

COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION: ITS PEDAGOGICAL ASPECTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

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Abstract

Class discussions conducted in a CMC environment may give students an equal opportunity for participation. This paper discusses English language lessons which were conducted in such an environment. It particularly tries to see how best to teach language using the synchronous mode of communication. Pair-work, small group and whole class discussions were studied for this purpose. The study shows that students preferred small group discussions as they were more interesting and stimulating than the other two modes of communication. Students' background such as their command of the language and their nationality were taken into consideration when the grouping was done. This was to ensure the effectiveness of communication. Seating arrangement was also important to warrant that they would not resort to face-to-face interaction.

Introduction

In a traditional language classroom, creating an authentic environment for interactive communication to take place might be a problem. Thanks to the advances in technology, the creation of such an environment ceases to be a major obstacle, especially in cases where telecommunication technology is available in the classroom. Class discussion on a computer network entails meaningful use of the target language (Colombo and Simutis, 1996), as, for example, students can be asked to engage in classroom discussion online with their classmates via the computers. This may encourage students to apply the language skills that they are learning. It also gives them more opportunity to participate as everybody can contribute their ideas without having to wait for their turn. The technology can hence increase students' opportunities for collaboration and active participation.

As learners are forced to use their knowledge of the language structure to construct meaningful information, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) environment may facilitate and promote comprehensible input. Users of CMC technology can share brief as well as lengthy messages, not only in one-to-one but also in one-to-many mode of communication. Such attributes may facilitate collaborative reading and writing (Warschauer and Kern, 2000).

CMC allows either asynchronous (not simultaneous) or synchronous (simultaneous) communication with other users in real time modes. The synchronous mode of CMC is indeed a combination of written and oral styles of communication (Bordia, 1996). As it is not face-to-face, it is not entirely spoken but neither is it strictly written as the composition is done online where the use of planning and editing strategies that are often employed in writing is ruled out.

This paper discusses an attempt to describe how synchronous or instantaneous conversation via the computers can provide opportunities for meaningful learner output in a second language classroom.

CMC and Language Learning

Different students may have different learning styles, hence the need to expose them to many kinds of learning experiences (Brooks, 1997). The use of the computer in this case may add to the range of learning situations and environments. Both the asynchronous and synchronous modes of communication can be valuable tools for discussion, reflection, negation and the development of creative and critical thinking skills. Learning can be turned into an active process of knowledge acquisition.

Studies on CMC identified equality of participation as one of the beneficial effects of using electronic synchronous discussion in writing instruction. Warschauer (1996a) claims that this equalization effect is the result of the absence of oral interaction which normally has elements of fear of being interrupted or to interrupt, the need to manage the floor, and the need to co-orient to the production of sequentially relevant discourse. In a study done by Chun (1994), the advantages of more equitable participation in terms of potential learner development in discursal, interactional, and functional competence were also reported. Beauvois (1992) and Kelm (1992) made a positive finding in their study as well. In their impressionistic account, they mentioned an increase in the participation pattern of shy students. Students who are often embarrassed to speak up have an equal tendency to participate in a CMC environment as they do not have to pay attention to the way they speak. In her study, Beauvois (1992) looked at real-time synchronous discussions among intermediate Portuguese and elementary French learners whereas Kelm (1992) observed non-native speakers of Portuguese enrolled in fourth semester Brazilian Portuguese course.

Group Interaction in a CMC Environment

In the traditional classroom, there are always learners who outshine others when whole class discussions are held. However, in a CMC environment studies show that electronic discussions increased with the size