Potential Integration of a Computer-Mediated Communication Platform into the Saudi EFL Classroom: A Synthetic Review

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Abstract

The paper aims at reviewing the research about computer mediated communication to provide an understanding and discussion of their key features and capabilities and how these features might be used in online synchronous voice-based computer mediated communication (SVCMC) to support English as a foreign language learning (EFL) in Saudi Arabia. The problem of teacher-based classrooms in Saudi Arabia and their limited support of promoting oral proficiency and interactive learning environments are discussed. This paper first presents a brief overview of EFL instruction in Saudi Arabia, followed by a brief review of relevant (Second Language Acquisition) SLA theories and research with respect to interaction, CMC, and CMC based tasks. A definition and the possible implications of Skype, a CMC tool, in language learning is then presented. Finally, this paper suggests ways in which CMC can be integrated into EFL learning in the Saudi context.

1. Introduction

The global importance of English grows rapidly around the world. In Saudi Arabia, English is a compulsory subject taught in elementary, intermediate, and secondary education, while in tertiary education, many scientific and medical departments consider English the main means of instruction (Abalhassan 2002). Critical Saudi professions such as medicine and aviation employ English as the major, if not the only, language of communication (Abalhassan 2002). English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher-fronted classes in Saudi have experienced severely limited opportunities for communicative tasks and authentic and meaningful interaction in the target language (Alahydib 1986, Zaid 1993, Abu Ghararah 1996, Al-Beiz 2002 & Al-Yousef 2007). So, with the aim of constructing an interactive learning environment where learners experience opportunities for interpersonal or conversational interaction with peers and teachers, computer mediated communication (CMC) tasks are suggested for implementation in Saudi EFL classes on the basis of relevant SLA theories and research.

2. EFL Instruction in Saudi Arabia

Despite the significant importance of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia, the level of achievement of many learners remains unsatisfactory and below expected levels (Al-Hajailan 1999). Research investigating problems related to EFL learning also remains limited (Al-Beiz 2002). In addition, EFL instruction in Saudi Arabia fails to promote classroom communicative interaction, learner-learner interaction and oral proficiency, leading to the continuing low achievement of learners as well as negative attitudes towards the target language (Al-Beiz 2002 & Abu Ghararah 1996).

2.1. Common Pedagogical Approaches

According to Alrumaih (2004), during the 1970s, EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia was based on the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) of language teaching. Dabaan (as cited in Alrumaih 2004: 147) found that this was the case in Saudi Arabian public schools. Alahydib (1986) and Dabaan reached the conclusion that using this approach shifted the attention of teachers from the communicative part of the language to the written part, with the result that students depended on memorization at the expense of discussion and communicative interaction.

Alahydib also found that many EFL teachers preferred this approach because it was less demanding for them and they could see fast improvements in the students' knowledge of grammatical rules. However, according to Al-Mazroou (1988) and Zaid (1993), the Audio Lingual Method (ALM) was at that time the method of teaching English mostly found in Saudi EFL classrooms. However, this method was not fully applied due to insufficient emphasis being placed on the exploitation of language laboratories, which are considered a vital component of ALM. Noting students' failure to communicate in English and to express themselves adequately in the target language, Zaid and Al-Beiz attributed this to the focus on drilling in grammatical structure and the repetition of certain words and phrases. Speaking and communication activities were, however, neglected.

2.2. Classroom Interaction

Dabaan (cited in Abalhassan 2002: 175) found that teachers failed to give students enough time to practice the language; instead the teachers talked for most of the class time, leaving a little time for students to answer questions every now and then (Alahydib 1986 & Abalhasan 2002). Thus, even after two decades, learning through interaction is still neglected in Saudi EFL classes and students still consider the teacher as the dominant source of knowledge (Alahmadi 2007). As Alahmadi states, a central issue in this neglect of the role of interaction in the Saudi EFL classroom is thought to be the educational system, which disregards student-centred negotiation; however, this issue is not dealt with in this paper.

3. *The Relevance of SLA Theories and Research to Interaction and CMC TBL*

This part of the paper describes prominent theories and research related to interaction, Task-Based Learning (TBL) and CMC in SLA to set the scene for potential implementation of CMC based tasks in the Saudi EFL classroom.

3.1. Role of Interaction in SLA

3.1.1. The Interaction Hypothesis (IH)

Many researchers in SLA have claimed that interaction with others leads to the successful acquisition of L2. The early version of Long's Interaction Hypothesis (IH) (cited in Ellis 2000: 199) claimed that acquisition is facilitated due to the negotiation of meaning that occurs during communication breakdown; such negotiation provides the opportunity for comprehensible input (Ellis 2000). The 'negotiation of meaning' has been defined by Pica (1994) as the "modification and restructuring of interaction that occurs when learners and interlocutors anticipate, perceive, or experience difficulties in message comprehensibility" (p. 494). Krashen's 1985-input hypothesis has argued that learners, during human interaction, make progress as they comprehend input that is slightly beyond their current stage of linguistic competence (Heins et al. 2007). In the later form of IH, as stated by Ellis (2000), the feedbacks that the learner receives during interpersonal interaction with others as well as modified output are taken into account to reach ultimate comprehensibility.

Conversational or interpersonal interaction contributes to L2 acquisition because interaction "connects input [and] internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (Long 1996: 451-452). The most crucial element for acquisition is the negotiation of meaning involved in conversational interaction. According to Cook (2008), in order to make interaction useful, breakdowns while conversing should be resolved continuously. This can be achieved through such actions as "repetitions, confirmations, reformulations, comprehension checks, clarification requests, etc" (Long 1996: 418). Lightbown and Spada (1999) argued, "when learners are given the opportunity to engage in meaningful activities they are compelled to 'negotiate for meaning,' that is, to express and clarify their intentions, thoughts, opinions, etc., in a way which permits them to arrive at a mutual understanding. This is especially true when the learners are working together to accomplish a particular goal" (Lightbown and Spada 1999: 122).

3.1.2. Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

The role of interaction has also been emphasised by the sociocultural theory rooted in Lev Vygotsky's work (Cook 2008). SCT places special emphasis on the role of social and cultural contexts and environments (Poehner 2008) and on the interaction with other language users such as peers and teachers who enhance the learners' performance and production of language functions that would not be performed by learners.

When unassisted (Heins et al. 2007 & Lantolf 2005). Lightbown and Spada (1999) pointed out that, according to the SCT, "learners advance to higher levels of linguistic knowledge when they collaborate and interact with speakers of the second language who are more knowledgeable than they are".

Moreover, Norris and Ortega (2003) confirmed that language learning, as well as any other kind of learning, should involve social interaction rather than individual action. The support and mediation that learners experience within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Poehner 2008) and while performing a new task is called 'scaffolding'; a concept that was based on Vygotsky's SCT but taken from Jerome Bruner, a developmental psychologist who conducted research on children's language (Cook 2008). 'Scaffolding' in the SLA context, as summarised by Cook (2008) in the following extract, does not always have the same constituents; see the following extract: For some, anything the learner consults or uses constitutes scaffolding, such as the use of grammar books or dictionaries; virtually anything that happens in the classroom, then, can count as scaffolding, say the traditional teaching style [...] known as IRF [...] or any kind of correction by the teacher. Others [consider] scaffolding [as] social mediation involving two people, and is performed by a person who is an expert. Some have extended scaffolding to include help from people at the same level as the student [...] In teaching terms, this includes everything from teacher-directed learning to carrying out tasks in pairs and groups. (Cook 2008: 229)

3.2. CMC Based Tasks and Language Teaching

Cook (2008) asserted that TBL "is related to the interaction model [...] in that it depends on negotiation of meaning [... and] to the sociocultural model in that it depends on peer-to-peer scaffolding" (p. 258). Lee H. (2003) confirmed that TBL focuses learners on language form and meaning and that this methodology focuses on involving learners in real world related tasks. TBL is defined as "the notion that learning and teaching should be organized around a set of classroom tasks" (Cook 2008: 257). A definition considers 'task' from a pedagogical and a language acquisition perspective (Nunan 2006), was given by Ellis (2003) as follows: A task is a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes.

(Ellis 2003: 16) The effectiveness of CMC based tasks, such as free-discussion tasks, have been explored in a number of studies (Chun 1994, Warschauer 1996, Kitade 2000 & Sotillo 2000). Due to the prevalence of face-to-face based tasks such as decision-making and jigsaw tasks in the field of SLA interaction, Blake (2000) and Smith (2003) investigated their effectiveness of in generating more negotiation of meaning. However, whereas Blake found that jigsaw tasks could generate more meaning negotiation than decision-making tasks, Smith found the reverse. With regard to effective task design, Rosell-Aguilar (2005) argued that tasks should be interactive, collaborative, meaningful and engaging, generating target language, and integrating authentic materials. Meaningful negotiation occurs better when learners engage in interactions based on well-designed and well-implemented tasks (Pica 1994). Masputeriah Hamzah (2001) asserted that for tasks to be designed in a CMC environment, they should be structured appropriately, that is, in a way that guarantees opportunities for quality interaction and communication exchanges.

She summarised four crucial factors that should be taken into account when designing learning communicative tasks. First, tasks should have two dimensions; the interactional activity that entails communicating information; and the communication goal that entails goal orientation and outcome options. Secondly, two-way information-gap tasks generate more negotiation work than one-way information-gap ones, due to incomplete information held by each partner who needs to collaborate and exchange information to complete a task. Thirdly, interaction within small groups produces more input in the target language of a kind where learners have more opportunities to modify their interaction. Finally, closed, convergent, difficult tasks generate more negotiation of meaning than open, divergent, easy ones. CMC has been defined by Herring (cited in Rosell-Aguilar 2005: 2) as "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers". There are two types of CMC, synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous CMC means that the interaction takes place in real time (Chapelle 2003) and over the internet.

Text messages, audio conversation (Chapelle 2003) and video conferencing and messages are examples on synchronous communication. The second type of CMC is asynchronous communication such as blogs, emails and bulletin boards. Research on CMC is associated with positive results and positive impact on the field of language learning as compared to face-to-face communication (Warschauer 1996). CMC supports autonomous learning in a less restrictive environment as compared to traditional classrooms (Peterson 1997) and supports communication with native speakers and other learners of English with no space or time limits (Warschauer 1996 & Warschauer 2004). CMC has given shy and reluctant students equal opportunities of participation. CMC also makes equal learners of different types and levels, from different backgrounds, and with different learning styles. Warschauer et al. (1996) stated that CMC applications provide more equal participation to learners who are often discriminated against or excluded, including minorities, shy students, women in some cultures, and learners with strange learning styles. Chapelle (2003) believed that communication through CMC has given learners great opportunities for input that is not available in face-to-face communication.

4. Points of Intersection

Teaching EFL in Saudi Arabia needs to focus on enhancing students' communication in English and on constructing an interactive EFL learning environment. More attention should be given to speaking and communication activities. Memorisation, drilling in grammatical structure and repetition of certain words and phrases should be given a secondary importance if the target of the lesson can be achieved interactively. Teachers have been found to follow traditional approaches that focus on translation, reading and writing, and to neglect speaking. As a result, students in such teacher-fronted environments that neglect interaction and the negotiation of meaning do not have enough communicative and interactional competence to use English as a means of communication. Thus, the Saudi EFL classroom needs to be extricated from such an environment by taking into account the interaction hypothesis that considers meaning negotiation through interpersonal interaction and the sociocultural theory which emphasises "social mediation between the learner and someone else [...] through scaffolding by an expert or a fellow learner" (Cook 2008: 230). Since the advent of computers, research on CMC has revealed various advantages of CMC over face-to-face interaction. Learner autonomy, equal opportunities for participation, and less restrictive environments in terms of place, time and input can generate more meaning negotiation.

"CMC can provide many of the alleged benefits ascribed to the Interaction Hypothesis, with greatly increased possibilities for access outside the classroom environment" (Blake 2000: 120). Recently, sociocultural theory has been included in the frameworks for conducting CMC based research (Cheon 2008). Within the sociocultural framework for CMC, 'scaffolding' shows how a "more capable participant can dialogically create the ZPD in which a novice learner can extend current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence" (Cheon 2008: 2). CMC was defined by Herring (cited in Rosell-Aguilar 2005: 2) as a type of human-human interaction conducted via computer software. Many different software packages have been developed to enable communication between computer users. One of these packages that may be particularly well suited for use in the EFL context is Skype. Skype is a tool for intersection using text-, audio-, and video-conferencing. Using it, Saudi students could run different tasks such as jigsaw and decision-making tasks and many others to generate the negotiation of meaning. They can also assist one another or receive assistance from experts in a shared and less-restricted learner-centred online environment.

5. What is Skype ^{TM}?

5.1. Skype ^{TM} and Pamela-for-Skype ^{TM}

Skype ^{TM} was launched in July 2004 (Elia 2006). It is a synchronous CMC software that allows text-, voice-, and/or video messaging (Chapelle 2003 & Gough et al. 2006). It is popular software that offers a VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) service and is the fastest-growing voice communication application in the internet (Max and Ray 2006 & Godwin-Jones 2005). If a broadband connection is available, it works well with high sound quality, even through firewalls (Godwin-Jones 2005). Skype allows one-on-one calls as well as conference calls (in the latter, the person who initiates the call must stay connected for the whole session (Gough et al. 2006). Pamela-for-Skype ^{TM} is an add-on for Skype that is fully compatible with it that can record one-on-one and conference audio and video calls (Gough et al. 2006).

5.2. Why Skype?

Skype is considered as a successful audio- and video-conferencing tool combining aural, visual, and textual communication (Signorelli 2008). Godwin-Jones (2005) and Foote (2008) found it possible to consider Skype for use in language learning due to its low cost, conferencing capabilities, and recording options (via Pamela-for-Skype ™), as well as its capability to connect free real-time conversations. "Many teachers around the world are actively experimenting with internet telephony in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classes as Skype can be used for communicating and sharing files and can be used as a tool to facilitate small group class projects or small discussion forums [where] language learners can have the opportunity to speak in real-time with people from a variety of different countries" (Elia 2006: 272). After installing Skype, teachers should set its preferences to allow communication with people who are added to the programme settings so that learners could work safely without being vulnerable to any intrusion.

With the aid of Pamela-for-Skype ™, learners can also record their own audio conversations with peers and/or teachers. Learners can create their own Skype learning portfolios out of these recordings, reflect on and track their learning process, and take notes concerning linguistic and cultural information acquired while speaking over Skype (Elia 2006). Although research on the implementation of Skype in language teaching is still in its infancy, it is software that language teachers and educators should consider. It is a free tool for online audio and/or video conferencing and has many advantages as mentioned earlier. Of course, it should be ensured that the facilitation of language learning occurs through the effective design and implementation CMC communicative tasks based on the relevant research and theories of SLA and EFL/ESL pedagogy.

6. Conclusion

This paper has introduced Skype as a potential CMC environment for task-based EFL learning in the Saudi teacher-fronted context. It may provide learners with more opportunities for communicative interpersonal interaction that is rich in the meaningful negotiation of meaning. A review of the relevant literature has identified how CMC based tasks can enhance second language acquisition. The paper has also illustrated the types of tasks that are claimed to be more effective in providing increased opportunities for meaningful interaction via the medium of CMC. Although researchers disagree on which tasks can generate more meaning negotiation, jigsaw and decision-making tasks seem to be promising.

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