

INTERACTION IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM AND IN THE FORUM FROM A LEARNER'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

One of the main problems teachers face in the foreign language classroom is low student participation. Nowadays, with the advent of computer mediated communication (CMC), students have at their disposal another medium to communicate and participate in their language learning process. But what is their attitude towards this medium? Our study investigated the perception of preservice English language teachers of the interaction that occurs both in the classroom and in the forum. Two groups of students between the ages of 20 and 40 responded to a questionnaire designed ad hoc. The results obtained from the analysis of the data suggest that CMC acts as a complement to the language learning process.

KEY WORDS: Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), forum, language learning, participation, feedback, preservice English teachers.

RESUMEN

Uno de los principales problemas al que se enfrentan los profesores de una lengua extranjera es la escasa participación de los alumnos en el aula. Hoy en día, con la incorporación de la Comunicación Mediada por Ordenador (CMO), los estudiantes tienen a su disposición otro medio para comunicarse y participar en el proceso de aprendizaje de la lengua. ¿Pero cuál es su actitud hacia este medio? Nuestro estudio ha investigado la percepción de futuros maestros de inglés de la interacción que se da en la clase y en el foro. Dos grupos de estudiantes de edades comprendidas entre los 20 y los 40 años rellenaron un cuestionario diseñado ad hoc. Los resultados obtenidos de los análisis de los datos sugieren que la CMO actúa como un complemento para el proceso de aprendizaje de la lengua.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Comunicación Mediada por Ordenador (CMO), foro, aprendizaje de la lengua, participación, *feedback*, futuros maestros de inglés.

1. INTRODUCTION

The extensive development of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) over the last decades has led to the emergence of new alternatives in language teaching. Most of the research carried out in this field has shown that people behave differently when communicating online compared to a face-to-face situation. People show fewer inhibitions, display less social anxiety, and reduce their public self-awareness (Matheson and Zanna; Siegel et al.; Sproull and Kiesler). The illusion of anonymity that language learners experience when communicating via computer is an important element in reducing anxiety. As Wallace has explained, "Even when we are not exactly anonymous on the net, the physical distance and low social presence make us feel less inhibited, less likely to be detected" (139).

However, in the study by Arnáiz and Ortega, it was detected that students appear to be as comfortable when participating in the classroom as when participating in the forum or discussion board. The study by the aforementioned authors, like the one we present here, was carried out with preservice language teachers attending a blended course, that is, while students attended face-to-face classes at the university, they used Moodle as a support tool.¹ In this type of blended course, the teacher asks the students in class to consult Moodle for details of the assignments they have to do, for the keys to certain exercises or for any particular link that has been uploaded and to which they must go in order to be able to follow the classroom sessions adequately. Furthermore, Moodle is the medium used to send assignments and receive them, once they have been marked by the teacher. Besides, in the discussion board, students have the chance to interact and give their opinions about the topics proposed either by the teacher or their fellow students. Usually, the topics chosen are a continuation of the topics brought up in class or, the reverse, sometimes the topics brought up in the discussion board are taken to the classroom and a debate ensues. In this way, the teacher establishes an inevitable link between the classroom and the virtual environment.

As Leffa (39) explains, mainstream theories in foreign language teaching tend to focus either on the individual (addressing issues such as learning styles) or the community (including methodologies such as collaborative learning or study teams). The arrival of computers in foreign language instruction seem to have contributed further to this dichotomy, highlighting the differences between a student working alone in front of the computer or interacting with others in a community.

One of the main motivations for doing this research is the belief that an emphasis on either the individual or on the community leads to a reductionist approach. Our suggestion, then, is to stress the point at which they intersect. In order for the learner to interact with other learners, he or she has to do something (action) through some kind of mediation (tool). Computer Assisted Language Learn-

¹ Moodle was designed on the basis of various pedagogical principles ("social constructionist pedagogy") to help educators create effective online learning communities).

ing (CALL) brings a new paradigm to the field of language teaching, giving priority neither to the student nor to the teacher, but on the relation created between them in the learning process (Leffa 40). Therefore, language teachers need to realistically assess the implications of using computers as another tool for language learning, and to consider the changing role of the teacher to that of “mentor and consultant” (Fernández Carballo-Calero 7) and, consequently, the inevitable adjustments of the relationship between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves.

Some of the key aspects of the relationships established in the classroom between teachers and students and among students are, undoubtedly, the reaction of students to the teacher’s responses, students’ expectations as regards feedback not only from the teacher but also from their classmates (peer feedback), and the feelings of closeness students have to their teacher and to their classmates. It is these aspects that we will explore in this paper with the aim of shedding light on the area and contributing to increasing the knowledge related to classroom reality.

Behind all the perceptions and feelings mentioned above lies one single concept: *feedback*. Feedback has been demonstrated to play an important role in instruction (Mory; Topping) with many learning theorists positing that it is essential to students’ learning (Driscoll). In general, instructional feedback provides students with information that either confirms what they already know or changes their existing knowledge (Mory 745-746). Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton (62) note that feedback which is meaningful, of high quality, and timely, helps students become cognitively engaged in the content under study, as well as in the learning environment in which they are studying. Furthermore, feedback may be even more important in online environments than in traditional classrooms (McVay-Lynch). Due to a lack of feedback, students taking part in online courses are more likely to disconnect from the material or environment than students attending face-to-face courses (Ko and Rossen). While instructor feedback is often cited as the catalyst for student learning in online environments, lack of feedback is most often cited as the reason for students’ withdrawing from online courses. The criticality of feedback in online environments has led Notar, Wilson, and Ross to make a number of recommendations to increase its effectiveness. Specifically, the authors call for feedback that is “diagnostic and prescriptive, formative and iterative, and involving both peers and group assessment” (646). According to these authors, feedback should be aimed at improving the skills needed for the construction of end products more than on the end products themselves. While students agree that feedback needs to contain a summative aspect, they also hope for formative comments. As Mory reports, students expect feedback in an online environment to be: 1) prompt and timely; 2) ongoing formative (during online discussions) and summative (about grades); 3) constructive, supportive, and substantive; 4) specific, objective, and individual; and 5) consistent. However, to attain this level of feedback in online courses, instructors must invest a significant amount of time and effort. In order to meet students’ needs for immediate and ongoing feedback, an instructor would have to be online almost continually (Dunlap), a suggestion that is impractical and incongruent with the types of independent learning being promoted through online courses.

One possible solution is for instructors to capitalize on peer feedback as an instructional strategy, requiring students to provide feedback to one another while simultaneously encouraging greater levels of interaction. In this way, instructors could be spared from evaluating large numbers of student postings, yet still provide ample instances of formative and summative feedback. Students, on the other hand, would still receive the feedback they require in order to assess their progress in the online environment.

Peer feedback provides students with a greater awareness of audience, more practice in understanding as well as empathetic support to the process of writing (Rosalia and Llosa 322). The use of peer feedback in an online learning environment offers several advantages which include: increasing the timeliness of feedback, offering new learning opportunities for both givers and receivers of feedback, and humanizing the environment. By asking students to provide each other with constructive feedback, instructors are inviting them to participate in each other's learning and thus take advantage of a greater understanding and appreciation for their peers' experiences and perspectives (Connolly et al. 355). Moreover, by engaging students in the feedback process, meaningful interaction increases—interaction with fellow students and interaction with the content of the discussion postings—which subsequently promotes students' satisfaction with the course (Richardson and Swan) and with the instructor (Sherrya, Fulford and Zhang). If used effectively, both instructor and peer feedback may increase the quality of discourse, and thus the quality of learning, in the virtual environment (Ertmer et al. 415).

However, using peer feedback as part of the learning process has some challenges: 1) overcoming students' anxiety about giving and receiving feedback (especially negative feedback) and 2) ensuring reliability. According to Palloff and Pratt, "the ability to give meaningful feedback, which helps others think about the work they have produced, is not a naturally acquired skill" (123). In terms of implementation, Topping (256) points out that both assessors and assessees might experience anxiety about the process. Furthermore, Topping notes that learners may perceive the peer feedback they receive to be invalid, leading them to refuse to accept negative feedback as accurate. It is still unclear whether challenges related to giving and receiving peer feedback in a traditional environment will be exacerbated or mitigated when applied within the online environment. Tunison and Noonan (506, 508) report that many students find it difficult to communicate complex ideas in an online environment and that their ability to express their questions clearly and comprehend detailed explanations is limited by the lack of face-to-face interaction.

While feedback has been demonstrated to be an effective strategy in traditional learning environments, limited research has been conducted that examines the role or impact of feedback concerning online learning environments in which learners construct their own knowledge, based on prior experiences and peer interaction. The purpose of the exploratory study presented in this paper is to help to fill this gap by examining students' reactions to the feedback they get from their teacher and from their classmates as well as their preferences. Strongly connected with the concept of feedback is the emotional distance between students and teachers and among students, and this distance will also be analysed. We focus on asynchronous

CMC, such as threaded discussion, in contrast to synchronous CMC (e.g., real-time chat). Moreover, the aim of the study is to compare these students' reactions and perceptions in the online environment with those in the classroom context.

2. METHOD

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

The setting for this investigation was a B2 level EFL (English as a Foreign Language Classroom) at the Teacher Training College belonging to the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. The language levels were established following The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR).²

There were 46 student participants who ranged in age between 20 and 40 ($M = 24,65$; $SD = 6,499$); 34 (73%) were female and 12 (26,1%) were male.

INSTRUMENT

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire designed ad hoc. Participants were asked to indicate on a five-point **Likert scale** their degree of agreement on 7 statements related to the two learning contexts mentioned above. They had to respond whether they Disagreed Strongly or Disagreed, Had no opinion/ Felt Neutral, Agreed or Strongly Agreed (1-5).

PROCEDURE

The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the students, and participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were given 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analysed and transferred to the statistical analysis software package SPSS 16.0 to calculate descriptive statistics and the Pearson correlations for the different variables. Different Student's *t*-tests were also conducted.

² A guideline used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe. The 2008 study by Martínez Baztán has addressed correspondence with the American Council on the teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Guidelines. Thus, B1 would correspond to Intermediate Mid and Intermediate High, B2 would correspond to Intermediate High and Advanced Low, and C1, to Advanced Mid and Advanced High.

3. When I participate in the forum, I expect the teacher to give me some feedback	.539**	.396**	-			
4. When I participate in the forum, I expect my classmates to give me some feedback	.529**	.527**	.539**	-		
5. The forum has made me feel closer to the teacher	.305*	.244.	.409**	.468**	-	
6. The forum has made me feel closer to my classmates	.162	.149	.174	.437**	.764**	-
7. I feel that the forum has been a positive experience for me	.256	.236	.193	.486**	.361*	.379**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

4. DISCUSSION

On analysis of the data, we observe that students consider the virtual environment as a positive aspect in the learning process.

In the first place, we see that students pay similar attention to the corrections made by the teacher in the two learning contexts analysed. This means that the forum, in spite of still being a relatively new learning environment for them, is not seen as a much better option than the classroom context, or does not attract students' attention more than the classroom sessions. This result is also evidence of the fact that the figure of the teacher remains intact in the new context.

Secondly, the data show that the students have a clear preference for their teacher's feedback. This result confirms what other studies have indicated, i.e. that students usually prefer to get an answer from their teacher rather than from their classmates and that they usually find it difficult to trust other language learners.

Thirdly, according to our results, the forum has played a more significant role in helping students feel closer to the teacher than to their classmates. This result is not consistent with previous research, which has highlighted the impact of CALL both on the relationship between teachers and students and among students (Leffa).

Lastly, the data allow us to see vital associations between the different contexts dealt with in our paper and also between the different agents or participants in the learning process. The high degree of correlations between the variables suggests that students consider CMC as an integral part of the learning process, and not as an add-on to their course.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Our study, although exploratory, shows that students feel that the computer complements the classroom. CALL does not seem to be aimed at replacing either the teacher or the textbooks. The basic idea is that we need tools to improve

the quality of the learning process, to make it more varied and compatible with different learning styles and CALL is doubtless one of them.

CALL has often been described in terms of dichotomies: tutor vs. tool or individual vs. group of learners. These dichotomies can be referred to as the “or” approach, where either the individual or the group is discarded, which is an obvious impossibility, since both are equally essential. Another possibility is to emphasize both the individual and the community, on the basis that we may refer to it as the ‘and’ approach. Again, this is questionable because nothing is left out and may well result in redundancy. What we suggest here is that neither the individual nor the community should be emphasized, but the point at which they coincide.

However, it is important to underline that any implications should be interpreted in light of the following limitations. The first one is imposed by the instrument used in this study, which may not appropriately capture participants’ perceptions and feelings and may therefore serve as an important limitation. The second limitation refers to generalisability, as the number of participants was not very high (46). The third one is determined by the level of the participants, who had a B2 level of English. It would be interesting to analyse how reactions and perceptions change using subjects who have a lower (B1) or a higher (C1) level.

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