

Learning English in the classroom and in the forum: what is university students' perception of their interaction in these two contexts?

Patricia Arnaiz Castro

Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria y

E-mail: parnaiz@dde.ulpgc.es

José Luis Ortega Martín

Universidad de Granada

E-mail: ortegam@ugr.es

Abstract

Studies on Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) have reported several benefits for language learning. CMC, for example, does not demand for competition and provides for more equal participation. It also enables introverted learners to interact with others.

The type of CMC system our research deals with is the one which occurs at different times, namely, asynchronous. Our study investigates the perception of university English language learners of their participation in CMC and their perception of their participation in the classroom. Hybrid courses like the one our research focuses on, consisting of in-class time and online time may provide the most beneficial results, combining the advantages of both types of instruction delivery. However, there are few empirical studies to date which have assessed the effectiveness of hybrid online language courses. 46 students between the ages of 20 and 40 responded to a questionnaire designed *ad hoc* on their perceptions of these two contexts for interaction.

Participants were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale their degree of agreement on 16 statements related with the two learning contexts mentioned above. The data were analysed and transferred to SPSS 16.0 to calculate descriptive statistics and correlations between the different variables. The results obtained suggest that the CMC acts as a complement to the language learning process.

Our research can contribute to a better understanding of the implications of integrating technology in the learning process.

KEYWORDS

Computer Mediated Communication, forum, discussion board, language learning, participation

1. Introduction

How successful students are as language learners greatly depends on their ability to use effective learning strategies. MacIntyre and Noels (1996:373) define learning strategies as "Steps taken to facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information". They listed 50 language learning strategies and asked 138 students to rate these strategies according to four categories. One of these categories was anxiety. These authors found that the most anxiety provoking strategies were the following: start L2 conversation, encourage myself to speak when afraid, look for conversation, find ways to use L2 and ask questions in L2. At the same time as students rated these strategies as being the ones to make them feel uncomfortable they also rated them as highly effective. Students knew perfectly well that the best way of improving their proficiency was to practice speaking or writing in the target language. However, what is stopping them is an acute sense of self-awareness. What seems to be necessary, then, is finding the best contexts for students to feel at ease to use their English and interact.

The extensive development of CMC in the last decades has led to the emergence of new alternatives in language teaching. Research 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 (Kiesler et al., 1984; Siegler et al., 1986; Matheson & Zanna, 1988; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991;). Bradley & Lomicka (2000:362) talk of the computer as "a shield from being on-stage". In an educational framework teachers have long reported that student participation in discussion boards is greater than in classroom discussions (Starr, 1997: 56). Less proficient students are allowed to have more think time, and encouraged to generate more syntactically complex language (Sotillo, 2000 and Kim and Risel, 2008).

The illusion of anonymity that language learners experience when communicating via computer is an important element in reducing anxiety. As Wallace (1999:139) 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".

Based on these findings, it seems that a virtual learning environment may constitute a more relaxed and stress free atmosphere than a classroom. The low level of inhibition would be advantageous in foreign language learning, as it would result in increased language production. But as each specific learning situation must be looked at in a critical light and described and evaluated in relation to specific social contexts, our study seeks to explore and compare the perceptions students have of their participation in the foreign language classroom and in asynchronous CMC (forum or discussion board); furthermore we examine the perceptions the students have of the role CMC has in their learning process. The characteristics of the course chosen allows us to have access to this information; it is a blended course, that is, the students attended face-to-face classes at the university, and they used Moodle as a support tool. In the discussion board, students had the chance to interact and give their opinions about the topics proposed either by the teachers or their partners. There seems to be no doubt that 'properly designed' hybrid courses (Presby, 2001), combining the advantages of both types of instruction delivery, provide the most beneficial results. However, there are not many empirical studies to date which have assessed the effectiveness of hybrid online language courses.

2. Method

The purpose of this paper is to present the results corresponding to some of the items included in our research (9), namely, those concerning the students' final marks, their worries about making mistakes, their difficulty to participate, their fear for being laughed at and their evaluation of the role the discussion board has played.

2.1. Setting and Participants

The setting for this investigation was a B2 level EFL classroom at the Teacher Training College in the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. 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.

2.2. 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 9 statements related with 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.

2.3. Procedure

The researchers explained the purpose of the study to the students, and participation in the study was entirely voluntary. First, the participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. Participants were provided 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

3. Data analysis

The data were analysed and transferred to the statistical analysis software package SPSS 16.0 to calculate descriptive statistics.

4. Results

Table 1 summarizes the means and standard deviations of the variables includes in this paper.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of the perceptions associated with students' participation in the learning process and their feelings towards the role of the forum ($N = 46$)

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I worry about making mistakes in the forum	3.46	1.206
2. I worry about making mistakes in the classroom	3.46	1.328
3. I find it hard to participate in the forum voluntarily	3.17	1.288
4. I find it hard to participate in class voluntarily	3.16	1.509
5. I'm afraid my classmates laugh at me when I participate in the forum	2.40	1.355
6. I'm afraid my classmates laugh at me when I participate in class	2.48	1.410
7. Thanks to the forum, my degree of involvement in the subject has been higher	3.61	1.043
8. I feel the forum has helped me in my English learning process	3.80	.833
9. I feel that the forum has been a positive experience for me	3.85	.816

Table 1 shows that students appear to be comfortable when participating both in the classroom and in the forum or discussion board. However, in two particular cases a difference in the degree of intensity of agreement with the statements is appreciated, as shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Percent of participants who opt for each of the five answers offered when asked about their worry about making mistakes in each of the contexts examined ($N = 46$)

	I worry about making mistakes in the forum	I worry about making mistakes in the classroom
Disagreed Strongly	10.9	13
Disagreed	10.9	13
Had no opinion/ Felt Neutral	15.2	10.9
Agreed	47.8	41.3
Strongly Agreed	15.2	21.7
Total	100.0	100.0

The percent of students who report that they 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that they worry about making mistakes is the same for both contexts (63%); however, when looking at the figures carefully, one can observe that 15.2% of the participants indicate that they 'strongly agree' that they worry about making mistakes in the forum, whereas the figure for the classroom context is 21.7%.

Table 3. Percent of participants who opt for each of the five answers offered when asked about their difficulty to participate voluntarily in each of the contexts examined ($N = 46$)

	I find it hard to participate in the forum voluntarily	I find it hard to participate in class voluntarily
Disagreed Strongly	10.9	20.5

Disagreed	26.1	18.2
Had no opinion/ Felt Neutral	13.0	11.4
Agreed	34.8	25.0
Strongly Agreed	15.2	25.0
Total	100.0	100.0

While 50% of students indicate that they 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that they find it hard to participate either in the forum or the classroom, the figure corresponding to the students who report that they 'strongly agree' that they find it hard to participate in class voluntarily is higher (25.0) than the figure for students who report that they find it hard to participate in the forum voluntarily (15.2).

Table 4 summarizes the results of the Pearson correlations for the different variables.

Table 4. Pearson correlations of the different variables (N = 46)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	-										
2. Final mark	.000										
3. I worry about making mistakes in the forum	-.158	-.065	-								
4. I worry about making mistakes in the classroom	-.228	.002	.727**	-							
5. I find it hard to participate in the forum voluntarily	-.171	-.180	.438**	.361*	-						
6. I find it hard to participate in class voluntarily	-.308*	-.075	.401**	.490**	.483**	-					
7. I'm afraid my classmates laugh at me when I participate in the forum	-.149	-.135	.314*	.325*	.338*	.255	-				
8. I'm afraid my classmates laugh at me when I participate in class	-.178	-.143	.287	.379**	.333*	.374*	.906**	-			
9. Thanks to the forum, my degree of involvement in the subject has been higher	.277	.300*	.074	.334*	-.483**	-.145	-.166	-.082	-		
10. I feel the forum has helped me in my English learning process	.217	.065	.201	.303*	.320*	-.117	-.298*	-.316*	.474**	-	
11. I feel that the forum has been a positive experience for me	.212	.048	.208	.373*	-.419**	-.113	-.156	-.167	.609**	.193	-

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

There was a highly significant positive correlation between students' worry about making mistakes in the forum and their worry about making mistakes in the classroom ($r = .727$). The difficulty to participate in class voluntarily correlated significantly with the difficulty to participate in the forum (.483**) and with the worry about making mistakes in the forum (.401**) and in the classroom (.490**); and a significant negative correlation was found between student's difficulty to participate in class and their age (-.308*), which shows that for younger students it is harder to participate in class. These results also reveal a strong positive relationship between the fear students feel for being laughed at in the classroom and the fear they feel for being laughed at in the forum (.906**). That fear to be laughed at in class also correlated significantly with the difficulty to participate in the forum (.333*) and in the classroom (.379**) and with the worry about making mistakes in the classroom.

As for the variables related with the role that the forum has played in their academic life, the figures show, firstly, that students who indicate that the forum has influenced positively their involvement in the subject, are the ones with a better final mark in the subject; moreover, this variable shows a strong negative correlation with the difficulty to participate in the forum (-.483**). Secondly, the results indicate that there exist a positive correlation between the perceived help of the forum in their English learning process and three variables: their worry about making mistakes in the classroom (303*); their difficulty to participate in the forum voluntarily (320*) and the degree of involvement. In the third place, it can be observed that there is a negative significant correlation between the perceived help of the forum in their English learning process and the fear of the students for being laughed at both in the forum (-.298*) and in the classroom (-.316*). Finally, a strong negative correlation is appreciated/observed? Between the feeling that the forum has meant a positive experience and the difficulty to participate in the forum (-.419**).

5. Discussion

On analysis of the data, one thing stands out: that learners appreciate and value the learning that they do using the computers. Students see CMC as an integral part of their academic studies, they feel that the computer complements the classroom. However, it cannot be said that the results of the study are consistent with previous research, which affirmed that students usually feel less inhibited in discussion boards (Bradley and Lomicka, 2000). Although after a careful study we discovered some differences between the classroom and discussion boards, the interpretation of these results do not suggest that students feel much more comfortable in one context or another. This preliminary study encourages us to continue examining students' interaction in class and in CMC.

Conclusions

As instructed SLA researchers, we have a responsibility towards the foreign language teaching community. It is therefore crucial that we ask ourselves: How could instructed SLA research be more responsive to the heterogeneity in language learning experiences across individuals? How can we research the L2 learning process in ways that produce findings that truly serve learner-centred education? We believe that this preliminary research allows us to glean some valuable insights.

In conclusion, technology is another tool to be used in the language learning process. Learners view it as enhancing, not replacing, their classroom-based instruction. In fact, the role of the lecturer, his/her attitudes, could be a positive motivation for student teachers and it should not surprise us that very often they prefer classroom interaction much better than online procedures. Having the personal contact with a lecturer who cares about the progress and facilitates the improvement and provides the necessary tools can become essential in this process of learning an additional language. On the other hand, the use of ICTs is nowadays something as popular as unknown, unluckily, and the fact of having computers, interactive boards or virtual platforms is not going to be the key of it all without the right training at universities and the appropriate in-service training.

One of the clearest indications given by our study is that, like any learning tool, CMC work needs to be linked tightly within the course curriculum.

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