ONLINE CHAT AND THE LANGUAGE LEARNING CLASSROOM: SYNCHRONOUS COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION (SCMC) AT THE UEM LAB

López-Lago, José María [1], Saiz de Lobado García, Ester [2]

1: UEM Lab
Vicerrectorado de Innovación
UEM
Edificio A, UEM Lab, Calle Tajo, s/n. Urb. El Bosque, 28670 Villaviciosa de Odón
josemaria.lopez@uem.es

2: Departamento de Periodismo y Comunicación Intercultural
Facultad de Artes y Comunicación
UEM
Edificio B-15, Calle Tajo, s/n. Urb. El Bosque, 28670 Villaviciosa de Odón
ester.saizdelobado@uem.es

Summary *This article is a preliminary study that analyses how 14 Students of English from the UEM Lab interact in a controlled virtual environment doing synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) exercises. In the past decades controlled virtual environments have increasingly gained more importance in education, especially since -as Presky defines them- the appearance of "digital natives": individuals who have implemented technology in their communication processes from a very early age, mainly born in the late 80s and 90s. In order to carry out this research, the Students were paired up and given tasks that they had to complete using Messenger. Once the online-task was completed, they were given a satisfaction survey to measure their degree of comfort and interest when approaching online interactions in SLA classes. These surveys confirmed that Students feel less intimidated and exposed when doing collaborative online tasks than when face to face interactions take place. These data or Learners Corpora present -in line with previous studies- a great number of negotiation, confirmation and reconfirmation strategies that could be used to modify or adapt the UEM Lab syllabus.*

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Synchronous Computer-mediated Communication (SCMC)

1. INTRODUCTION

The new Bologna Framework for Higher Education places significant importance on learning foreign languages. Computer Mediated Language Communication (CMC) has gained tremendous importance in the past decades, especially in foreign language teaching, in which the higher education "classroom" has increasingly moved onto online and blended learning platforms in order to better serve its students, known as "digital natives" (Presky, 2001 as found in Thorne et al.; 2005: 379), whose social and academic lives are "critically mediated by participation in digital communities such as Facebook, blog networks, instant messaging, and voice and text messaging over cell phones" (Thorne et al., 2005: 378).
Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) is the main objective at the Universidad Europea de Madrid (UEM) Lab, where over 3,000 students are enrolled in 2010-2011 to meet the English level required by their degree programs at the university.
According to previous studies, the main benefits of SCMC on foreign language education are 'that it provides a bridge to face-to-face interaction (Beauvois, 1992; Kern, 1995; Negretti,

1999) and an optimal environment for second language acquisition (Pellettieri, 2000; Smith, 2003; Tudini, 2003, 2007). The reason the SCMC environment is beneficial to SLA is because it fosters negotiation of meaning, much like face-to-face (FTF) interaction, by providing enhanced target language (TL) input and encouraging modified TL output, which makes TL input more comprehensible, triggering internal processes of language acquisition (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Pica, 1994; Long, 1996 as found in Pellettieri, 2000 in Warschauer et al., 2000: 64). Pellettieri also suggests that the fact that students can see what they are producing in the TL and can review previous turns may make students more likely to focus on language forms (2000 as found in Warschauer et al., 2000: 82). The use of one-to-one (dyad) rather than group chat in particular has been found to be conducive to the learning of foreign languages because it provides learners with the opportunity to practice and develop conversational language in a less threatening environment than the classroom' (Tudini, 2010: 18). This project aims to test these findings and explores the viability of incorporating SCMC activities into the UEM Lab.

2. PARTICIPANTS & TASKS

Students enrolled in the UEM Lab utilize a blended learning system of 17 levels, made up of four units each (68 units total, plus an optional 2 levels of Business English Online): each unit is composed of a multimedia section, a workbook, and a 50 minute face-to face (FTF) class called an "Encounter"; these steps must be done in this order. Because of the emphasis on student scheduling flexibility, there are no fixed class groups: most students in the Encounter do not know one another beforehand. Fourteen Upper Intermediate students (two Encounter groups in units 39 and 40) were selected to take part in this research project, which took the place of the corresponding unit's Encounter. Encounters are used to assess what the student has learned from the multimedia and workbook sections.

Each student was assigned a Messenger account and a partner. Students worked in pairs on two tasks: one vocabulary exercise, in which students had to select synonyms from the same vocabulary list, and one collaborative writing exercise (a jigsaw task), in which students were given two sets of pictures that represented problems encountered on a trip to a Moroccan hotel; after identifying the problems they had in common, students wrote a complaint letter to the hotel management. The Students were encouraged to use only English in their interactions.

The program automatically recorded the interactions which were analysed after the Encounter by the teachers. After completing the two tasks, students anonymously filled out a five question survey measuring satisfaction with the class format and their personal and academic use of synchronous and asynchronous computer mediated communication (chat, text messages, email and e-education platforms).

3. OBJECTIVES

As this is a preliminary study to analyse the viability of implementing SCMC activities at the UEM Lab, the researchers have decided to focus on the following questions:

'Does the negotiation of meaning occur in a task-based synchronous NBC as we know it does in oral interaction?' (Pellettieri in Warschauer et al., 2000: 64)

'Do the negotiations facilitate mutual comprehension?' (Pellettieri in Warschauer et al., 2000: 64)

Do the negotiations push learners to output modifications that are both meaning- and form-focused?' (Pellettieri in Warschauer et al., 2000: 64)

'Do the negotiated interactions foster the provision of corrective feedback and the incorporation of target-like forms into subsequent turns'? (Pellettieri in Warschauer et al., 2000: 64)

Do students feel comfortable with and see the utility of SCMC activities in the foreign language classroom?

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In response to the first and second research questions, the language data gathered corroborates previous findings that negotiation of meaning occurs in SCMC in patterns similar to FTF conversation, that the negotiations facilitate mutual understanding, and that most of the negotiations are triggered by lexical items (Pellettieri, 2000 in Warschauer et al., 2000:71). The data also demonstrate that the need for negotiation was signalled using clarification requests, confirmation checks (particularly tag questions), explicit statements of non-understanding, and echo questions; students also used emoticons and laughter as discourse markers to signal understanding and negotiation resolution.

In examples 1a and b, one student signals for negotiation using explicit statements of non-understanding; in 1a, student10 is trying to explain to student8 that he has a picture of cockroaches, but can´t find the word. The student apologizes first, and then tries describing the insects to his partner. The other student has the same picture, and responds to his partner with explicit corrective feedback in contiguous turns. Student10 confirms his understanding in the next turn, interrupting the phrase he had been writing with the confirmation markers 'jaja' and 'yes' and also thanks his partner. The 'ok ok' phrase in the student´s next turn signals mutual understanding and closes this micromoment of negotiation.

Example 4a. Negotiation signals and explicit, contiguous corrective feedback (feedback underlined)

student10: yours ¿third one are some insects but I don´t remember the name, sorry... they are "small" black or brown

student8: cockroaches¿?

student10: with legs...you know jaja yes jaja thank you jaja

student8: ok i have it too

student10: have you got the same image¿ ok ok

In example 1b, student10 is trying to explain another picture to his partner and again cannot find the TL form for 'tiburones', which is 'sharks'. The student signals his non-understanding by using the non-target forms "delphines" and "tiburons", but in this example, his partner initially ignores the request for negotiation, perhaps because it doesn´t impede in his understanding of the conversation. However, in a later turn, student8 uses the correct TL form "sharks" to clarify which pictures they don´t have in common, an implicit form of corrective feedback known as embedding. Even though the correction comes many turns after the request for negotiation, and the feedback is implicit, student10 recognizes the corrected form 'sharks' and acknowledges this by repeating the TL form in all caps. The negotiation sequence is closed by the extended laughter phrase, once of the most common discourse markers found in the data. Student10 later uses the modified TL form in another turn, one of the few examples found in the data of form-focused output, thought to be beneficial in SLA (Schmidt, 1990; Spada & Lightbown, 1993; Gass & Varonis, 1994; Long, 1996, qtd. in Pellettieri, 2000: 61). Future research on student preference for utilizing laughter and emoticons as to signal comprehension and close negotiation sequences from a Conversation Analysis (CA) perspective could be interesting, especially in relation to Smith´s (2005) SCMC modification of Varonis & Gass´s (1985) FTF negotiation model, which adds the steps confirmation and reconfirmation (Thorne et al., 2005: 375).

Example 1b. Unheeded negotiation signal and delayed, implicit corrective feedback (embedded correction)

student10: mine is a swimming pool with delphines or "tiburons" or something like that

later turn:

student00008 dice: no we have two different pictures i have the baby who is crying and you have the swimming pool with sharks

student000010 dice: jajajajajaja I´m stupid SHARKS

student00008 dice: jajajajajaajajajajaja

Example 2 shows students 5 and 6 jointly composing a complaint letter to a hotel with the information they had to negotiate in the previous task. Unlike in the vocabulary task or the pìcture comparison task,

students virtually ignore all lexical and morphosyntactic errors, since none seem to impede understanding. What is interesting here is the amount of TL produced in a short period of time and the ways in which students overtly mark turns. Perhaps if students were asked to analyze their open-ended tasks after production, there would be a more explicit focus on form, which could in turn provide more opportunities for modified TL output.

Example 2. Collaborative writing exercise- complaint letter

student6: ok ok, what a luxurious place so we have to do a complaint

student5: ok can you start with these?

student6: To the hotel management okok Dear hotel manager:

student5: i think you must give back our money because your hotel sis sooo dirty continue please

student6:beacuse your hotel is the more dirty and nasty thing than I ever seen I think is better sleeping with homeless I have a calf in the fire exit, a lot of damn babys crying all the day, the floor full of insects, the bed broken and the beer is so expensive, so I can not get drunk to forgent that I am here!continue please jaja

student5: and is sooo hot and i swimm in the pool because i can be kelled by sharks

student6: ok ok nicefor all this, I think that If you dont want us to buy a bat of baseball and broke your legs, please give our money back right now

student5: i think the hotel give back our money

student6: the must do it jajaja

student5: as fast as they can

student6: yes yes, they should be very afraid

student5: ok i think we finished the complaint

student6: yes me too

In response to research questions 3 and 4, while the students produced very elaborate responses to the collaborative writing task and reported high levels of satisfaction, the data yielded very few examples of modified output (such as the 'sharks' example). This may be due to the type of task, frequency of sessions, or confidence or politeness issues when it comes to correcting peers in conversation. Pellettieri (2000) suggests in her conclusions that all tasks be goal-oriented with a minimum of possible outcomes, and should include some vocabulary beyond the immediate level of the learners. Furthermore, a longitudinal study with an emphasis on production of learner corpora and subsequent learner reflection could improves Students´ focus on grammatical forms.

In response to research question 5, results from the anonymous five question survey measuring satisfaction with the class format and personal and academic use of synchronous and asynchronous computer mediated communication indicated that most Students preferred SCMC over FTF interactions, citing lower levels of anxiety and high ratings for format application to their language learning goals. Particularly worth noting was students´ reported frequency of use of chat in both social and academic contexts, confirming the relevance of the medium to students´ daily lives and learning goals. It would be interesting to ask in future surveys how frequently, if ever, students chat with friends or coworkers in English, and what their experiences are like.

5. CONCLUSIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

Preliminary findings based on the student satisfaction surveys indicate, as already mentioned, that the Students would be keen to include SCMC activities in the Second Language Acquisition classroom. This methodology could be applied to other languages taught at the UEM, since the necessary technology is already available to students and professors.

The data corroborates previous findings on the similarities between negotiation of meaning in SCMC and FTF formats, though the limited amount of modified output examples suggests that

changes to the types of tasks and frequency of SCMC sessions may be required if grammatical focus on form is the main objective of these exercises.

Since past research has also found that 'negotiation and noticing in chat in NNS found that ¾ of specific linguistic items noticed during chat interaction by learners were subsequently remembered in post-tests. (Shekary and Tahririan 2006, in Tudini 2010: 23)', it would be of interest to the researchers to try and replicate these findings here at the UEM Lab, utilizing both written (synchronous and asynchronous) and oral post-tests, which could further investigate 'the possibility of cross-modality transfer between SCMC use and oral language production' (Thorne et al., 2005: 374).

The Encounters are currently conceived as an assessment tool. But if the UEM Lab was to implement SCMC activities and make the transcripts available for students to reflect on, it could help the Students learn from their own mistakes, through peer to peer feedback and teacher to student feedback –whether it takes place during the class or afterwards, though it would significantly increase the workload for both students and teachers alike under the current system, and would need to be evaluated with respect to the rest of the language learning curriculum. Investigating their own work may also prove motivating for the students, increasing the amount of 'noticing' and theoretically augmenting the opportunities for modified output.

The data that could be potentially gathered (68x40 minute interactions) would conform a learner text corpus that could prove a very interesting tool to improve the design and evaluation of the UEM Lab English curriculum, by assessing the actual level of students in each unit and identifying troublesome grammar or vocabulary points that may need reinforcing (Nesselhauf, 2004 in Sinclair, 2004: 127).It could be of further use to give feedback during or after the class and it has the particularity of enabling mixed-presence groups, with some of the Students physically in the class and some connected remotely. This, however, could raise some issues related to the actual identity of the students participating in the class which would need to be addressed. Finally, some variables such as the length of time, the types of tasks required could be modified in order to better fit the purposes. Another research option would be the development of a longitudinal study: a control group -standard UEM Lab students- and an experimental group -students who supplement UEM Lab Encounters or classes with SCMC activities. Ideally, this study would also include several oral and written assessments, to see if increased frequency of sessions contributes to increased TL production and correction incorporation in student TL production. It would also be of interest to incorporate the WIMBA classroom conferencing application, in which students could be recorded as they chat, to monitor whether or not students produce modified correct output privately, instead of typing it in the chat.

REFERENCES

Nesselhauf, N., (2004) Learner Corpora and their Potential for Language Teaching. En Sinclair, J., (Ed.). *How to Use Corpora in Language Teaching* (pp.125-152) Amsterdam : John Benjamins,

Pellettieri, J., (2000) Negotiation in Cyberspace: The Role of Chatting in the Development of Grammatical Competence. En Warschauer, M., Kern, R., (Eds.), *Network-based Language Teaching: Concepts and Practice* (pp. 59-86) Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Thorne, S. Payne, S. (2005). Evolutionary Trajectories, Internet-mediated Expression, and Language Education. *CALICO Journal*, 22 (3), p-p 371-397.

Tudini, V. (2010). *Online Second Language Acquisition: Conversation Analysis of Online Chat.* London: Continuum International Publishing Group.