

Computer-mediated communication and second language acquisition

During the summer semester 1999 an international email project was set up between students studying law (and German), and European business (and German) at the Nottingham Trent University, and students studying law and business (with English) at German partner institutions.

Two broad lines of inquiry informed the framework of the project: First, can CMC facilitate the acquisition of a) content and b) language and second, which motivational factors can be traced amongst the group members?

In order to gain insights into the usefulness of CMC in the acquisition process of subject-specific content and language, all email exchanges were copied to the tutor. Students followed collaborative tasks¹ which were intended to facilitate negotiation and a comparison between the two countries. Students were asked to communicate approximately 50% in L1 and 50% in L2 in order to guarantee some parity between partners. Since students discussed complex issues related to their main course of study, i.e., law or business, some communication in L1 was seen helpful to express subtleties, but also to serve as a model text of subject-specific language for the partner. Students were seen as 'specialists' in their respective L1 and asked to correct their partners' L2 communication. At the end of the project the British group was assessed in the form of a written report and an oral discussion.

The pre- and post-project questionnaires² aimed to elicit general information, e.g., the participants' age, mothertongue, access to computers at home, and very specific information aimed to give insights into motivational factors and attitudes as perceived by the students themselves.

Some results of the project were reported in conference proceedings (Leahy, 1999 [business group]) and 2 articles (Leahy 2000 [motivational factors, all participants], Leahy, 2001 [law group]). Some interesting findings emerged.

Of all participating students, 90% stated that they enjoyed using email, a result which matches that of a study of the US population where email was named as the most used function (90%) of the internet³. However, even though all participants viewed the project positively from the outset, a shift in attitude developed for some during the course of it. The influence of the predominant previous learning modes may have a detrimental effect on the introduction of new learning frameworks, i.e., the use of the computer. In extreme cases this may lead to a self-denial of learning opportunities (Leahy, 2000).

Some computer-inherent motivation could also be observed: 43% felt that their concentration periods were longer, and 47% acknowledged total absorption when using the computer.

Instrumental and integrative motivation could be confirmed as influencing factors amongst the participants of this project.

¹ The different tasks and some of the information provided to students can be accessed on the web at <http://dml.ntu.ac.uk/~cl/Clemail.htm>

² The questionnaires may be accessed through the project's title page at <http://dml.ntu.ac.uk/~cl/Clemail.htm>

³ Nie and Erbring, 2000

Students made progress acquiring content and language, even though to varying degrees. To a much higher degree than any classroom setting would allow, the one-to-one partnerships enabled progress at an individual level. This is documented in effective examples of error correction and discussion of language usage as well as in discussion of content (Leahy, 2001). The relative open framework enabled students to negotiate their own working patterns within each partnership. Two very advanced language learners (both with C-test scores over 80%) chose to write mainly in their respective L2 while still correcting each other's language errors and discussing language usage. Subtleties in content could be addressed in L2 without difficulty. On the other side of the spectrum, some chose to make less use of language corrections and needed the support of L1 to express more complex issues. However, the individual approach, i.e., the communication between two partners produced some impressive examples of bilingual negotiation and collaborative construction of knowledge.

Overall, this international email project produced very encouraging results regarding CMC as a powerful language learning mode. Several outcomes could be informative for others wishing to engage their students in international email projects: A tailor-made framework is paramount to its success, which also needs to take students' preferred learning modes and attitudes towards the machine into consideration. Organisational difficulties, e.g., different teaching times in different countries and maintenance of the indispensable presence of a committed contact person at each participating institution should not be underestimated.

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