

Written computer-mediated requests for help by French-speaking students: An analysis of their forms and functions

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Abstract

The present study regarded the self-regulated vs. not-self-regulated function and the indirect vs. direct (i.e., polite vs. impolite) linguistic form of middle school students' requests for help. Natural data (149 requests were sent via an online homework-help forum by French-speaking seventh to ninth graders) was used. Nearly 60% of the requests were self-regulated and 70% were indirect (polite). Moreover, self-regulated functions (detailed or general requests about mathematics) were frequently combined with indirect request forms (embedded imperatives, question directives, or hints), suggesting that these students were capable of metacognitive reflection on their homework and followed the pragmatic communication rules of traditional student–teacher situations.

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1. Introduction

The Internet and other remote communication devices have profoundly modified homework-help opportunities. Obtaining help with one's homework is now possible for anyone equipped with this technology. Typing “homework-help” into Google leads to millions of hits to a variety of sites including homework-help forums, blogs, live online tutoring, etc. Some analyses on written computer-mediated homework-related help seeking have already been published (Puustinen, Volckaert-Legrier, Coquin, & Bernicot, 2009).

In a related domain, recent research on communication pragmatics in educational contexts (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Block, 2002; Volckaert-Legrier, Bernicot, & Bert-Erboul,

2009) has provided evidence that written computer-mediated communication has some peculiarities that distinguish it from traditional, face-to-face communication. However, these studies, which have mainly focused on the written form (spelling mistakes) or on different types of requests for help (i.e., direct vs. indirect), need to be completed by more fine-grained analyses that would allow us to determine the exact characteristics of these requests. One way of characterizing written computer-mediated help is as follows: students type a message and address it (usually anonymously using a pseudonym or their first name only) to an (unfamiliar) expert who is not physically present, instead of asking for help orally from someone who is physically present (Puustinen et al., 2009). Furthermore, contrary to oral, face-to-face requests for help, written requests are asynchronous: there is a time delay between the request and the reply.

This novel communication situation constitutes a challenge for further work in this domain because it adds a new dimension to the study of student help seeking. In fact, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that help-seeking is not only a self-regulated learning strategy (Puustinen, Lyyra, Metsäpelto, & Pulkkinen,

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2008), but also a situation of social interaction between two persons, a student and an expert, which necessitates the use of social strategies (Goffman, 1967). When analyzing students' written computer-mediated help seeking, researchers should therefore consider not only the characteristics related to self-regulated learning, identified by educational psychologists (such as the instrumental vs. substitutive function of the requests; Nelson-Le Gall, 1981), but also the characteristics specific to the social aspects of the communication situation. The way in which the requestor approaches the situation from the social standpoint is revealed by the linguistic forms employed, which are more or less polite or more or less clear, demand respect for one's rights, ask for a favor, etc. These linguistic marks of social functioning are described in theories of communication pragmatics (Austin, 1962; Mey, 1998; Searle & Vanderveken, 1985; Verschueren, 1999).

The aim of the present study was to examine this novel pedagogical situation, namely, written computer-mediated homework-related help seeking, by analyzing not only the educationally oriented characteristics of student requests but also their linguistic forms likely to reflect the social perception of the situation by the "speaker". The question raised was: Does the computer-mediated homework-help situation involve particular functions that reflect (or do not reflect) a self-regulated learning attitude and a particular pedagogical relationship with the teacher?

1.1. Functions

The Nelson-Le Gall (1981) article constitutes a landmark in research on the function or purpose of students' requests for help. One of its major contributions was the clear distinction it made between instrumental help seeking (i.e., asking only for the explanations needed to finish solving the problem by oneself) and executive help seeking (i.e., having someone else solve the problem in one's place).

Only instrumental help seeking, which is also qualified as adaptive, strategic, or self-regulated by the different help seeking researchers (see Puustinen, Kokkonen, Tolvanen, & Pulkkinen, 2004), is considered to play a positive role in learning and to reflect a self-regulated learning attitude (Karabenick & Newman, 2009; Puustinen et al., 2008; see also Butler & Shibaz, 2008, for example). Self-regulated help-seekers do not ask for help when they are capable of solving the problem by themselves, and when they are not, they confine their questions to just those explanations needed (Puustinen et al., 2008). Such self-regulated help seeking is a sign that the student is able to carry out a certain degree of metacognitive reflection about the task to be performed, because confining a request to just those explanations needed to solve the problem presupposes that the student has at least some knowledge of what he/she can(not) do alone. In Puustinen's (1998, p. 280) terms, after becoming aware of their need for help, self-regulated help-seekers «question themselves (...) before deciding to ask others for help».

Another feature of self-regulated help-seekers is that they do not ask questions that are not aimed at understanding the

solving process (Puustinen et al., 2008). These questions, which can be qualified as not-self-regulated, include questions aimed at avoiding the problem-solving situation and questions reflecting a lack of self-confidence (e.g., asking for confirmations such as "Is this right?" to check one's answer; Puustinen et al., 2008).

The ability to seek help first develops in children through early parent–child interactions (Puustinen et al., 2008; Puustinen & Rouet, 2009). Then when children enter school, they need to learn how to adapt their help seeking to the classroom situation. At this stage, they are supposed to become self-regulated help-seekers because "making frequent appeals to the teacher, or asking for ready-made answers, are not good strategies in the classroom" (Puustinen, 1998, p. 271). Research on this topic has shown that students' ability to engage in such self-regulated help seeking depends at least to some extent on their level of metacognitive knowledge and control, which in turn partially depend on the students' age and academic achievement (Puustinen & Rouet, 2009). Nelson-Le Gall (1987), for example, showed that with increased age (i.e., 3rd vs. 5th grade), elementary school students begin to prefer instrumental to executive help. Puustinen (1998), who compared 2nd and 4th graders' help seeking skills, found that only high-achieving 4th graders sought help that could be qualified as self-regulated. When these students did not seek help, it was because they knew how to solve the problem by themselves, and when they did, they focused on understanding the solving principle.

The available results were obtained with elementary school students in strictly controlled experimental situations. In the Nelson-Le Gall (1987) study, for example, students were first asked to write down a preliminary answer to a vocabulary question, then had the opportunity to read the answer or hints left by another student, and finally had to write down their final answer. It is not clear to what extent these results reflect students' spontaneous help seeking behavior in real learning situations. There are currently no studies that analyzed students' self-regulated (vs. not-self-regulated) help requests addressed to a human expert in a real learning situation (traditional face-to-face or technology-mediated). The present study analyzed a computer-mediated learning situation in which middle school students sent written requests to an unknown mathematics teacher on an online forum in order to obtain help with their homework in mathematics.

1.2. Forms

As stated in the Introduction, the linguistic form of a request reflects the way in which the student apprehends the social relation with a teacher. The theoretical framework underlying this idea is communication pragmatics, which considers requests for help as directive speech acts¹ by which

¹ In communication pragmatics, a speech act is defined as an intentional social act realized by a speaker during the production of a message (Austin, 1962).

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