

The Role of Chatbots in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

During the past decade, chatbots have been integrated into commercial platforms to facilitate second language acquisition (SLA) by providing opportunities for interactive conversations. However, SLA progress by learners is limited by chatbots that struggle to understand the context of a conversation or lack sufficient grammar and vocabulary, which are deficiencies that instructors typically prevent in college and university classrooms by providing context and introducing relevant grammar and vocabulary at appropriate junctures. Higher education institutions have not made much progress toward incorporating chatbots into SLA courses, and current tools do not incorporate successful in-person pedagogical methods. Achieving this goal with a chatbot may assist instructors in overcoming a challenge often faced in online and in-person SLA courses, namely, the need to create regular opportunities for multiple students to orally practice the language they are learning while being involved in activities that involve one-to-one interaction between an instructor and a student. This presentation will focus on a collaborative Digital Learning Incubator (DLI) project dedicated to creating and testing an innovative type of chatbot, called Slabot (Second Language Acquisition Bot), in two upper-level university courses at the University of Tennessee, asynchronous online Spanish 331 (Introduction to Hispanic Culture), and in-person Spanish 434 (Hispanic Culture Through Film). Evidence reveals that students in these two courses, like students in SLA courses at many universities, believe that their oral skills would benefit from more opportunities to speak in Spanish. To provide students and instructors with a tool for assessing Spanish oral skills in online and in-person courses, the DLI project objective was to create Slabot and test its efficacy in inspiring meaningful discourse by replicating in-person methods.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, MuBot, second language acquisition