



Task complexity effects on the complexity and accuracy of writing via text chat



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ABSTRACT

Despite limitations with text chat as a mode of writing (e.g., a simplified register, short turns), researchers have argued that it offers unique advantages as a site for language practice. However, realizing these advantages in second language (L2) writing-to-learn environments may depend on whether tasks are implemented in a way that facilitates learners' attention to language form in their writing. It follows that the design and selection of appropriate tasks to use in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) are key issues. Inspired by the Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson, 2005), the current study examined the role of two instructional interventions related to task implementation—the amount of task structure and inclusion of language support—in promoting accurate and complex writing via text chat by L2 learners in a classroom setting. Data were collected from 96 students performing an engineering simulation task via text chat. The learners were placed in one of four counterbalanced experimental groups. Analysis of the chat exchanges provided evidence that task complexity influenced the *accuracy* of student writing in line with the Cognition Hypothesis. However, the influence of task complexity on the *linguistic complexity* of their writing failed to match predictions of the Cognition Hypothesis.

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1. Introduction

Communication in virtual environments has opened up opportunities for second language communication and learning (see Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2008, for a comprehensive analysis of this topic). As computer technology use has become ubiquitous in professional and personal communication, the ability to communicate effectively via this medium has become a requisite aspect of language competence (Thomas & Reinders, 2010). For second language learners, the changes in communication brought by technology have both introduced a new learning need (to be proficient communicators in Computer-Mediated Communication, or CMC) and increased opportunities for learning via CMC. CMC technology increases the space available for communication and collaboration, because it can take place with the person seated at the computer next to you, or with someone on the other side of the world, whether between native speakers and learners or among learner peers (cf. Blake, 2007; Chapelle, 2004). Research overall has indicated that communicating in a second language via CMC has unique benefits for language learning (see Sauro, 2011 for a full overview). From a teaching perspective it also offers unique

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advantages: CMC-based peer interaction can easily be implemented in large classes; it can encourage participation among more reticent learners (Chen & Wang, 2009); and it allows the teacher the means to monitor multiple interactions.

CMC occurs in two modes: asynchronous (such as e-mail, online discussion forums, and podcasts) and synchronous (such as text or video chat). Communication unfolds in very different ways in these two modes. Asynchronous CMC is more analogous to pen and paper writing, in that it allows time to compose and edit thoughts before making them public (Kitade, 2008). In contrast, synchronous computer mediated communication (SCMC), although a written medium, unfolds in real time and shares many of the characteristics of spoken dialogue (Blake, 2009). In both forms, CMC represents a new extension of writing. Just as technology is changing the way people read (e.g., anchored by screens of flowing text rather than pages) it is also changing the way people write. CMC has introduced new technologies for writing as well as new models of distributing our writing. This is changing our understanding of the role of audience response and interactivity in writing. Understanding text-based CMC and its role in writing-to-learn-language (WLL) is increasingly important for understanding the connection between writing and learning, whether within or beyond the second language (L2) classroom.

To address these needs, the current study examines how writing via CMC under different task conditions promotes language learning among students preparing for professional second language communication. Essentially, this research clarifies whether learners' written language production and learning opportunities are different depending on how second language computer-based writing tasks are implemented. We focus on two task conditions—the amount of structure given to learners directing them how to complete the task, and opportunity for guided pre-task language practice—to determine whether these influence the complexity and accuracy of written communication in a CMC environment. These variables were selected for their pedagogical value: teachers can easily manipulate CMC tasks in these ways in real classrooms. For this special issue, this is the only study to examine CMC writing. As such, it reflects the broadened scope of writing in the Internet age. It is also the only study to examine task complexity effects on both the complexity and accuracy of second language writing, extending the discussion of complexity in second language writing-to-learn.

2. What is text chat?

While synchronous CMC (SCMC) can occur in video and audio formats as well, bandwidth restrictions, platform stability, and convenience make text-based SCMC (text chat) a common, reliable, and affordable means of SCMC in educational settings (Johnson, 2006; Traphagan et al., 2010). Text chat combines characteristics of speaking and writing (Smith, 2003). Like spoken language, it is a rapid, spontaneous exchange of information in real time. Like writing, it results in a relatively permanent, visual record of the discourse. However, it is not simply a hybrid of speaking and writing. Text chat also includes unique characteristics. Even though text chat discourse unfolds in real time, the production and transmission of messages are disassociated, with each turn in a text chat discourse fully formed before it is visible to other interlocutors. This allows for discourse effects atypical in other modes of communication. First, in a group setting, multiple interlocutors can produce messages at the same time, which can separate adjacency pairs as the discourse unfolds (Smith, 2009). Second, text chat produces a written record which can be reviewed as the communication evolves (Chun & Payne, 2004). Third, text chat has a simplified register and syntax, a unique set of abbreviations, and uses symbols such as emoticons to express the author's attitudinal stance (Smith, 2003).

3. Writing to learn through text chat

A writing-to-learn-language (WLL) perspective on writing instruction emphasizes the role of writing as a medium for language development in contrast to the focus on writing skill development seen in the more traditional learning-to-write (LW) approach (Manchón, 2012a). The WLL perspective has proved a useful counter to the claim that much of the L2 writing research lacks relevance to learning in foreign language contexts (Manchón, 2009). As Leki (2009) remarks, "contrary to dogma in SL writing, with its now traditional de-emphasis of language learning, using writing to develop language proficiency may be a central aim of L2 writing in FL settings" (p. xv).

WLL draws largely on theorizing in SLA for its rationale, and particularly on research into the role of output in language development (Swain, 2000). Williams (2012) highlighted the role that output, and written output in particular, has been shown to play in the three main acquisition processes proposed by Housen and Pierrard (2005) of knowledge internalization, restructuring and consolidation. Two key features of writing distinguish it from oral production, its permanence and the slower pace at which it is produced, and it is these that make it particularly valuable for WLL by allowing for "more learner control over attentional resources as well as more need and opportunity to attend to language both during and after production" (Williams, 2012, p. 322). However, as Williams points out, the facilitative role of writing in language development shown in many studies should be more accurately seen as the result of writing instruction including "interaction and negotiation among writers during text reconstruction or pre-writing activities" (p. 323, see also Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012). As we noted earlier, this interactive element is a fundamental feature of CMC and so provides a strong theoretical orientation to CMC research.

Chapelle (1997) pointed out that CMC research based on the Interaction Hypothesis (cf. Long, 1996) would allow for theory-based comparisons of the effectiveness of CMC in promoting language learning. The large body of research this claim has inspired has sought to determine the extent to which text-based CMC interaction promotes learning to the same degree as oral interaction as well as the variables that bear on this relationship. In a synthesis of SLA-based CMC research, Sauro

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