

# **Computer-Mediated Communication(CMC) as a tool for language teaching**

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## **I. 1.INTRODUCTION**

mediated communication (CMC) is the most significant and popular milieu that develops human life. It can be defined as the (human) communication that occurs through the use of computers or technical devices; as Metz (1994 cited in Mahdi, 2014:9) puts it "any communication pattern mediated through the computer". It is used to communicate individually over the world providing them with opportunities to share information significantly language, with each other. Particularly, (which is also the focus of this essay) the development of the technical communication provides opportunities for language teaching and learning. These types of opportunities are not actually existed in the traditional (conventional) classrooms. Originally, communication systems were not used for human to human communication; they were used to send data (Murray, 2005). The systems, then, developed to include the 'human human communication'. Therefore, the networking systems have moved from information technology (IT) to include communication within it (after the invention of emails), so it became information and communication technology (ICT) (Ibid, 2005). There are two modes of human communication: the asynchronous communication which is the non simultaneous communication, for instance: emails, discussion responses and online posts. The second mode is the simultaneous communication, for instance: chat and instant messages. It is worth to mention that; communication systems are not entirely achieved through computers or other technical devices. Internet connection is an integral part of the communication. Therefore Thorne (2008) defined CMC as a multimodal system that participates with 'internet mediated communication'. According to Castells (2004 cited in Thorne, 2008), the daily activities are transformed into the educational, professional and interpersonal world by the use of internet. However, accessing internet continues to be unequally distributed toward social classes and 'geopolitical regions' (Thorne, 2008). Although CMC arises with internet, it is also arising from mediated communication technologies – for example: television, telephone, printing

press as well as radio. There are a large number of studies regarding CMC, because it is important to understand its role in developing life. Moreover, it is important to understand and evaluate CMC as a system considering language teaching and learning. This essay would review the findings of a number of computer mediated communication 'recent studies regarding: the environments of CMC. Then, these findings would be linked to a group of Arab (Iraqi) learners of English. In addition, the characteristics of this group and a number of shortcomings of CMC regarding this context would be mentioned.

## **II. SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS**

As mentioned above the synchronous mode is the simultaneous and the asynchronous mode is the non simultaneous. There are a number of researches regarding both modes. This essay would show a number of research findings:

### **2.1. Synchronous**

In terms of synchronous mode, Asterhan and Eisenmann (2011) did a study exploring the preferences and experiences of secondary school students. They simply compared different formats of discussion: face-to-face and synchronous CMC. They divided students into two groups: students who are active in face-to-face discussions and 'silent' students. They found that there are several advantages of the synchronous CMC discussion format especially in 'social interactive' and 'managerial aspects' of the class discussions. Moreover, silent student would prefer the synchronous CMC in comparison with the face-to-face mode of discussion.

### **2.2. Asynchronous**

Sevinçgil and Bayyurta (2010) examined the influence of asynchronous mode of communication on the perceptions of Turkish nonnative speakers (NNSs) of English. By exchanging online email messages (in English) with native speakers of English and nonnative speakers of other countries, (they found) Turkish NNSs of English benefited from these emails in gaining 'cultural information' and developing foreign language learning. Therefore, learners encouraged the use of asynchronous CMC, because it helped them understanding the target language.

### 2.3. Synchronous vs. Asynchronous

Hrastinski (2008) did a comparative study between synchronous and asynchronous modes and found out that synchronous online discussions prompted 'personal participation' (which increases the interaction) whereas asynchronous online discussions encouraged 'cognitive participation' (which provides a more reflective type of participation). Therefore, the students in synchronous discussions sensed that they are working together and also they are not restricted to the course content. Hsieh and Ji (2013) did a comparative study of the effects of three modes of communication: synchronous and asynchronous online communication, and traditional grammar translation method, on a group of EFL learners. They divided them into three groups, and then made the experiment. They found out that there was no considerable difference in the reading scores between synchronous and asynchronous groups. Moreover, in their (groups) 'perceptions survey', there were no statistical differences between them. Oztoke et al. (2013) inspected the relationships between learners' use of synchronous private messages and their use of asynchronous discussion forums. They found out that asynchronous discussion forums contain more formal (academic) language and less informal (social) language, while synchronous private messages are the contrary less formal and more informal language. In addition, they found that learners who use synchronous private messages are less likely to quickly read the discussion forums and the fact that they spend more time online than those who do not use synchronous private messages. Therefore, they suggested using asynchronous discussions for those who use more synchronous private messages.

## III. FACEBOOK, SKYPE AND YOUTUBE

Facebook, Skype and YouTube are, nowadays, the new environments of CMC. They help to communicate people over the world by different ways: written work, audio and video. They are used in computers and other technical devices, such as: smartphones. As they are ubiquitous in most of the world, it is possible to apply them in the field of language teaching and learning. By applying them, teaching/learning would be applied outside classrooms. Moreover, that would increase the multicultural aspect of teaching or learning, i.e. teachers from different parts of the world would teach learners from other parts (distance teaching/learning). It is worth to mention that there are a number of differences in the usage of each of these environments. There are a large number of studies regarding these environments. This essay would show a number of studies finding regarding each one of them.

### 3.1. Facebook

Facebook is one of the most famous social networking websites. It has a large number of users from all over the world. It helps to connect users in a synchronous mode of communication as well as asynchronous mode (if both individuals are online there is an indication if a user is online and recently, one could know whether the individuals/he is contacting saw his/her message or not). All ways of communication (written, audio, video) are possible to use which creates a large opportunity to share information. In language teaching/learning context, Facebook offers possible atmosphere of teaching/learning in these settings that using it would foster the interaction between teachers and learners and learners themselves. In the study of Kabilan, Ahmad, and Abidin, (2010), they tried to find out whether the university learners regard Facebook as a suitable environment for language learning that could help, promote and develop their learning of English. They found out that learners 'believed' that Facebook could be used as a suitable 'online' environment to develop their English language learning. Yet, teachers have a significant role in integrating and utilizing Facebook for educational purposes. Mitchell (2012) examined the motivation of learners for using Facebook which is mostly used for social purposes. They use it for a period of time and then they were interviewed. The results showed that they had a great ability in using it to communicate with their existing friends, learn English, and learn about friends' cultures. However, there were a slight number of difficulties considering its use.

### 3.2. Skype

Skype is a program that provides text messaging as well as video and audio chat. It is widely used academically, because of its ability of conferencing calls, i.e. more than two individuals can do an audio chat at the same time. Because of its abilities, one could assume that it could be a significantly beneficial tool for language teaching/learning (Mahdi, 2014). In the study of Develotte, Guichon and Vincent (2010), they found that using Skype as a synchronous mode (video chat) would improve the interaction between learners and teachers. However, the less use of webcam (video) might, to a great extent, affect the interaction. The reason seems to be related to cognitive aspects of language. Yang (2010) researched the use of audio and video Skype chat by learners while doing a task-based interaction. He found that the turn-taking while using Skype is considerably close to the face-to-face turn-taking. Therefore, it is possible to assume that most learners would not disagree with using Skype academically, regardless of the shortcomings of CMC that would be mentioned later.

### 3.3. YouTube

YouTube is a website. It is used for video sharing. Individuals can view, upload and share videos. It contains a very large number of various types of videos. Lectures, educational and cultural information can be easily uploaded. Therefore, YouTube could be used for language learning. It is simply like attending lectures anywhere at any time. YouTube is a communication through videos; however, there is a space of posts which is simply applied for posting opinions about what has been seen. This space could be used academically as a form of asynchronous online discussion. Miller, Hafner and Fun (2012) found out

that, learners of English for academic purposes (EAP) course understood the values (linguistically and technically) of constructing and sharing videos on YouTube.

#### **IV. WIKI**

Wiki is an unlocked website in the sense that it is freely accessible and not only authoritative users can add, edit, or delete its content. Any user, however, can add, edit, or delete content easily. Wiki can have license control option, so, it can be restricted to any editing, editing or deleting, just as Moodle. Therefore, there is a considerable possibility of wiki space to be used for educational purposes, especially collaborative writing in language learning. According to Kessler and Bikowski (2010:43), "the evolution of collaborative writing may be intrinsically connected with the iteration of technologies since new developments provide new opportunities for collaboration". Not to forget that wiki space tends to lack authoritative and reliability, because of the ability of anyone to change, add or delete. Kessler and Bikowski (2010) studied the effects of wiki based collaborative activity on the behaviour of EFL learners. They found out that using flexible learning environments (collaborative autonomous language learning and CMC wiki based collaborative activity) would benefit the learners. In addition, even if learners do not consistently use wiki spaces in the way they are instructed to, wiki is beneficial, because it creates a process of engaging learners to write together. Li (2013) explored the effect of wiki spaces on Chinese EFL university learners. The focus was on wiki based collaborative writing. The researcher found that the engagement of learners was significant not only in the discussion content but also in task management, social chat, language negotiation and technical communication. Furthermore, the learners have 'scaffolded' one another's writing while constructing the wiki. It is possible to say that the use of wiki would improve the learners' collaboration.

#### **V. FEEDBACK**

In terms of feedback, computer mediated communication (CMC) studies have shown that CMC's feedback appears to be effective in language learning. Bueno Alastuey (2013) studied the interactional feedback and particularly Language Related Episodes (LREs) which mean the parts of interactions when a learner shifts from meaning to form. The researcher did a study of three groups of learners (non natives with the same first language L1, non natives with different L1 and non natives with natives) to see whether interacting with different partners has an effect on the number and type of LREs by using Synchronous Voice based Computer Mediated Communication. The researcher found out that: LREs focus on meaning and form, interacting with different partner has considerably influenced the type and the number of LREs and there were insights of negative feedback and negotiation. Therefore, the quality and quantity of feedback would depend mostly on interpersonal aspects. Gurzynski Weiss and Baralt (2014) investigated the perception of language learners and their use of feedback in a task based interaction. It is a comparative study between two modes of communication: CMC and face to face interaction. They found that in both modes, learners noticed feedback as a feedback. In both modes of communication, perception accuracy of feedback has the same statistical rate. However, the learners' chance to use feedback are depending mostly on the type of interaction as well as the error addressed.

#### **VI. CULTURAL AWARENESS**

Culture in this case means 'stereotype' which could be defined as the classification of different aspects according to individuals' cognitive processes (Houghton, et al. 2013) Because of the rapid spread of language learning over the world, culture appeared to be considered as an obstacle. Therefore, critical cultural awareness was applied; which means "an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997 cited in Houghton et al. 2013:1). Still, stereotypes would have an influence over learning. Wu, Marek and Chen (2013) studied the cultural awareness of EFL learners, while providing them with cultural differences and similarities course using CMC Internet video conferences. Their critical thinking was analysed and revealed that history and culture are important, their view of multicultural world is improving and finally, such a course increases their confidence. Following Hall's cultural dimension of contextuality, Pflug (2011) analysed Germans and Indians postings in internet forums. The researcher found out that Germans showed less cultural context than Indians. Moreover, Indians utilised more 'emotions' than Germans and this use (of non verbal communication) suggests revealing cultural context. Therefore, culture/social aspects seem to have influence on CMC.

#### **VII. GENDER**

There appears not to be a large number of CMC studies regarding gender. However, it could be a possible issue that influences CMC especially on the interactional processes. Guiller and Durndell (2007) did a study on the language use in a synchronous computer mediated communication (CMC), specifically, to distinguish the role of gender in group discussions. They found out that both genders utilised similar linguistic variables, but females used 'intensifiers' more than males. Males used 'authoritative language' and 'negative interactions' while females used more personal and emotional contributions. Therefore gender appears to be a significant factor in discussions and would have an effect on CMC in language learning. Cubuc and Kutlu (2013) researched the CMC's attitudes regarding gender in (synchronous and asynchronous) chat, and also the influence of gender on individual's linguistic choices when chatting. They found out that CMC is somehow similar to face-

to-face communication in the sense that they are both put under a number of communication restrictions on participants and they are using the same strategy of turn-taking.

### **VIII. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GROUP**

They are a university monolingual group consisting of approximately (3545) learners. The teaching process is taking place in classrooms which are not well technically equipped. Their course can be considered as general English language. The group can be divided into five subgroups in terms of their intelligence and technical understanding i.e. the proficiency in using computers and other technical devices. (a) Learners who could be perfect in learning process whatever context they are in i.e. they would not be affected when moving from the traditional classroom to the computerised learning environment or vice versa. (b) Learners who are perfect in terms of intelligence and technical understanding, but still they might have problems with moving from one system to another. (c) Learners who are perfect in terms of intelligence, but they have difficulty in using developed technology. (d) Learners who are weak or insufficient in terms of intelligence, however, they could be perfect in using developed technology. Finally, (e) Learners who are insufficient in both: intelligence and technology. These divisions are applied and judged according to experience, as teaching the group for two years would provide more information. Moreover, knowing the learners for a long period of time would give the teacher expectations of their reaction towards unfamiliar conditions that they may encounter. The reason behind this division is that it might give a clearer picture towards the influence of CMC, and one could understand the advantages and disadvantages of the system (CMC) easily (as well as it would help for further CMC research there). For example: learner from group (a) would not actually give any information of whether using CMC is better than using the traditional way, because simply he/she seems to be perfect in both, then his/her positive view would be balanced. The same case with a learner from group (e) his/her negative view towards CMC would also be negative towards the traditional way. However, motivation and learners' beliefs tend to affect their CMC judgement. In addition, the groups (b, c and d) are those whom might provide a clearer judgement of CMC but also motivation and learners' beliefs play a significant role in their judgements. Motivation in this sense is either cognitive (intrinsic), individual who is not willing to learn English language, or social (extrinsic), an individual who thinks that English is not beneficial to him/herself or he has to learn in order to pass exams or a course. Moreover, cognitive and sociocultural aspects would affect the learners' judgements. Finally, it is worth mentioning that knowing the participants of the study personally appear to influence the findings of the research.

### **IX. LIMITATIONS REGARDING THE GROUPS' USE OF CMC**

There are actually a number of limitations regarding the context of these selected groups of learners. The first and most important limitation is that CMC, as a language learning environment, has rarely (if ever) been used in Iraq yet. No studies appear to be found in using CMC for language teaching/learning. Therefore, the reflection of learners' use of CMC would be assessed according to experience. However, CMC is being recently used for social purposes. The second problem is accessibility. Accessibility in this sense can be divided into three main aspects: the technological availability, the internet accessibility and the licensed pages or programmes. In terms of technological availability, a number of learners do not have computers, others do have but they cannot use them appropriately. Although a large number of learners has and uses computers or other technical devices and the fact that technology is rapidly developing, a small number of learners who lack the technical use and accessibility would make an influence on using CMC in classrooms. Moreover, the groups' university do have a language laboratory (sound lab) and contains 2030 computers which are not enough for all learners at a time. As for the internet accessibility, internet seems to be provided mostly everywhere in Iraq, however, the service appears to be not of a considerable quality. In terms of licensed pages and programmes, the groups' university does not provide their learners with software licenses i.e. the paid or (not free) websites and programmes. Therefore, materials would be out of their (learners) hands. The third issue is the perceptions and beliefs of teachers and learners, which means, a number of teachers as well as learners would assume that the traditional way of teaching and learning is better than the CMC environments of learning. In addition, it could be possible if learners or teachers perceive computers or other technical devices differently i.e. they may think of them as not a considerable environment of education.

### **X. THE GROUP'S ASSUMED REFLECTIONS TOWARDS THE MENTIONED STUDIES**

According to synchronous and asynchronous modes, both methods are considerably beneficial in language learning. However, each one of them has a number of aspects that learners may find them useful or not depending on the type and the subject of interaction. In the context of the Iraqi learners, they would prefer the synchronous mode when they are interacting with each other because as found in Oz Toketal. (2012) study, synchronous mode tends to be more informal and sociable as it offers instant sent/received replies. Whereas while interacting with teachers, they prefer asynchronous mode of communication as it is more formal than synchronous. Moreover, it is distancing teachers from learners i.e. Iraqi learners tend not to be strongly related to their teachers because of cultural issues of respect even if there are relations, then they would be with certain limits, but that does not mean the teachers are unfriendly, it is just as putting the teacher on a higher status out of respect. In addition, asynchronous mode would give learners more time to check their responses before interacting with teachers; (they mostly seem to be afraid of committing any grammatical or spelling mistakes) Facebook, Skype and YouTube are known by almost

Ill learners, because of their spread over the world. They might strongly welcome the idea of using those environments in language learning as these environments provide significant opportunities to communicate (by texts, audio and videos) with people from different languages and cultures. However, teachers and a number of learners would consider those environments as time-consuming; they may tempt learners and move their attention and focus while learning. Furthermore, these environments can be regarded as unreliable and unauthoritative, for the fact that anyone can write, speak or record a video. This could not be, however, a limitation because teachers can control discussions, videos and talk easily. Wikis would also be encouraged by both teachers and learners. It would be possible to suggest Wikis for online reading to Iraqi learners, just as an attempt to communicate language with technology (computers/other devices). Therefore, this essay would suggest that when applying these environments with the selected Iraqi group online reading would be taken as a first step towards implementing technology with language learning. Reading in this sense is both controlled (structured reading activities) and free (extensive reading). In terms of feedback, Iraqi learners may, to a great extent, prefer teachers' feedback; they tend not to accept peers' feedback because they probably want the feedback from someone who is at a higher level (also they are afraid if their mistakes are revealed in front of their peers). However, peer feedback also existed but it depends on the relationship of peers as both researches above revealed. Moreover, it would be better for teachers/learners if they use asynchronous interactional feedback, because it is private and could happen at any time and anywhere, they also would prefer face-to-face teachers' feedback, because it may probably open the doors that are somehow restricted in asynchronous mode of discussions and destinations. In terms of cultural awareness, culture would strongly influence CMC in perceptions of both teachers and learners. Thus they both would encourage CMC in language teaching/learning environments, because they might share cultural knowledge and understanding from all parts of the world. As for genders, probably the results of the finding of both researches would be the same in the context of Iraqi learners. Moreover, the technical and internet accessibility of females appear to be slightly less than males, so, males could be able to use technical devices more. However, according to the selected Iraqi group of learners, females can be considered more supportive and encouraging than males in CMC environments for language learning.

## **XI. CONCLUSION**

Computer-

mediated communication is rapidly developing. Life in the center depends more on technology. As computer-mediated communication is utilized in almost every field of life it can be utilized in language learning. A large number of studies revealed the privileges of implementing CMC in language learning. Furthermore, there is a possibility that CMC learning would take over the traditional way of classroom learning because of the benefits and variable environments that CMC offers. According to all the findings revealed in this essay, CMC environments would be significantly beneficial in language learning as they provide a large number of opportunities of communication, collaboration, and language and cultural knowledge. In the context of the Iraqi group of learners, it would be also beneficial as well as developmental in implementing CMC environments for educational purposes especially language learning. However, a large number of learners because of the limitations mentioned above would find difficulties using CMC. Therefore, CMC might be applied as a blended course with the traditional classrooms. The maintained learners' reflections are limited as there seem to be no previous studies to support claims (claims are based on experience). Further study would provide authentic investigative research.

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