



EFL Reviewers' Emoticon Use in Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Peer Response

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Abstract

This classroom research described CMC users' employment of text-based emoticons in asynchronous web-based peer responses in an EFL college English writing class, to better understand how learners behave in such a face-threatening and task-oriented act (i.e. peer response). A total of 104 peer reviews produced by 13 English majors in Taiwan were analyzed. Among the 90 text-based emoticons produced, the most utilized was the smiley face. Although students attached emoticons to their criticisms, emoticons were more often employed in positive (80%) than negative (20%) contexts. Emoticons were also used as a friendship marker by some users. Individual difference in emoticon use, nevertheless, varied greatly. Findings showed that in asynchronous text-based peer response, emoticons served several purposes, depending on the contexts they occurred in: to express affections, to reduce the formality of peer response, to punctuate sentences, to hedge statements or to mark friendship.

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1. Introduction

The innovation in technology has dramatically changed the way we live, communicate, and learn. With the availability of computer-mediated communication (CMC), that is, person-to-person communication in computer networks (Herring, 2005), our daily contact with one another can take different forms: traditional face-to-face, cyberspace, including synchronous (e.g. real-time chat, Skype), asynchronous (e.g. email, Bulletin Board Systems, blogs), or a combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication, and a hybrid of face-to-face and CMC.

One prominent feature of CMC is emoticons, the use of emotional icons to express one's feelings, affections, and beyond, when such visual (e.g. facial expressions), auditory (e.g. tone), or gestural (e.g. body languages) cues available in face-to-face communication are absent (Herring, 2005). CMC is therefore often described as a lean medium, wherein emoticons may be able to compensate and augment information richness (Daft & Lengel, 1984, cited in Herring, 2005).

Peer response, also used interchangeably with peer review or peer feedback, is an instructional strategy commonly employed in the composition class, no matter first language (L1) or second language (L2). Some researchers (Lee, 1997; Mangelsdorf, 1992) distinguished peer response from peer editing, peer evaluation or peer assessment on the grounds that peer response emphasizes the provision of feedback while peer evaluation/assessment involves grading. Regardless

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of the definitions, students typically exchange drafts (either in face-to-face or computer-mediated environments), and offer oral or written feedback to help classmates improve the global (content, organization, and style) and/or local (grammar, vocabulary, punctuations) writing areas. When written feedback is given, peer response can take place either face-to-face or online, synchronously or asynchronously.

The studies of emoticons in CMC are abundant, so are studies on peer response. However, to the best of this researcher's knowledge, there is no research on emoticon use in computer-mediated peer response (CMPR), a gap this classroom research intends to address. By addressing this research gap, this study contributes to our understanding of computers and composition research, in particular CMC participants' use of paralinguistic emoticons as a potential hedge or friendship marker in such a task-oriented and face-threatening act as peer response.

2. Literature review

2.1. Peer response

Peer response is often described as a face-threatening act wherein peer reviewers identify problems in reviewees' drafts, and/or offer solutions to remedy the problems. Learners, regardless of their collectivist or individualist background, were found to be resistant to peer response, as it conflicts with face-saving in group harmony. This resistance is even magnified in collectivism (e.g. Chinese culture) where loyalty to the group is a priority (Carson & Nelson, 1994, 1996; Lee, 1997; Min, 2003; Nelson & Carson, 1998; Tang & Tithcott, 1999). Chinese peer reviewers thus often employed face-saving strategies, such as totally withdrawing honest comments, agreeing more than disagreeing or presenting criticism in indirect forms when they responded (Carson & Nelson, 1996).

The trend to move face-to-face peer response to computer-mediated environments is reflected in CMC research (Hewett, 2000; Ho & Savignon, 2007; Jin, 2007; Jin & Zhu, 2010; Liou, 2010; Liou & Peng, 2009; Tuzi, 2014). While the hedging or face-saving strategies may be achieved linguistically, it is unknown whether they may also be achieved through paralinguistics like emoticons in CMC.

2.2. Emoticons in CMC

Emoticons composed of ASCII symbols are a unique feature of text-based CMC. They can be generally divided into western and oriental emoticons. The western emoticons are presented sideways, rotated to the left (e.g. :-)) while the oriental emoticons are upright (e.g. ^_^) (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Goldsborough, 2009). Thus, both western text-based emoticon :-)) and oriental text-based emoticon ^_^ represent the same graphical smiley face (☺).

The functions of emoticons are diverse and still under debate. Walther and D'Addario's (2001) statement summarized this complexity:

Although it is conceivable that a sender's generation of emoticons could become habitual and less conscious over time, it is still not clear how they are interpreted in CMC: as iconic and unconscious like nonverbal facial expressions or, like wording, as deliberately encoded elements of intentional communication. (p. 329)

Some researchers contended that emoticons are merely a reflection of CMC user's emotions, a compensatory strategy to "replace social cues normally conveyed by other channels in face-to-face interaction" (Herring, 2005, p. 623); some argued that emoticons punctuate CMC texts (Goldsborough, 2009; Markman & Oshima, 2007; Provine, Spencer, & Mandell, 2007); still others maintained that emoticons serve pragmatic purposes in CMC (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Golato & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006; Vandergriff, 2014). Empirical emoticon research emerged as a result of these ongoing debates.

2.3. Research on emoticons in CMC

Research on emoticons in CMC have centered on a few strands: review of literature (Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008; Double, 2007; Dunlap, Bose, Lowenthal, York, Atkinson, & Murtagh, 2015; Jibril & Abdullah, 2013; Krohn, 2004), the influence of emoticons on message interpretation (Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow, 2008a; Ganster, Eimler, & Kramer, 2012; Lo, 2008; Riordan & Kreuz, 2010; Thompson & Foulger, 1996; Walther & D'Addario, 2001), the

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