



Video call or chat? Negotiation of meaning and issues of face in telecollaboration



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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to evaluate the influence of the type of digital medium on language learner communication, this study examines *negotiation of meaning* during interaction between native speakers and non-native speakers of English in a task-based advanced second language classroom via two forms of real-time one-to-one computer-mediated communication: *video calling* and *instant chat-messaging*. It investigates the nature, scope, and possible patterns of negotiated interaction in both types of digital communication modes. Dyadic groups consisting of non-native speakers and native speakers from two different universities collaborated in a series of one-to-one digital real-time interchanges. The digital discourse produced during the telecollaboration sessions was analysed within the framework of the *negotiation of meaning* theory, following the Varonis and Gass model of non-understandings (1985). It was found that negotiation of meaning episodes occurred in both types of real-time interaction but that they yielded their own distinct patterns of negotiated interaction. The data suggest that communication through video calling triggers more potential loss of face issues for the second language learner than communication through chat, which has a direct effect on the trajectory and outcome of the interactions.

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1. Introduction

This article presents the findings of a study into second language (L2) learner initiation of negotiation of meaning during two modes of one-to-one synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC): video call and real-time chat. The aims of this study were to examine the relationship between negotiation configurations and the type of synchronous mode of computer-mediated communication, i.e. to investigate if and how the digital mode of real-life communication affects the ongoing interaction in a language learning environment; whether any consistent patterns can be observed for each mode of communication; and what causes these occurring patterns. Dyads consisting of undergraduate native (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of English carried out an L2 learning task using both video call and real-time text chat. The data – transcripts of the video call sessions and chat-scripts – were coded for negotiation of meaning episodes, and analysed for learner-initiated signals of non-understanding.

It is important to consider and investigate the possible effect of both of these synchronous computer-mediated communication modes on the dynamics of interaction, because real-time, one-to-one digital interaction is implemented

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more and more in educational language learning environments. The digital platforms that are now available within most educational contexts in many parts of the world facilitate communication and collaboration beyond institutional constraints and national boundaries, and provide educators with the possibility to create digital communication environments and forums (Belz, 2005; Kramsch, 1987; Prior, van der Laaken, & van der Zwaard, 2009; Prior, Johnson, & van der Zwaard, 2011; Thorne, 2008; Warschauer, 1996, 1997). Linking up students from different parts of the globe, which used to be an expensive and time-consuming effort involving plane trips and youth hostels, has, technically speaking, become a matter of acquiring the right equipment and downloading the appropriate software: interactive computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies in the L2 classroom give language learners the opportunity to collaborate with native speakers of the target language without leaving their own classrooms (Helm & Guth, 2010; Guth & Marini-Maio, 2010; Lamy & Goodfellow, 2010; Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008).

2. Issues in computer-mediated communication

Research studies have claimed a number of benefits of computer-mediated communication, especially in studies comparing written CMC interaction, such as text chat, and traditional face-to-face interaction. Beauvois (1992) indicated that participants communicating through text chat generally showed more motivation and produced a richer lexicon due to the non-threatening and comparatively anonymous mode of chat communication. Other studies comparing written CMC and non-digital face-to-face confirmed that text chat generally yielded higher learner participation and more equal footing, particularly because the participants felt less communication pressure (Abrams, 2003; Chun, 1994; Condon & Cech, 1996; Freiermuth, 1998, 2001; Freiermuth & Huang, 2012; Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006; Kelm, 1992; Kern, 1995; Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2008; Meunier, 1998; Warschauer, 1997). More recent studies, however, have found contradictory results. In a study comparing the effectiveness of different types of digital and non-digital real-time communication, including video call as the digital equivalent of face-to-face communication, Yamaha and Akahori (2007) report that communication and comprehension through video call was the most successful because the participants felt reassured by the presence of their partners' image. Similarly, Yamaha (2009) and Ko (2012) found that the availability of the counterpart's image during communication creates an awareness of social presence, and enhances a more active and effective communication in an L2-environment.

2.1. Chat and video call: differences and similarities

The two types of one-to-one synchronous computer-mediated communication – real-time chat and video call – differ in various ways (see Table 1). Naturally, chat sessions are based on written texts, meaning that a message needs to be typed and can be modified, and reviewed before it is sent off. This makes turn-taking slower and more deliberate than in video call, which resembles face-to-face conversation in that it involves both audio and visual information exchange: the interactants see each other's image and hear each other's voices. It, therefore, includes prosodic, paralinguistic, and non-verbal features of communication and can be said to suffer from 'tyranny of succession' (Leech & Short, 2007), meaning that words or sentences that have been uttered can be modified but never erased.

There are also similarities. Both SCMC-modes have a significant common denominator: the communicative event is live, which means that messages are encoded and decoded during interaction in real time. Even though chatting is based on written text, it is still regarded as a speech-like modality because messages are sent back and forth during real-time communication: a "conversation in slow motion" (Beauvois, 1998) as it were, or "a quiet phone call", as Carl from the television show *The Simpsons* explains the phenomenon of written digital communication to Homer (cited in Pasfield-Neofitou, 2012, p. 5).

3. Computer-mediated communication and L2 learning

3.1. Negotiation of meaning in CMC

Negotiation of meaning can be defined as a series of conversational turns, usually initiated by the learner. Due to non-understanding, the conversational flow is interrupted and an interactional repair sequence is started, aimed at reaching

Table 1
Comparing interaction through one-to-one chat and video calling.

One-to-one real-time chat	Video calling
Text-based: activity of typing and reading	Audio-visual: activity of speaking and listening
Intentional emotions through emoticons	(Un)intentional emotions
Non-adjacent discourse patterns	Sequential/adjacent discourse patterns
No image of counterpart	Image of counterpart (cyber face-to-face)
Slow turn-taking: time to encode and decode messages	Turn-taking 'suffers' from tyranny of succession (Leech & Short, 2007): words or sentences that have been uttered can be modified but never erased, and call for immediate reaction
Saved messages	No log of saved messages

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