among learning community, the learner can be aware of his responsibility for and importance to the community. Meanwhile, when the learner is frustrated by the difficulty, he can obtain the direction and assistance from other members instantly. The existence of this learning community can meet the learners' demands for the sense of belonging and recognition, making for the enhancement of learning interest and degrees of participation of the learners (Shanyun Kuang, 2005). (3) common development. The topic for the learning community members to discuss   centers around the learning subjects and tasks, the ways to collaborate, communicate and interact together in order to solve the confronted problems, which undoubtedly promote mutual understanding, cooperative study and common development.

III. CREATION AND OPERATION OF GROWING-UP ON-LINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

A.   Preparatory Work for Creating Growing-up: A Questionnaire

The author sent questionnaire to her students before the creation of Growing-up English QQ group. Nine questions are to be answered anonymously and most of them are open-ended. Through collecting and analyzing the students' real and open responses the author obtained the valuable first-hand materials involving demands, expectations of the masters in Growing-up. Undoubtedly, learning assistants only act as the assistants, guides, and administrators in this group, while the mastership belongs to every student who join this group. As a result, the author must conduct a thorough and cautious survey by means of approaching the students' inner hearts to understand their practical learning demands and progressive desires. The main content and results of this survey are as follows.

TABLE 1:
THE SURVEY OF LEARNING INTENTIONS OF GROWING-UP ENGLISH QQ GROUP

Questions	Answers
1. Why don't you join this English Group？ (The students who would like to join it can omit this question.)	1)anxiety for poor English level and difficulty in expression in English (33%); 2)oprerational problems (4%); 3)equipment problems (3%) (the rest of students omit it)
2. What do you want to be, observer or participant? And why?	1)observers (vocabulary and grammar problem47%, inadequate online time9.8%, topic problems 3%,doing other activities 16.2); 2)participants (25%)
3. In what condition will you join the group actively?	1)Improvement of English level(43%); 2)easy and friendly learning environment with suitable topics and cheerful friends (24%); 3)Chinese addition(8%); 4)without preconditions(6%); other conditions(19%)
4. What mesures should the teacher adopt to increase the students' involvement?	1)Regular and colourful activities with interesting topics, articles and easy manner(47%); 2)offering of English materials and band 4 information (16%); 3)making award bonus(10%);④no response (27%)
5. What time do you think is appropriate to have Group discussion?	1)8:00—10:00p.m.(77%); 2)6:30—8:00 p.m.(10%); 3)weekend and vacation (13%)
6. Do you need more English teachers or foreign experts to join the group?	1)Yes(65%); 2)No(35%)
7. Do you like to communicate with students or learning assistants? To give the general percentage.	1)50% and 50%(24%); 2)70% with assistants and 30% with students (18%); 3)40% with assistants and 60% with students (18%); 4)90% with assistants and 10% with students (14%).
8. What kind of materials do you want the teacher and other members to upload?	1)English learning materials and test directions(90%); 2)cultural materials, music,movie and video(72%); 3)inspirational and success story(48%); current affairs and hot issues(66%); 4)excellent compositions(42%)
9. Open suggestions for English Group.	1)To creat an English communication platform of knowledge and interest (45%); 2)to make new friends (21%); 3)to contribute to the improvement of English practical application and higher scores (15%); 4)others (19%).

After the statistical research the author collected the most practical and reliable data and suggestions from the potential community members, forming the basic concept about how to design and construct the appropriate and effective English learning community via cyber-interaction. The ultimate goal of this English QQ Group is to create an extracurricular English interactive platform realizing the true sense of the combination between knowledge and interest. This is an easy and cheerful English learning environment absolutely different from the formal classroom. In this multi-dimensional interaction space, the students' anxiety and pressure can be narrowed down to the lowest degree, while their learning desire and zest can be lighted and aroused to the maximum. English teaching and learning, once lent the wings of network technology, can make its historic breakthrough.

B.   Creation of On-line Learning Community on the Basis of QQ Group: Organization and Requirements

On the basis of the platform of QQ Group, the author created this English QQ Group entitled with Growing-Up (This unique group name selected by the author has very rich connotations. The author hopes that all the group members can grow up mentally through constant and positive communication with their partners and learning assistants). The students can apply the QQ number to take part in the interactions of Growing-Up. The author also invites some foreigners (teachers and experts) and her colleagues to join this Group acting as the learning assistants. In the process of on-line learning activity, the assistants upload well-designed learning tasks to the group sharing of the Group, and the students will fulfill learning tasks through self-study, cooperative study, individual assistance, and common discussion with the direction of learning assistants. Figure 1 displays the inter-connective circle of Growing-up English learning platform.
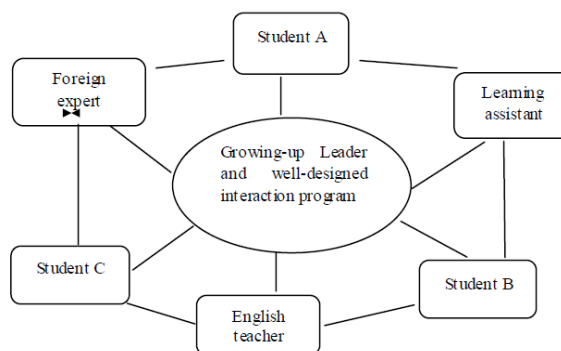
Figure1: The inter-connective circle of Growing-up learning and interaction platform

Organization of on-line learning community: the author selected 50 students from Investigation Department and Public Security Administration Department in Grade 2011 as the subjects of this research. Along the way, she invited five colleagues (English teachers) and one foreign scholar to join the group as learning assistants. Before starting the activities of this English QQ group the author put forward three requirements for the community members: they should use English names to join Growing-up; they should upload their homework (including excellent compositions, book reviews, term papers), comment on other students' performance, discuss with other members in English; they should fulfill learning tasks and collaborate with others in English. In view of these definite demands, Growing-up is a limitless cyberspace to extend the classroom learning to a seamless learning with the students speaking their minds freely and fully, and the classroom teacher conveying their ideas and comments breezily and carefully. The following excerpts are author's prologue at the start of group's operation. Although she didn't receive any response from her group members (at the beginning, there are only six members besides the author, so it is understandable for her not to receive any reply), she still declared her ebullient opening remark to welcome each member to join this English on-line community actively and passionately.

Vicky(the author's QQ name): 13:31:33

Hi! My old and new friends. 😀　　First of all, let's celebrate the creation of this English QQ Group named as Growing-up. I suddenly had a brainstorm this morning. With all my heart I hope everyone of you can grow up mentally through beneficial communication and friendly collaboration in this English Group. As your English teacher and close

companion, I'll go to great lengths to provide you a colorful and interactive English learning environment. 🥰
Vicky: 13:36:36

But I have a requirement that you should use English as your QQ name,Ok? Here only our creator Lost meets this requirement. Please change your QQ name and select a suitable one for you as quickly as possible.
Vicky: 13:41:04

I delare that Growing-up is a cyberspace of learning and sharing.So everyone of you can express your viewpoints confidently. Don't be afraid of making any mistakes and don't worry about being criticized or jeered at by teachers or other members. It is really a friendly and gay space integrating amusement and communication into English learning. I

am waiting for your comments on my teaching style and this innovative idea! Be volunteer! 🐧

The author adopted easy tone and simple rhetoric to express her congratulations on the smooth creation of the English QQ group. She also pointed out three requirements cordially in order to remind those students who didn't obey the rules of this particular group. At last, she sincerely welcomed the group members to make comments about her teaching styles freely. All these opening remarks will push a driving force to activate the group activities promptly. One point worthy of note is that the author took good advantage of lovely icons representing warmth and affection to get closer to group members, which is the typical reflection of immediacy behavior in the cyberspace.

C.　Operation of Growing-up English QQ Group: Tasks of Group Leader and Their Application

The author, as the Group leader, takes charge of dealing with the routine work of the whole group, uploading learning tasks and resources, collecting and checking excellent compositions, reports, papers uploaded by the student representatives, releasing previewing questions before learning the new unit, daily topics to discuss in English Hour (form 8:00 to 9:00 every other evening), news report and current affairs downloaded from Yahoo English website in a selective way (the news which are related to the students' major and the news which can arouse their interest), uploading the English educational videos including students' videos and pictures taken from their virtual performance, and other excellent teaching videos. Apart from these tasks, the Group leader is also responsible for conducting regular English communication every other evening by written words on the screen. The leader initiated the English chat at the beginning, but as the group members got used to this particular style of "chatting", the leader would recruit volunteered members who are qualified to be the leader guiding the direction of the conversation. There was one deputy leader for one English Hour. Three deputy leaders came up with quite different topics before performing their duty and they had to

search for adequate references to prepare for it. On weekends, the members could choose free topic to discuss. Furthermore, the Group leader had to listen to the voices from the members through interviews, questionnaires, and net feedbacks to tune various strategies unsuitable for its further progress. Figure 2 clearly displays the Group leader's main tasks.
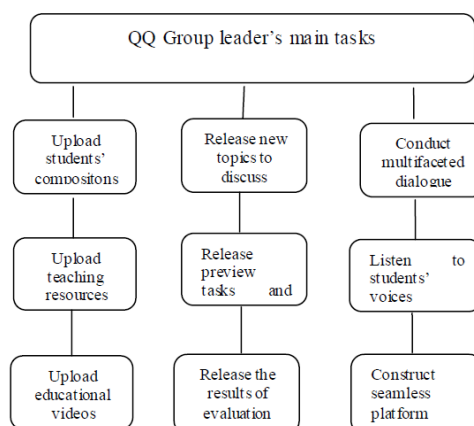

Figure 2: The detail analysis of Growing-up QQ Group leader's tasks

To be frank, the author created this English QQ Group after taking the initiative in writing this article. When she read the article written by the Singapore scholar pointing out the theory of seamless language learning and then creating Chinese language seamless learning via mobile communication equipment such as mobile phone, she conceived the idea of creating English language seamless learning platform via QQ group. She started to construct this English QQ Group with great support from her students. Mr. Lost (the creator of this group) helped her to create the group and did lots of routine work, such as uploading photoes of English virtual performance and admitting the enrollment. The study monitores helped collecting and uploading the excellent compositions each week. Many volunteers contributed a lot to searching for interesting and meaningful topics to discuss and supervising the progress of English Hour. Concequently, Growing-up is a fruit of common labours representing collaborative spirits and sharing attitudes. Under the illumination of the modern theories, Growing-up is progressing on its way to the promising goal.

Figure 3, as the recording of early Growing-up, presents the main learning resources (on the right) uploaded by Group leader including CET 4 instruction lectures (audio component) given by the author and her colleague, a manuscript for training police cross-cultural communication capabilities written by the author, and two instructional papers about how to write a good English academic paper and police paper. A real English communication script between the author and the Group member Fly is presented on the left. The writing pace of the article was keeping up with the progress of Growing-up. The author particapted in the group activities, updating the notice and bulletin board, uploading the latest English news every day, the successful story of celebrities, engaging in English Hour guiding and explaining the students' conversation and questions. In this extracurricular cyber-interaction learning space, the students are just like ducks to water, while the teacher gives free play to her talents in English. With great efforts of the author and other community members, Growing-up is bound to become the indispensable assistant and partner of the English fans, witnessing every progress of their growing-up.
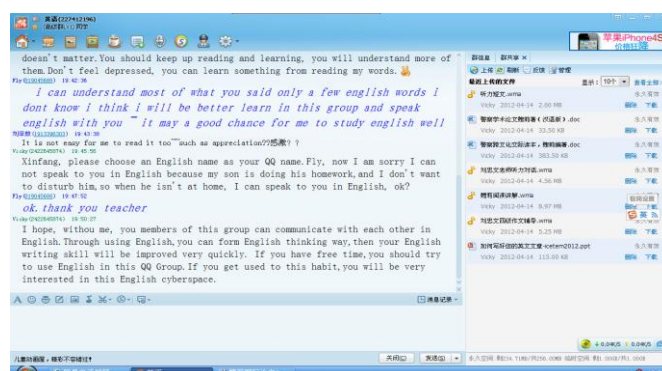

Figure3: The uploaded learning materials and written communication recording between author and community member

In the process of performing network community activity through English QQ Group, the teacher should fully employ the encouragement mechanism of evaluation to tap latent power of students, to stimulate and mobilize their enthusiasm and go-aheadism in order to promote their English learning and exploring. The evaluation system includes recording and evaluating the students' performance in Group chat, Group forum, Group sharing, and Group discussion. Their performance is evaluated by their participation coefficient and contribution percentage. The teacher can also

employ the growing-up files in Qzone to record and collect their information. These information involve the students' homework, their individual diaries of reflection, self-evaluation, evaluations from other students and learning assistants, and the feedback information as well. The teacher can evaluate the students' performance according to comprehensive information. Apart from the teacher's evaluation, other experts and students can also complement the task of evaluation. The whole process of evaluation is on-line, open and dynamic process which greets others' supervision and recommentdaitions in and out of this group. The community members can learn from others' strong points, exchange learning experience, share learning resources and results, which contribute to establishing an interactive and inter-promoting social relationship.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The creation and application of this Growing-up QQ Group is author's innovative experiment. After four months of practice, this initiative effectively realizes the goal of constructing the seamless English language learning in cyberspace. For the students, most of them improve their English level in different aspects, especially in writing, reading, discussing and thinking. They naturally form English thinking in some degrees, getting used to communicate in English when entering Growing-up. Furthermore, they learn to solve their learning problems through collaboration and cooperation among students and learning assistants, which is conducive to build a friendly and harmonious English communication space. This English Group produces great influence on other students who are eager to join Growing-up. The students share the common ideas: English QQ Group is a fresh style of network learning community; this sharing and discussing platform is so easy to operate but greatly beneficial to every member; the teacher's assistance is direct, instant and dynamic, which arouses their potent curiosity and enthusiasm to explore and appreciate the mystery and charm of English kingdom.

But in the process of practice, we also run across some problems embodied in the following points. Some students who are poor in self-study ability and collaborative awareness will affect the learning effects and pace. So we have to provide them with directions in learning ways and develop their collaborative spirits. Some students who are ill-prepared for this particular learning style with less ability of self-restraint are easy to chew the fat or play QQ farm games which result in less concentration on on-line learning and failure in learning tasks. The teacher and learning assistants should intensify the supervision and give correct guidance to these students. At last, due to many reasons, the English teacher and learning assistants cannot always participate in QQ Group activities, especially the QQ English Hour and forum. This will weaken the power of the instructional functions of English QQ Group. To mobilize more experts and teachers home and abroad to take part in various activities in QQ Group is the premise to build a high-end English QQ Group, and hence, the QQ Group leader should go for broke to invite and encourage more English scholars to perform the duty of learning assistants offering constant and significant recommendations and timely feedbacks to the group members.

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