WCES-2010

Making a shift towards new CMC modes

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Received October 23, 2009; revised December 1, 2009; accepted January 13, 2010

Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of Turkish nonnative speakers of English (NNSs镞) concerning asynchronous mode of communication. Turkish nonnative speakers of English, native speakers of English (NSs) and nonnative speakers of English in different countries (NNSs〦) exchanged online e-mail messages in English on preset topics between February 2008 and May 2008. NNSs镞 regard the use of e-mail as a learning tool for acquiring cultural information and facilitating foreign language learning. This experience helped them understand the conventions of the target culture and language. They stated that other CMC tools need to be used in foreign language classrooms in the future.

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Keywords: Computer-mediated communication; asynchronous and synchronous communication; CMC tools; intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is conducted through computer networks between individuals who may be far away from one another (Herring, 1996). CMC is achieved via CMC tools. Earlier modes of CMC tools are newsgroups, electronic bulletin boards, and listserv/mailing lists, which are text-based. Newer modes of CMC include instant messaging (IM), voice chat, 3D online games, and social networking sites, which make use of textual, audio, visual, and graphical information (Xie, 2008).

Teachers and students have shown interest in the use of e-mail to foster interaction, to find partners from different cultures, and to help learning (Keranen & Bayyurt, 2006). The use of technology, especially the use of e-mails, in educational settings is widespread in most parts of the world. This will be the first study of CMC acts conducted in Turkey, with participants from Turkey and from other countries.

CMC may be synchronous or asynchronous and may take place on a one-to-one basis or one-to-many basis (Baron, 2004). In synchronous environments, such as chat rooms and online instant messaging systems (e.g., MSN and ICQ), all parties communicate in real time (Lotherington & Xu, 2004). In asynchronous environments, communicators are not online and available at the same time or place. Participants have the opportunity to compose, send, and contribute to ongoing messages. (Montero, Watts & García-Carbonell, 2007). Asynchronous environments include e-mail, bulletin boards, group conference folders, and listservs. The current study is focused on the use of one asynchronous CMC tool, namely e-mail.
CMC tools help to develop L2 proficiency through experiential learning, reflection, and collaboration (Eastmond, 1998). Therefore, the range of applications of CMC to teaching and learning at all levels has continued to grow, and the body of research on the use of CMC has also grown (Chen & Chiu, 2008). A CMC environment leads to increased interaction and negotiation of meaning (Leahy, 2004). Learners share personal opinions or experiences and regard CMC as a medium for socializing and exchanging information (Romanoff, 2003). As a result, CMC can be made an integral part of foreign language classes (Vandergriff, 2006). Familiarity with CMC technology has become essential for foreign language teachers who wish to integrate technology with other classroom activities (Matsumura, 2004).

In this study, I focus on e-mail for educational and cultural purposes. E-mail communication in the foreign language classroom is a rich new form of communication, at once creative, corrective, and social (Vinagre, 2008; Paulus, 2007). Experience shows that learners have positive attitudes toward using e-mail; they feel comfortable communicating by e-mail, especially if their partners are social counterparts (Waldeck, Kearney & Plax, 2001).

2. Methodology

This study addresses one research question: How do nonnative English speaking Turkish university students (NNSsT) perceive asynchronous and synchronous modes of CMC in a context of foreign language learning and cross-cultural communication?

The participants in this study were 19 volunteers aged 18-22 in their English preparatory year at Istanbul Commerce University in Turkey. There were 8 male and 11 female students from various majors. A 3-point Likert type background questionnaire in English, developed by Shin (2006), Warshauer, (1996b) and Lee (2004), was administered to NNSsT prior to the study. This background questionnaire provided information on their use of computers in general and their expertise in various applications, such as e-mail.

NNSsT were called the “Gold Group” at Istanbul Commerce University based on the results of the “Proficiency and Placement Exam” held at the beginning of the fall term, 2007. Their scores varied between 47 and 60 (out of 100), which were higher than those of two other groups, namely “Silver” and “Bronze.” Beginning in October, 2007, these NNSsT studied English throughout the academic year, starting, at the A1 level (the lowest English proficiency level according to Common European Framework, CEF). By the end of the spring term in May, 2008, the official final exam was prepared and administered according to the objectives of materials the learners had gone over for a year.

There were two other nonnative speakers of English who participated in the study. Their ages were 18 and 20. One was a Spanish male freshman who was between the B1 and B2 level based on CEF according to test results at his university. His double major was education and psychology. A female freshman EFL student at a university in Greece also participated. Her level was between B1 and B2. They exchanged e-mails in English with their NNSsT and NS partners.

The native speaker group was from the United States. They were three Foreign Language Education freshmen at Georgia State University in Atlanta, two males and one female. Their ages were 20, 22, and 40. They likewise exchanged e-mails with NNSsT, NNSsO and other NSs.

To start with, I sent NNSsT an introductory e-mail message in Turkish explaining how to join the Yahoo group that I had formed for e-mail exchanges. I sent e-mails to the professors of NSs and NNSsO and asked them to help me find participants for the study. Next, NSs and NNSsO sent me their e-mail addresses, and I sent them an introductory message in English asking them to join the Yahoo group “iticugold1.” Later, a Topic Survey including seventeen topics was sent to all participants by e-mails to determine which topics the participants would like to write about during their e-mail exchanges in English. Nine discussion topics out of seventeen were chosen. The most popular topics were friendship/friends, education, sports, leisure and work, nature, eating and food customs, music, movies, and holidays. These weekly discussion topics were selected from the studies of Keranen and Bayyurt (2006), Pinkman (2005), and Thompson, Teo, Vivien, & Lim (2000). Each discussion topic was accompanied by three or four discussion prompts taken from Web sites and young adult blogs, such as teenmag.com, cosmogirl.com, seventeen.com, and fashion-mag.com. All participants were asked to discuss these topics each week between February 2008 and May 2008, without any instructor intervention in their e-mail exchanges.

Also, a questionnaire developed by Warshauer (1996b) was used to assess NNSsT attitudes towards the use of computers for communication, particularly as an aid to cross-cultural understanding and English language learning.
Finally, a post-study questionnaire was used to assess NNS’s English language proficiency and to gather information about their experiences when exchanging e-mails with NSs and other NNSs in the study. This questionnaire was adapted from Beauvois and Eledge (1996), and Lee (2004).

Finally, in interviews, NNSs were invited to reflect on their e-mail experiences and were asked if their experiences contributed to their English language proficiency and/or cross-cultural understanding. The interview questions were adapted from Lee (2004). I had also prepared a Turkish version of the interview questions in case any of the NNSs had difficulty understanding them in English.

3. Results and Discussion

The participants found working with computers to be useful in terms of communication and English language learning. Communicating with other people via computers gave them a chance to practice English and experience the need for authentic language. Such findings are consistent with O’Dowd (2007). Participants considered the use of e-mail and the Internet to be a good way to learn about people and other cultures, consistent with Hawisher and Moran (1997). E-mail was also considered to be a tool for learning, and participants contended that writing e-mails encourages creativity, consistent with Erkan (2004). They did not consider working with e-mails to be frustrating. Their responses indicate that the participants were eager to work with computers, meet new people, and practice English, consistent with Bretag (2006) and Hawisher & Moran (1997).

NNSs thought of CMC as a new opportunity to practice English. Moreover, three participants mentioned that these exchanges also resulted in meeting new people and learning about other cultures, as indicated in Paulus (2007).

Furthermore, NNSs claimed that they felt confident when interacting with other NNSs in the study. On the other hand, they agreed that they experienced some anxiety when interacting with NSs and NNSs. NNSs did not find writing to other NNSs difficult, because they assumed, as Fedderholt (2001) also indicated, that their partners did not share the linguistic mastery or cultural norms of NSs. In fact, perceptions about NSs may be a reason for limited output of CMC acts. In the post-study questionnaire, NNSs claimed that they felt some anxiety when interacting with NSs and even with NNSs because of their discomfort with certain native-like routines and their unfamiliarity with aspects of social structure and values, as Erton (2007) pointed out. Although NNSs stated that they were not comfortable communicating with NSs, the number of messages showed that they had more exchanges with NSs than with NNSs. They believed that these exchanges were useful for them and their partners; however, they were not certain that NSs and NNSs had liked the experience.

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They reported that the discussion topics were an important stimulus to communication. They strongly agreed that participating in the study was a positive experience for them, and that the exchanges contributed to their writing skills, as Lightfood (2006) also reported. They felt the need to monitor their use of grammar and vocabulary, and believed that e-mails also helped them to understand texts better, as Hoshi (2003) also reported. However, they said that they had difficulty finding time for reading and responding to the e-mails.

NNSs answered eleven questions during the interview sessions. The questions were prepared in Turkish and then translated into English. NNSs reported enjoying the e-mail exchanges because they led to exchanges of information about different cultures. They considered them useful in terms of English language learning, self-expression, reading, and writing, as also reported in Hoshi (2003). However, three participants asserted that they did not gain anything at all or give enough time to the exchanges. They claimed that the responsibility was a burden for them, and they thought that they were not proficient enough in English to exchange messages in this way.

The majority of participants reported that the most valuable experiences were learning about other cultures, discussing various topics, correcting their mistakes, and learning from one another. Six NNSs reported that the hardest part of the exchanges was writing about the topic of the week. In addition, ten NNSs stated that providing discussion topics with prompts made it easier to write about the topics in detail because the prompts provided needed guidance.

Regarding their experience with NSs during online e-mail exchanges in English, most NNSs said that they learned some conventions of colloquial English and new words. NSs helped them with their English. On the other hand, most NNSs realized that they were not proficient enough in English when communicating with NSs about complex issues. In contrast, they said that they felt secure when exchanging e-mails with NNSs, because English is
not their mother tongue. Then they were able to correct one another’s mistakes and engage in a form of peer tutoring, as also reported in previous studies (Akayoğlu & Altun, 2008; Fernández-García & Arbelaitz, 2003).

When NNSsT participants exchanged messages with peers in their own group, they felt they were most comfortable in expressing themselves because they had a common background, and they helped one another when necessary, consistent with Vinagre (2008), who found that L2 peers work together to help their partners. However, two NNSsT asserted that they preferred to address NSs and NNSsO rather than NNSsT peers. Nine participants stated that they learned lots from NSs and NNSsO. The only problem was the low number of responses they got from NNSsO, who participated infrequently in the exchanges even though they were informed in advance about the weekly topics.

NNSsT expressed their opinions about the discussion topics. Four did not find the topics interesting or motivating and when they were confronted with such topics they offered to change them. These participants did not contribute much to the e-mail exchanges. On the other hand, most NNSsT approved of the topics because they led to exchanges of information and because they were of interest to young people. The use of technology for online collaboration was useful according to the participants because they were able to reflect on their own and others’ ideas and cultures and because they were able to practice English. The finding is consistent with earlier studies (Möllering, 2000; Ware & Kramsch, 2005). Most NNSsT felt that the e-mail exchanges helped them in terms of reading, writing, oral expression, and comprehension. But they added that improving their level of English was not the only reason they would want to continue the exchanges.

4. Conclusion

NNSsT regarded the use of e-mail as a beneficial tool for learning about people and other cultures, gaining cultural information, and comparing their way of life with other participants from different countries. The participants practiced L2 and negotiated meaning by discussing topics of common interest. They asserted that these exchanges improved their English in terms of word choice, grammar, and e-mail conventions. They had the chance to practice various patterns and modes of discourse. Also, they were able to engage in peer tutoring with NSs and NNSsO, enabling them correct one another’s mistakes. Finally, they agreed that the experience helped them to understand the conventions of the target culture and language. NNSsT stated that CMC tools should be used in foreign language classrooms in the future.

The present study has certain limitations. The main limitation is the sample size; with a larger number of participants, normalization of the data would be possible. The participants produced a limited number of e-mail exchanges. Their interest in a specific topic may have affected how they reacted to it, and what they wrote about it. They also asserted that the time allowed for exchanging messages on a discussion topic was rather short. Another limitation is the loss of interest in e-mail exchanges. The participants’ enthusiasm for writing messages was high in the beginning, but the number and the length of e-mail exchanges decreased over time, as also reported in Stockwell (2003). Others mentioned that CMC often became extra work when the other participants did not participate in the e-mail exchanges. Most participants did not put enough effort into writing messages, a problem they attributed to the need to do other school work, to exams, and also to the lack of a deep understanding of correspondents’ backgrounds. Their understanding may have suffered from a lack of social or linguistic clues and from implied rather than explicit messages coming from different backgrounds. Their L1s were different, and the L2 language proficiency of NNSsT and NNSsO was limited compared to the fluency of NSs.

This study supports the integration of CMC into foreign language classrooms for achievement of the rich input and output that is necessary for learning L2. However, one must pay attention to low levels of participation and the indifference of some participants to the project. Moreover, it is important that learners receive timely responses to their e-mail messages. I suggest that other researchers make use of a smaller number of discussion topics over a longer period of time. Participants should know beforehand what they are going to write about and internalize the discussion topics gradually as they respond to other correspondents. Instructors should not interrupt ongoing interactions by providing new and possibly distracting topics.

It might be useful in future research to explore the CMC acts of participants at various levels of language proficiency. Because of their scarcity in the research, there should be more study of NNS-NNS exchanges. Participants’ preconceptions about other cultures, including cultural stereotypes, may affect the way participants write e-mails. Therefore, it might facilitate communication if instructors encourage NNSs to ask freely for
clarification and otherwise help them to free themselves from prejudices they may have about NSs of the target language.

E-mail is becoming obsolete among learners in the current study. Learners now prefer new modes of CMC that include textual, audio, visual, and graphical information. They want to use multiple modes of CMC and switch from one to another. Synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication may be used and compared in future research. Researchers in this field might consider investigating the use of synchronous media, which are used increasingly outside formal learning settings.

References


