



CALL RESEARCH BRIEF

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Title: Summary of Digital social reading: Exploring multilingual graduate students' academic discourse socialization in online platforms

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Rationale/Overview of the study

This study explores the use of a digital social reading (DSR) application, SocialBook, to describe how it helped graduate students in their first doctoral course learn the vocabulary, writing conventions, and research designs in the field of second language acquisition. Nine participating students were divided into 3 groups. As part of the course, the students were required to make comments (annotate) 3 times each week on a total of 11 readings over the four-month semester, although the course instructor did not tell them what to comment about. Overall, the researcher was trying to determine whether and how the collaborative opportunities of DSR use facilitated the participants' socialization into their academic field.

Research methods

Approach: The researcher used a case study approach in order to explore participants' context and interaction in the DSR in depth. Further, because of her small number of participants, she could deeply examine learners in an authentic academic environment.

Participants: The study participants were nine out of the 14 graduate students enrolled in a semester-long doctoral seminar course at a U.S. university. Four female and 5 male students agreed to participate. Four of the participants were native English speakers and five spoke English as an additional language.

Data Collection and Analysis: The researcher collected data from three sources: 1) the participants' annotations in the DSR application, 2) a demographic background questionnaire, and 3) one-on-one semi-structured interviews. After reading all of the data multiple times, the researcher employed thematic analysis, in which she looked for themes and patterns in the data. Because the three participant groups used the DSR app separately, the researcher treated the groups as different cases and then also analyzed the patterns across the groups. By using three sources of data, the researcher could view the outcomes in several ways and it helped her to avoid bias as a doctoral student in the same program as the participants.

Results

This study provides evidence that the use of DSR resulted in the participants constructing meaning about the vocabulary in the readings together. Further, the students used other texts and resources to support their own learning and that of their groupmates. In addition, participants appeared to be agents of their own learning and also serve as “knowledge providers” (p. 7) for others. The results indicate that the students also learned about citation and word choice practices in the literature by using features of the DSR such as highlighting and underlining and then collaborating about these practices in their annotations. In addition, the study found that the students collaborated around the data sources and procedures in the texts they read and transferred the research approaches from some of the articles to their own projects. Overall, the researcher concluded, as other authors have, that DSR was useful in supporting the participating students because it provided an “active learning space through which students can benefit from each other’s expertise in interpreting and conceptualizing academic terms and concepts” (p. 9).

Practical Implications

1. DSR can be used to facilitate the uptake of vocabulary and ideas in a discipline.
2. Teachers can use DSR to provide graduate students with “space and opportunities” to discuss and learn collaboratively.
3. DSR use can support essential skills such as reading and annotating research articles.

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