

Analysis of Learners' Perception of the Pedagogical Usefulness of Messenger as a Call Application

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to analyze students' perceptions of the pedagogical usefulness of messenger as a Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) application in second language learning. Our analysis will be presented as follows: first, a discussion of the pedagogical usefulness of CMC in L2 learning; second, an analysis of how our findings are similar or different to previous researches on Computer Mediated Communication (CMC); finally, the benefits and limitations of CMC in reference to other CALL applications.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Due to the rapid increase of technology, computers have played a significant role in foreign language learning and teaching in recent years (Kupelian, 2001; Warschauer & Healey, 1998 cited in Shang, 2007), likewise Computer Mediated Communication impacts positively on language learning such as more participation, more motivation and interest (Wang, 1998; González-Bueno,

1998; and Skinner & Austin, 1999 cited in Shang, 2007). In addition to this, there is some research in which it is found that synchronous CMC applications can increase motivation and reduce anxiety (e.g. Kern, 1995 cited in De la Fuente 2003).

Furthermore, Pellettieri (1994) considers that when learners communicate through a computer, they have more time to think about their language they need to use, this lets learners practice and take control of aspects of grammar that are not commonly practiced in a classroom conversation. Moreover, she points out that CMC tasks need to be goal-oriented, that is, they should have a communicative purpose. Likewise, Roed (2003) argues that the benefits of written CMC depend on its implementation as scaffolding: "gradually giving anxious students more confidence to embark on conversation in the target language" (cited in De los Arcos et al., 2009, p. 4).

With reference to the tutors, the lack of body language may make them work harder than in face-to-face settings since they have to create a sense of community,

trust, and student comfort that resembles a conventional classroom (De los Arcos et al., 2009). Taken for granted the benefits that CMC applications might bring to L2 learning process, teachers should take into account students' beliefs and attitudes towards its use when they design their tasks so that they could successfully achieve their learning goals.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Affective factors and students beliefs of how language is learned seem to foster or hinder language learning; likewise, De los Arcos et al. (2009) point out that "success and failure in language learning are partly determined by the learners' ability to regulate their emotions" (p. 3). In spite of the benefits that the use of strategies to reduce negative feelings (e.g., anxiety and stress) might bring to language learning, there is not significant research on these aspects in the field of CALL (De los Arcos et al., 2009). Moreover, the use of written CMC offers learners some benefits: shy students are eager to commu-

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nicate without feeling afraid since they feel protected by the computer screen; the sense of anonymity allows learners to “feel less inhibited, free to take risks and unafraid of making mistakes, and anxiety is reduced” (De los Arcos et al., 2009, p 6). Chatting as a synchronous CMC application provides learners with opportunities to be in contact with authentic conversations, learners can save their conversation, so they can reflect on and monitor their own language (Shang, 2007). Thus, taking into account the impact that learners’ attitudes and beliefs towards the use of messenger with pedagogical purposes can have on their learning process, our research question is as follows:

What are learners’ perceptions towards the usefulness of the messenger as a CMC application in their learning context?

CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

Messenger is a synchronous CMC application consisting of a free and instant chat room that allows for SNBC. Whenever a session is initiated, this CMC application displays a window in which people can see who they are chatting to. Considering the implementation of our activity, Ellis (2001) states that form-focused tasks refer to “any planned or incidental instruction that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form” (pp. 1-2 cited in Lyster, 2004, p. 400); moreover, VanPatten (2003) emphasizes that FF activities take place when correction, clarification request and confirmation checks are present. Based on the statements above, a form-focused activity was implemented in which two students had to interact to tell a story in the past; one student had a set of pictures and the other had a text in which parts of the story were omitted, they had 30 minutes to interact, complete the text, and

achieve the task goal. This activity was held at the UJAT Computing Center. They both are undergraduate students of communication degree and are at a pre-intermediate level of English as a foreign language. In spite of the fact that their career is based on communication matters, thus, they are somehow familiar with computers and some of its applications, they had never used computers for L2 learning purposes.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

This study seeks to analyze learners’ attitudes towards the pedagogical usefulness of the written synchronous CMC application “messenger”, to do so a seven-question interview was designed. Our questions were based on the assumption that students’ emotions and attitudes can facilitate or impede language learning (De los Arcos et al., 2009). The interview has 7 questions related to students’ emotions during the performance of a task, difference between a synchronous CMC setting and a classroom, linguistic areas developed through

the CMC task, potential benefits of synchronous CMC applications, limitations, major challenges in its implementation with students of Communication degree, and possible actions the institution should take to exploit this tool. After that, the questionnaire was implemented through a face-to-face audio-recorded interview, which was later transcribed, and then we wrote a sixty-word synthesis for each questionnaire section for each student’s answer. Then, we made use of a comparison matrix, which was based on the seven aspects under study, to analyze, compare and contrast each student’s answer. Our results are presented in the next section.

RESULTS

In this study our analysis reveals that the two students have positive attitudes towards the use of chatting as a CMC application. They reported a sense of enthusiasm and excitement while doing the activity. Moreover, both reported that through messenger they had more time to think of and reflect about what to say before saying



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it. Also, students coincided that vocabulary, grammar and writing were the L2 aspects they practiced most. They considered novelty and the sense of reality as the main advantages and lack of training and misunderstanding that may arise from lack of vocabulary and spelling mistakes as the main disadvantages. Finally, the main challenge this kind of activities have to face has to do with students acceptance since most of them are not used to doing it and therefore they need training courses on how to best work with this CMC tool.

DISCUSSION

It has been found (e.g., De los Arcos et al., 2009 & Pellettieri, 1994) that in using chatting for L2 learning, students felt nervous and as the task progressed, it became nervous excitement and this is very similar to what we found in the study among the participants; this may be due to different reasons: it was the first time our students were doing this, they had more time to think of and more important they did not feel the pressure of other people's eyes on them. Students reported that vocabulary and grammar were the L2 aspects they practiced the most, on the one hand, our findings on vocabulary learning is similar to what De la Fuente (2003) found "on-line negotiation tasks would be facilitating a much-needed incidental vocabulary development outside the classroom setting. (pp. 51-52). On the other hand, there is evidence that students tried hard to complete the story, however, the task objective was not fully reached; this may indicate that they need more time for language analysis so that they can achieve the task goal successfully. Finally, students claimed that misunderstandings of ideas are the main disadvantages of chatting, this is not in line with previous research (e.g., Pellettieri, 1994; De la Fuente, 2003), the former states

that misunderstandings triggers "clarification requests, confirmation checks, explicit statements of nonunderstandings" (Pellettieri, 1994, p. 71) which are trigger types for language learning to take place, the latter emphasizes that "where negotiation of meaning takes place clearly seem to be of great benefit to help learners advance in their L2 lexical development (p.74); therefore they are advantages rather than disadvantages.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Despite the enthusiasm and excitement showed during the performance of the synchronous CMC task, the linguistic aim of the task carried out by these two students was not achieved successfully because learners did exchange information but this was at expense of grammatical accuracy (Kern, 1995, cited in Pellettieri, 1994), since learners did not use complete sentences neither could they fill in the text. It is evident that these learners need to pay more attention to the language form. In this sense, Synchronous CMC application may increase motivation and reduce anxiety, but it is necessary to provide learners with task that allows them more time to focus on forms and reflect on the language. Such opportunities for language analysis and reflection may be possible if teachers take advantage of Wikis and Blogs. When learners post a contribution in a Wiki page they have the opportunity to see its evolution since other classmates can modify it if they think it is necessary; that is to say "...a wiki-based text is in a constant state of potential collaborative change" (Kessler, 2009, p. 80). This collaboration process provides learners with effective linguistic feedback (Vygotsky, 1978 cited in Kessler, 2009). As peer-editing work takes place through the Wiki page, they can post it on a blog because blogs "...also retain a sense of ownership

of their writing, which can be lost if the wiki technology is used on its own" (Dippold, 2009, p. 32). Thus, language teachers should be able to design tasks and select the appropriate CALL application that not only suit students' characteristics but also that allow them to analyze the target language.

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