Multimodal Computer Mediated Communication

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Introduction

Using Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) learners and tutors at a distance can interact individually or as a group. These interactions can take place either simultaneously (Synchronous CMC), such as text-chat and videoconferencing, or subsequently (Asynchronous CMC), such as email, blog and forum. While some of these interactions would be realised in a single mode, such as email, voice-mail, forum posts, etc., others could be multimodal, such as emails including pictures, videos and hyperlinks, Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) that allow text/audio/video communication, application sharing, voting and whiteboard or virtual worlds with text/audio communication and graphical representation of users (avatars) in a virtual space.

CMC Research in Language Learning

Studies in CMC for language learning have focused on either Asynchronous CMC (ACMC) (e.g., Hauck, 2007; Ware and O’Dowd, 2008) or Synchronous CMC (SCMC). SCMC studies on written communication reported equal participation (Warschauer, 1996). It was also observed to be similar to speaking (Tudini, 2003; Sotillo, 2000) which led to an investigation of the effects of text-based SCMC on the development of foreign language speaking skills. Positive results were reported by Payne and Whitney (2002) and Satar and Özdener (2008). Many scholars to date have further examined written SCMC from a variety of perspectives for foreign language development (Kötter, 2003; O’Rourke, 2005; Pellettiere, 2000; Satar, 2007; Smith, 2003).

As the internet bandwidth increased and became widely accessible, synchronous voice-based communication also became feasible. However, research on synchronous voice CMC in relation to foreign language learning remained relatively limited (Hampel and Baber, 2003; Hauck and Hampel, 2005; Lamy, 2004; Özdener and Satar, 2008; Satar and Özdener, 2008). Research on video SCMC (Jauregi ve Banados, 2008; O’Dowd, 2000; Wang, 2004a, 2004b, 2007) and CMC in virtual worlds (Peterson, 2006) is even scarcer.

Theories of Language Learning

Several Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories support the use of CMC for FL learning purposes, particularly psycholinguistic theories such as Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1983). Based on these theories a variety of analytical units have been utilised to evaluate the potential of SCMC, such as Negotiation for Meaning (Varonis and Gass, 1985) and Recasts and Self-corrections (Lai and Zhao, 2006).

Recently the socio-cultural theory for SLA has also gained momentum in studying CMC interaction (Darhower, 2007; Gánem Gutiérrez, 2006; Lamy, 2007). Socio-cultural theory assumes that cognitive development depends on the social context in which it takes place and is a result of meaningful interactions between the learner and the mentor (either the teacher or a more knowledgeable peers) (Lantolf and Appel, 1994).

It underpins that language learning takes place “not through interaction but in interaction.” (Ellis, 2000, p. 209). It also takes the social, affective and general cognitive needs of the learner into consideration within a notion of ‘whole person’ where learning occurs via “engaging with and attributing meaning to the world, including self in it” (Boot and Hodgson, 1987, p.6).

Social Presence

In terms of the underlying notions of socio-cultural theory of SLA, that (1) learning occurs through interaction, (2) interactional discourse outweighs transactional discourse and (3) a consideration of learners’ social and affective needs, ‘social presence’ could be considered to have a substantial role in FL learning. The term social presence is defined as “the salience of the other” and “the consequent salience of their interpersonal interactions” in mediated communication (Short, Williams and Christie, 1976) and as ‘a sense of being together’ (Hwang and Park, 2007). It is argued that as the perception of social presence increases, interpersonal relationship among learners will also increase (Walter and Burgoon, 1992 in Bozkaya, 2008).

Positive correlations between social presence and satisfaction in distance education are reported in Richardson and Swan (2003).

Batstone, Stickler, Duensing and Heins (2007) and Yamada and Akahori (2007) investigated the role
of social presence in FL learning in the CMC context. The former used a social presence framework developed by Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer (2001) for analysis and in their conclusions emphasised the need for better analytical schemes of social presence in synchronous spoken conferences. Yamada and Akahori (2007), on the other hand, found that interlocutor’s image was “most effective in promoting consciousness of presence” and voice was found to serve as reinforcement to image. Their participants also reported that when their partner’s image was visible they felt more comfortable in communicating, because they “can see the partner’s personality and non-verbal behaviors.”

As pointed out by Hwang and Park (2007) the main challenge for studies investigating social presence is measurement. Various questionnaire items have been developed in order to measure perceived social presence, but not much has been done to develop a measurement schedule based on actual data. One such tool is the social presence template (Rourke et al., 2001) developed for the analysis of interactions among learners in written asynchronous online communication.

**Discussion**

As new modes of computer mediated communication become accessible, such as videoconferencing and virtual worlds, the need to extent research to include other modes of CMC for foreign language learning purposes also increases. Although there is quite a lot of research on the effects of SCMC, many of these are limited to written communication only and research on audio, video and virtual worlds seem to be insufficient. There is also inadequate amount of research that explores social presence, its potential for foreign language learning and the relationships between the two.

This poster presentation aimed to outline a second year PhD study being carried out by the author at The Open University, UK, Faculty of Education and Language Studies under the supervision of Prof. James A. Coleman, Dr. Ursula Stickler and Dr. Barbara Heins. From a socio-cultural perspective to language learning, the research focuses on how social presence is established between dyads in online videoconferencing and how it can be analysed and measured. An analysis template is expected to be the outcome of this exploratory study which could then benefit research that explores social presence in other modes of online communication as well as the links between social presence and language learning.

**References**


