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Using Online Chatting as a Medium of Communication to Facilitate

Second Language Acquisition

by

Qi Liu

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This paper investigates whether the use of online chatting as a medium of communication can improve second language acquisition (SLA). This study identifies the obstacles of face-to-face communication in Second Language (L2) speakers and discusses how online chatting can alleviate and even eliminate these obstacles to facilitate communication among language learners. First, literature addressing the obstacles to face-to-face communication in SLA will be examined and then arguments will be presented that support online chatting as a way to improve communication and SLA compared to traditional face-to-face in class communication. The shortcomings of online chatting in SLA will be discussed toward the end. Some suggestions will be given regarding how to overcome these shortcomings through teacher guidance and the use of technological innovations and how instructors might effectively incorporate online chatting into SL/FL education.

Online chatting is “the use of a computerized device in order to exchange text messages in a synchronous manner...if a computer-mediated communication (CMC) involves simultaneous engagement of interactants in the communication process,” it is described as Synchronic Computer-Mediated Chatting (SCMC) (Latzko-Toth 362). The use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in language education is well supported by the socio-cognitive theory for its facilitation of language use and collaboration (Hamano-Bunce 426). According to Van Nguyen, interpreting CMC within a communicative language teaching approach from Vygotsky’s sociocognitive perspective, “language instruction has

been viewed not only in terms of providing comprehensible input and negotiated output, but also in the sense of helping students enter into the authentic social discourse situations and discourse communities that they would encounter outside the classroom” (203). SCMC provides students a medium to use language in a relatively authentic context through language exposure, production, and collaboration. Among various forms of CMC, online chatting has received a good deal of interest due to its potential for meaningful communication, which is critical for language acquisition. Long and Porter in the article “Group Work, Interlanguage Talk, and Second Language Acquisition” report that “groups of mixed native language backgrounds tend to achieve greater amounts of negotiation.” Their study suggests that grouping of students of mixed language backgrounds together is preferable because “it is one means of avoiding the development of ‘classroom dialects’ intelligible only to speakers of a common first language” (224). As a result, grouping of students of mixed language backgrounds including native speakers provides an ideal setting for learners’ to develop competence in a second language.

Generally, there are two distinct ways to develop competence in a second language according to Steven Krashen’s SLA theory: learning and acquisition. Learning is the process of obtaining the “formal knowledge” of a language whereas acquisition is acquiring the language through real communication. Learning is conscious while acquisition is subconscious (Krashen and Terrell 26). Further, learning requires focus on form; acquisition requires focus on meaning.

“Acquisition and learning are in complementary distribution; one cannot consciously focus both on form and meaning at the same time” (Yue-hai 16). Since a learner cannot consciously focus both on form and meaning at the same time, the participants have to take ‘time out’ to focus on linguistic form (Loewen and Reissner 101). Michael Long in the article “Linguistic and Conversational Adjustments to Nonnative Speakers” claims that learners’ incidental focus on form, which is comprised of the formal aspects of language, such as grammar, vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation and discourse, may be beneficial for SLA (177). However, in face-to-face communication, noticing a form in relation to its meaning is difficult because it is challenging to visualize the linguistic elements of the words. Researchers have sought to improve learners’ incidental focus on form using computer and information technology and find that text-based chatting is a useful tool for SLA. For example, chatting significantly lowers learners’ difficulty noticing their own errors (Lai and Zhao 102). In fact, the most fertile ground for target language acquisition may lie with student-instigated focus on form (Schmidt 129). These findings suggest that chatting is an ideal instructional tool for focus on form.

While traditional approaches have focused on structure and form of a language, in recent years more and more credit has been given to the CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) approach, which engages learners in communications that require negotiation of meaning (Nowrozi 200). The CLT approach is intended to develop learners’ ability to efficiently use the target

language in various contexts and make the learners actually communicate, rather than simply to form grammatical sentences. Effective communication involved with negotiation of meaning is crucial to the success of developing competence in second languages. Rod Ellis in "Task-Based Research and Language Pedagogy" summarizes Long's Interaction Hypothesis:

Meaning negotiation can contribute to L2 acquisition, namely through the feedback that learners receive on their own productions when they attempt to communicate and through the modified output that arises when learners are pushed to reformulate their productions to make them comprehensible.
(199)

In other words, learners are pushed to produce comprehensible output in CLT. In fact, one of the reasons that CLT has received so much attention is that in this approach output is regarded as important as input. Swain's study from her immersion programs in 1974 indicates the critical role of output in the enhancement of L2 communicative competence. She argues that learners' attempts to produce comprehensible output will give rise to negotiation of meaning as well as form. When non-comprehension occurs between the interlocutors during meaningful negotiation, the learners may modify their speech through self-repair and eventually achieve L2 acquisition. Despite the fact that the CLT approach attempts to involve the learners in meaningful communication in a relatively authentic context, there are communication obstacles in SLA due to the nature of face-to-face interaction.

Classroom anxiety is an obstacle to effective communication and language learning in a face-to-face environment. According to MacIntyre and Gardner in the study about the effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in L2, "language anxiety interferes with a student's ability to retrieve appropriate second language items from memory" (298). In other words, even if the students possess the linguistic knowledge to communicate, the anxiety will prevent them from expressing that knowledge. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope studied the effect of classroom anxiety on foreign language acquisition in 1986, and claimed that "teachers and students generally feel strongly that anxiety is a major obstacle to be overcome in learning to speak another language." How to reduce the learners' anxiety has frustrated many researchers and educators (125). Their study indicates that anxious students tend to avoid attempting difficult or personal messages in the target language. Anxious students even exhibit avoidance behavior such as missing class and postponing homework. Anxiety centers on the two basic task requirements of second language learning: listening and speaking (131). Thus, many anxious students who refuse to listen and speak in class will not benefit from communication. Based on this study, Aida surveyed Japanese language learners in a university in the U.S. and found factors affecting students' anxiety including speech anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, fear of failing the Japanese class, degree of comfort when speaking with native speakers of Japanese, and negative attitudes toward the Japanese class (70-72). For example, it is common that language learners cannot remember a given word for a short period of time in

class discussion. While they pause in the middle of a sentence and try to figure out the appropriate word, they are very likely to be interrupted by the other participant (who may be a native speaker) because of impatience. When students have a “freezing of memory” in the middle of a sentence, it is important for them to calm down and think for a second. The unwelcome interruption from the other participant will discourage the students and even lead them to be anxious about speaking in the future.

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope toward the end of their article, discuss the possibility that language anxiety may be alleviated, to some extent, by supportive teachers, who “acknowledge students’ feelings of isolation and helplessness and offer concrete suggestions for attaining foreign language confidence” (132). They emphasize the importance of recognizing, coping with and even overcoming foreign language anxiety since it is a key factor shaping students’ experiences in foreign language learning. Unfortunately, they were not able to solve this major communication obstacle in SLA back then. With the emergence of the use of online chatting as a medium of communication to improve SLA, educators may eventually overcome this communication obstacle, which has concerned researchers and educators for many years.

Many students feel tense or anxious speaking their second language in front of people and online chatting can help overcome their fear of communicating. Zitzen and Dieter examined the distinctiveness of chatting as a medium of communication and claimed that chatting creates “a greater sense of

social distance, a distance from social face with loss of fear to communicate...” (1017). In other words, during an online chat session, students are less likely to be afraid of making mistakes or being laughed at by their peers because chatting “suspends, at least partially, the social rules that are found in face-to-face settings” (Freiermuth 197). Without the intensive social pressure and the risk of being “interrupted midstream by another participant” in face-to-face settings (Zitzen and Dieter 1004), students can focus on composing sentences and expressing their ideas.

Another obstacle to effective communication and language learning in a face-to-face environment is that individual students may have unequal opportunities to speak up in class. In the article “The Computer Mediated Communication to Develop ESL Learners' Communicative Competence,” from Singh presents various factors affecting turn-taking opportunities. According to Singh, students' different personalities, learning and response pace, motivation, and language proficiency can all affect individual students' turn-taking opportunities (76). For example, the students who have relatively low language proficiency may choose to be silent in class discussion because they do not want to cause any misunderstandings. When these students mispronounce a word or pronounce a word with a deep accent, the mispronunciation may be an impediment to communication. Example (1) below is taken from Freiermuth and shows how low language proficiency can cause an impediment to communication

in face-to-face communication: A Chinese female NNS (PK) tried to give suggestions about the type of business the group should consider:

(1) BG: Okay, I would, I guess we're supposed decide a business and a location ____ anybody have a preference in a business sense ____ like to attempt?

PK: How about a restaurant.

BG: What?

PK: Restaurant.

BG: Restaurant?

TH: Restaurant? (189)

Even though it is only one word (restaurant), this student is questioned several times by others. There is no doubt this student must have felt frustrated about saying the same word again and again but still could not make herself understood. Even worse, being questioned or asked for clarification may make the student hesitate to join in future discussion because the frustration of the earlier experience may have undermined his or her confidence.

In addition to students' language proficiency, culture is a major factor that affects students' turn-taking opportunities in face-to-face communication.

Freiermuth in the article, "Native Speakers or Non-Native Speakers: Who Has the Floor? Online and Face-to-Face Interaction in Culturally Mixed Small Groups," reported how people from different cultures take turns differently: "Athabaskans believe that by refraining from speaking, they are able to protect their stand on

various issues, which in turn protects their own individuality.” In contrast, Americans/Canadians use conversation as a means to become more acquainted with others and their viewpoints. As a result, Americans/Canadians perceive Athabaskans as having a lack of desire to speak so they feel compelled to continue speaking (173). If a similar misunderstanding happens in a class, some students’ turn-taking opportunities will almost certainly be affected. For example, many students in Asia may feel uncomfortable interacting in an ESL class because of their previous schooling in their native country. In many Asian countries, the school is teacher-centered and the teacher usually is the only one who speaks in class. According to Freiermuth, “in many Asian countries it is uncommon for students to have opportunities to participate in oral discussions” because the teachers do not encourage students to do so (187). Eckstein, *et al*, in their book *Understanding Your International Students*, discuss the student/teacher relationship in China, saying that Chinese “teachers do not expect a great deal of participation and discussion, if any, from their students” (104). As a result, many Asian students tend not to speak much in language class and benefit little from class discussion.

The incorporation of chatting into class can provide students with more equal opportunities to speak up because turn-taking is based on “a simple first-come-first-served principle” (Zitzen and Dieter 992). One student does not have to wait for the other one to finish talking before he speaks up. All participants can compose and type their messages without interfering with each other. In other

words, everyone can “speak” at the same time. Furthermore, the participants do not have to worry about being interrupted by others while they are in the middle of composing and processing words. As Shekary and Tahririan said in the article “Negotiation of Meaning and Noticing in Text-Based Online Chat,” when chatting online, “learners can be less affected by the constraints of oral interaction such as the fear of interrupting or of being interrupted” (558). In the relaxed chat room environment, they can easily achieve communication synchronously without the boundaries of time and space.

Chatting reduces the communication obstacles caused by language proficiency and cultural factors. The influence of learners’ low language proficiency on their confidence in communication is reduced because “learners do not have to worry about mispronunciation, accent or using the wrong word” in chatting (190). Example (2) below is also taken from Freiermuth and shows how chatting can reduce communication obstacles caused by cultural factors through displaying the transcripts of language learners from various backgrounds (two Japanese speakers, a Thai speaker and an Indonesian speaker):

- (2) <SO> How about a restaurant???
- <CE> we don't have a lot of trained workers though
- <KH> That sounds like a good idea
- <YA> Great, Thai restaurant
- <CE> do we have sound reasons for our choice?
- <KH> a seafood restaurant would be good since it's on the coast

<SO> It doesn't need specialized workers, so I think it's a good option

<CE> good idea. I like seafood.

<SO> it's okay with

<SO> any other suggestion??... (191)

Even though the four participants in this chatting are NNSs and from three different cultural backgrounds, the transcripts indicate that they understand each other very well. Their successful interactions will very likely promote their willingness to participate in group work in the future.

Chatting not only provides equal turn-taking opportunities, but also longer intervals between each turn for learners to process the output compared to face-to-face communication. This relatively longer time between each turn-taking allows the language learners to examine their output carefully. In other words, learners not only have more time to compose words, but also have the chance to check their language output before sending out the message. According to Irom Singh, "the process of checking language output from resources can often cause learning to take place" (79). Studies have indicated that the increased online planning time allows learners to produce more accurate and complex production compared to face-to-face communication (Yuan and Ellis 1) and "L2 learners do use the increased lagging time during online chatting to plan on more careful production and monitoring" (Sauro and Smith 554).

In addition to longer intervals between each turn, learners can also benefit from the visual record of the interaction. Since the interaction in chatting remains

visible to all of the interlocutors, learners can always go back to the transcript saved on the floor and relate to what the other participant or other peers have said. When their trains of thought were interrupted for any reason, "they can simply look at earlier contributions from their peers to reorient themselves to the most recent entry" (Freiermuth 204). The learners will not be hindered by guessing the meaning of a word in a face-to-face communication, either. Whenever they see a word they do not know, they can look it up immediately with the help of an electronic dictionary installed in the computer. "As a result of the slower pace of turn-taking and the visual record of the interaction, chatting may foster more complex and accurate production and may consequently help facilitate a higher quality interlanguage than would occur in a non-electronic environment" (Sauro and Smith 555).

Despite the fact that online chatting can contribute to learners' L2 acquisition, it is not without disadvantages. Teachers' limited control over the students' production, students' deficiency of technical capabilities, and online chatting's lack of visual cues can all mar the effectiveness of this instructional tool. In order to successfully incorporate chatting into SL/FL education, teachers need to overcome these shortcomings. Teachers' guidance and assistance including overseeing students' output through active monitoring, giving students more technical support and encouraging students to provide some personal information such as uploading their portraits can all help overcome these shortcomings of online chatting.

Teachers have limited control over the students' production and some of the students may produce inappropriate content, like sexual language.

Subrahmanyam, Smahel and Greenfield reported on their study in an article entitled "Connecting Developmental Constructions to the Internet: Identity Presentation and Sexual Exploration in Online Teen Chat Rooms." They investigate the online construction of identity and sexuality from monitored and unmonitored teen chat rooms. According to the data, sexual themes constituted 5% of all utterances and obscene language constituted 3% of the sample. Female participants produced implicit sexual communication, whereas male participants produced explicit sexual communication (400).

Discussion of sexual matters or sexual topics in public is not acceptable to all cultures. If the students are from various backgrounds, they may show different feelings about and understanding of the sexual language. In western countries, discussion of sexual matters or sexual topics in public is acceptable to many people, especially young people. However, discussion of sexual matters or sexual topics can cause embarrassment among Chinese students. According to Louise Higgins and Sun Chunhui in the article "Gender, Social Background and Sexual Attitudes among Chinese Students," most Chinese students, who are deeply influenced by the Chinese traditional view of sex, do not feel comfortable talking in public about their experience with masturbation (34). Therefore, if there are Chinese students in the chat room, taboo language related to sexual matters should be avoided by participants from other cultures. Although the CLT and

chatting are intended to encourage students to communicate without being hindered by social conventions, the chat room still needs to be regulated depending on the background of the students. The problem is that discipline is not as easily kept in a chat room as in a real classroom. Even though the teachers can guide the chatting, they have limited control over the content posted by the students. Furthermore, it is difficult for teachers to quickly respond to students' impolite or inappropriate statements because students neither see the teachers' facial expressions nor receive verbal feedback. Even if the teacher notices the inappropriate content and types a message censuring content, there is a lag time for such a response. As a result, the inappropriate content may have already caused some misunderstandings among other students.

To reduce students' inappropriate output, the teacher should create basic chatting rules and actively monitor the chatting. First, a chatting guideline should be given to students who are going to participate in chatting. The guideline should stress politeness and avoidance of taboo language based on the background of the student body. Second, since the teacher cannot see an inappropriate message until after it is posted, the teacher's handling of the message is very important.

Goldsborough, in the article "Keeping a Lid on Online Discussions," suggests educators actively monitor all discussion areas. When inappropriate words are posted by students, the teacher should find out whether it is deliberate or because a cultural difference results in misunderstandings. Moreover, the teacher should

inform the students when they type something inappropriate rather than just deleting the post.

Another shortcoming of online chatting is that students' technical ability may affect the effectiveness of online chatting as an educational tool. Hamano-Bunce's study in the article "Talk or Chat? Chat Room and Spoken Interaction in a Language Classroom" points out that if one participant types really slowly, the other participant may become very frustrated (431). "Slow typing can considerably hinder language production, negotiation..." (426). Similarly, Wang in the article "Student-Facilitators' Roles in Moderating Online Discussions" indicates that most teachers using online interaction as an educational tool may have ignored the importance of technical facilitation (872-873). While the students who type slowly can always practice by themselves, they cannot solve many other technical issues. As a result, teachers should provide technical support throughout the chatting process, especially during the initial time period (863).

Compared to face-to-face communication, lack of social presence may be the biggest disadvantage connected with chatting. Social presence is the "degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationship" (Short, Williams, and Christie 1). According to Ko, social presence is one of the key factors determining the effectiveness of learning. When learners perceive a higher degree of social presence, they tend to engage in more social interaction, experience more learning satisfaction, and get involved in in-depth discussions. Due to the nature of SCMC, learners cannot observe the

visual and verbal cues, which are an essential aspect of establishing social presence, in face-to-face communication (66). The lack of visual and verbal cues may produce negative effects on students' learning. Hampel, in a study designed to help teachers enhance online learners' interaction and collaboration, claims that a lack of such cues in an oral interaction environment could cause lower motivation (40).

While it is a fact that chatting provides inadequate social presence, it is possible to increase social presence in chatting. In the article "The Role of Social Presence in Learner-Centered Communicative Language Learning Using Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication: Experimental Study," Yamada explains the relationship between media, learners' perception of social presence, and output in communicative learning using synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC). This study investigated four types of SCMC: video conferencing (image and voice), audio conferencing (voice but no image), text chat with image (image but no voice), and plain text chat (no image and no voice). The results show that image can promote consciousness of natural communication. Furthermore, Yamada's study indicated that the existence of a partner's image enhances the consciousness of natural communication, which leads to a number of self-corrections, an aspect of learning performance (1). As a result, the teacher should encourage students to upload their portraits to increase social presence in chatting.

Although chatters cannot observe the visual cues, such as nonverbal cues, many chatters themselves employ various “creative linguistic and paralinguistic devices to express interpersonal and affective stances, such as contractions of linguistic forms, prosodic features, and typographical conventions such as capital letters and emoticons to simulate gesture and facial expressions” (Park 133).

Example (3) below is taken from a new online tutoring program initiated by the English Language Institute (ELI) at UNC-Pembroke and shows how emoticons simulate gestures and facial expressions:

(3) Ann 10:22:16 PM

I'm so dispirited that I can't understand some of the American talking.

It's so hard to response to the meaning of the word

Ann 10:24:55 PM

slow reaction and terrible pronunciation 🙄

Tutor 10:25:41 PM

Try to ask some questions when you don't understand

Ann 10:26:22 PM

OH I'LL TRY 😊

Tutor 10:27:24 PM

it's gonna take some time, don't push it

Ann 10:27:57 PM

ok (From Online Tutoring Program)

(Transcripts obtained from an online tutoring program initiated by ELI)

Even though the gestures and facial expressions of the chatters are not available, the chatters do use emoticons like 😏 😊 to convey emotions which would normally be expressed without words. They have actually developed an ability to express emotion in written form (Gunawardena 147).

Online chatting should function as a supplement to face-to-face communication rather than a substitute because chatting language and spoken language are not the same. Although the language of chatting or online language has many features of spoken language, it is still different from spoken language in many ways. In fact, online language is “a kind of hybrid between speaking and writing,” since it has features of both written and spoken language (Lindemann and Anderson 296). Some scholars even believe that Online English is completely distinct from the other two media. In the article “Chatting and Conversation: A Case of Transmedial stability?,” Zitzen and Stein argue that online chatting will ultimately be defined in its own right, differentiated from both spoken and written language (983). In the article “‘Synchronous Online Chat’ English: Computer-Mediated Communication,” Al-Sa’Di and Hamdan investigated some major linguistic features of online language, features which present its distinctiveness: “sentences are characteristically short and simple, many words are distorted and truncated in familiar and unfamiliar ways, abbreviations and acronyms are widespread, and taboo words very likely to occur in most chat sessions” (409). The short and simple sentences may “lead to inadequate output for language acquisition” (Yamada ¶4). One of the possible reasons that chatters tend to use

many short and simple sentences and acronyms is to save time in typing. After all, typing is slower than speaking. Many learners may feel considerable pressure to respond rapidly so that they can keep up with the conversation. Since many students feel they are pushed to give immediate responses, the teacher should encourage these students to slow down a little. Shekary and Tahririan suggest that learners' producing deferred responses makes the output explicit and salient (570). This is not to say that immediate responses pushed by the other chatter are discouraged. In fact, an immediate response can be more effective than deferred responses "because it occurs at the time when the information is needed..." (569). Therefore, the teacher should encourage learners to produce both immediate responses and deferred responses to maximize the effectiveness of online chatting (570). Wrongly spelled words may also hinder language acquisition. According to Shekary and Tahririan, "the time and energy put into negotiation may not pay off if learners do not incorporate the correct forms into their output." As a result, they suggest that teachers "strive to have learners produce successful uptake as often as possible" (570).

Since online chatting has features of spoken language and contains paralinguistic devices, such as the emoticon, many educators worry about whether online chatting will engage students in serious conversations. They have the perception that people talking online are often off the topic. According to Graeme Kirkpatrick in "Online 'Chat' Facilities as Pedagogic Tools: A Case Study," this perception that too much 'nonsense' is being spoken by students in the virtual

classroom is actually wrong. "...in fact the nonsense quota is probably about the same as in 'real' classroom situations." Three factors may cause this misperception: first, "student babble becomes more salient in this medium," because all text is on the screen. In other words, the words on the screen have visual impact on the teacher. Second, "students talk nonsense with greater confidence than usual" because they are familiar with this environment from another setting. For example, many students chat online with chatting software, like Microsoft Service Network (MSN). Third, "the standard cues and 'proximity' expressions are not available to the lecturer, with the result that authority has to be invoked sooner" (157). In fact, research has shown that chatters take their conversation seriously, even in public chat rooms where they may not be able to see each other. Peris, *et al*, suggest that people who use chat rooms "consider online relationships as real as face-to-face relationships" (49). This finding should remove some scholars' doubts that chatters do not take chatting seriously.

The successful implementation of online chatting needs a teacher's efforts to engage students in meaningful communications. The CLT approach is intended not only to encourage learners to communicate but also to engage learners in meaningful communications that require negotiation of meaning. Language learning entails a meaningful input that the learners can process. In other words, successful uptake is likely to occur when the input resonates with the existing knowledge that the learner already possesses. If the "learners notice a difference in the nature of the L2 input to which they are exposed, or in the language they

are producing, then changes may occur in their interlanguage to reposition it to a form closer to that of the input" (Shekary and Tahririan 560). The idea is that the input has to be relatable to the learners' existing knowledge so that the new information can be noticed, learned and remembered. Even though online chatting may promote learners' willingness to communicate, it does not guarantee that the chatters can have enough negotiation of meanings in various contexts, which is important to language acquisition.

In order to ensure that learners negotiate for meaning in online chatting, the teacher should design tasks to facilitate learners to negotiate meaning in chatting. According to Pellettieri, negotiation of meaning is facilitated more when the chatting is task-based than when it is oriented towards casual conversation (83). Van Patten also argued that tasks are a motivational way of language learning as they facilitate language use. Smith in "Computer-Mediated Negotiated Interaction: An Expanded Model" introduced two commonly used features to describe tasks: The first feature is that tasks are goal-oriented. Interactants are expected to arrive at an outcome accomplished through their talk. The second feature is that tasks are composed of activities, and this suggests that the participants need to play an active role in carrying out tasks (40-41). Based on these two features of tasks, Smith's study shows that learners indeed negotiate for meaning in the task-based CMC environment when non-understanding occurs. Furthermore, he finds different types of tasks can affect the amount of negotiation the learners produce. The study also indicates that the jigsaw tasks involved more

incidental negotiation whereas decision making tasks resulted in more negotiation sequences compared to jigsaw tasks (52). Even though there is no conclusion about how task types are interrelated with negotiation of meaning, it seems certain that task-based chatting, at least to some extent, facilitates negotiation of meaning, a factor which is fundamental in SLA.

Jigsaw tasks are commonly used in CLT. Students usually work in pairs or small groups. "In jigsaw tasks, learners are given separate pieces of a puzzle, and they are asked to reach a convergent goal by combining these pieces" (Yilmaz 118). In other words, each learner has part of the information and learners have to exchange their information in order to complete the task. According to Pica, Kanagy and Falodun in their task typology, among the five task types (jigsaw, information gap, problem solving, decision making, and opinion exchange), jigsaw is the most effective task type. Pica, Kanagy and Falodun also claim that a jigsaw task "can be considered the type of task most likely to generate opportunities to work toward comprehension, feedback, and interlanguage modification processes related to successful SLA" (21).

Despite limited research, there is still evidence indicating that the jigsaw is one of the most effective tasks incorporated into chatting. Yilmaz in the article "Task Effects on Focus on Form in Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication" investigated the effectiveness of jigsaws. Two jigsaw task pairs were designed and matched for content in this study. The participants were paired randomly in a dyadic interaction and each of the tasks was performed using MSN

Messenger and CoWord software (116). The study confirms that the “jigsaw triggers a higher amount of language production” and it indicates that participants are usually very communicative when they try to solve jigsaw tasks (126). Further, Blake argues that jigsaw tasks induce the most negotiations, “because they require each partner to both request and contribute parts of the solution, exacting from L2 learners a certain level of cooperation, convergence, and a pooling of resources. These tasks appear to constitute ideal conditions for SLA, with the CMC medium being no exception” (133). Therefore, jigsaw is an ideal task with the CMC medium because it promotes communication involved with negotiation.

Smith has given an example of how jigsaw tasks can be used in CMC. He used a sequence of six pictures (determined to be the optimal number for computer-mediated dyadic interaction based on earlier pilot studies) for computer-mediated dyadic interaction with intermediate level English as a Second Language (ESL) students.

Under this structure, each participant worked with a task sheet (A or B).

The instructions on sheets A and B were identical; the difference between the two sheets was that the participants had different parts of a six-part pictorial story. The three pictures held by each student were arranged in random order and were labeled A, B, C or D, E, F, respectively. (41)

Jigsaw Task

Student A

Messy Garage

Part 1: Look at the series of pictures about a messy garage. You have three scenes (pictures) and your partner has three *different* scenes. Together with your partner *put the scenes in the correct order*. To do this, you will need to *describe each of your scenes* to your partner since he/she cannot see your pictures. You may use the words below to help you describe your pictures. Your partner will do the same for you.

The scenes are marked A, B, C, D, E, F. When you finish, please type the correct order. For example - *The correct order is C, B, F, A, D, E*

MAKE SURE YOU HAVE THE CORRECT ORDER!!!!

Part 2: When you are SURE that you have found the correct order discuss the following question with your partner:

What chores (jobs) around the house do/did you have? Do parents expect their children to do jobs around the house to help out? Is there a difference in the KINDS of chores boys and girls are expected to do while living at home? Do/did you and your partner have similar experiences? If not, what are the differences?

When you are finished raise your hand!



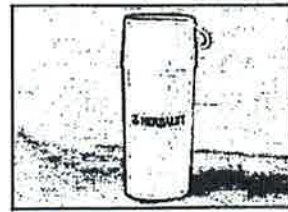
Tricycle



Snow shovel



Broom



Thermos

Student A - Picture Sequence



A



B



C

Student B

Messy Garage

Part 1: As shown in Student A Part 1

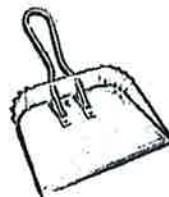
Part 2: As shown in Student A Part 2



Ax



Rake

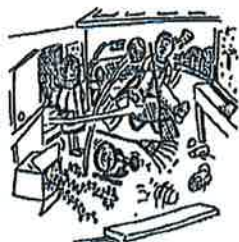


Dustpan



Overalls

Student B - Picture Sequence



D



E



F

This jigsaw task has two parts. Both of them are related to everyday life because cleaning a house is common to the general life experience of the participants. In other words, this task is meaningful for the participants and they can draw on their existing English language competence to finish the task. Further, the vocabulary of unknown items (objects) is provided to each participant and each of them receives four different target lexical items. Participants can also negotiate meanings of these words in chatting. This task is obviously well-designed to engage learners in negotiation of meaning.

Besides engaging learners in negotiation of meaning, the task design should also be based on the principle of being motivational. In the article "Willingness to Communicate: Can Online Chat Help?" Freiermuth and Jarrell noted that motivation is a matter of task attractiveness – an intrinsic measure. "If a

task is attractive and can sustain its attractiveness throughout an exercise, it is considered to be motivating” (190). In another article Freiermuth along with Huang Hsin-chou further investigated four factors that affect task-based motivation in chatting: the willingness to communicate, task attractiveness, task innovativeness, and the need to communicate in the target language (61). In the study, Freiermuth and Huang designed a problem-solving task for chatting. The task description is as follows:

You are part of a group of investors. Representatives from your group are planning to open up a company in one of the cities listed in the table below. Because each person in your group is planning on investing a lot of money, you must discuss and decide the following:

- What type of business would you like to start?
- Will the business be international or local?
- Why did you decide on that business?
- Based upon the characteristics of each city, what city is the best place to start your business?
- Why did you choose that city?
- Each city has strengths and weaknesses. If you don't know about a particular city, please ask someone in your group for more information about that city. The table will help you but might not answer all of your questions.
- Why did you decide to start a business in the city that you chose? (67)

Chat groups were set up using online software so that they could be easily arranged during the interactive chat session. Nine groups chatted to resolve the task. Groups consisted of either four or five students each: six groups consisting of two Japanese and two Taiwanese students, two groups consisting of three Japanese and two Taiwanese students, and one group consisting of three Taiwanese students and two Japanese students. Based on the analysis of a post-test questionnaire and the transcripts that students produced during their online task, the study indicates that students were generally motivated throughout the task with respect to all four of the factors:

- How does the task affect willingness to communicate?
- How does the task affect task innovativeness?
- How does the task affect task attractiveness?
- How does the task affect need to communicate?

These four factors are informative for educators who pursue ways to evaluate whether the task is motivating. Willingness to communicate, task innovativeness and task attractiveness are all related to the existing advantages of chatting as a communicative tool. As mentioned earlier, chatting, which increases learners' confidence and reduces anxiety by blocking many social cues, promotes learners' willingness to communicate. "The task was innovative inasmuch as these students, generally, do not communicate in English using online chat and, for the most part, do not communicate in English with language learners outside their immediate circle of foreign language learning students" (Freiermuth and Huang 74). This

task was also attractive to most participants. Freiermuth and Huang summarizes participants' responses regarding task attractiveness:

1. They can learn from one another.
2. They can relax while chatting.
3. They can resolve a task via real discussion in English.
4. They consider others' opinions; and
5. They gain cultural insights into the other's culture. (72)

The fact that students feel they can learn from one another is due to the interactive feature of chatting; they feel relaxed because chatting blocks, at least partially, the social presence; their feelings of fulfillment of a task in English are because of the moderate difficulty of the task; they value others' opinions because both sides of the participants hold part of the knowledge to solve the task; since the accomplishment of this task requires the exchange of students' opinions and knowledge, students on both sides will learn the culture of each other. In fact, responses 1 and 2 are still deeply connected to the existing advantages of chatting compared to face-to-face communication. Responses 4 and 5 are related to the "jigsaw" features of this task. Response 3 reflects the difficulty of the task and the need for students to use the target language.

As Freiermuth and Huang have indicated, a well-designed task should reflect the learners' need to communicate in the target language. The primary purpose of learning a language is to be able to interact with other speakers who use the target language to communicate. Learners who share similar backgrounds

with their peers may not need to use the target language to communicate.

Example (4) is from the UNC Pembroke English Language Institute online tutoring program:

(4) Ann 10:54:17 PM

hehehehe we joined in their birthday party last Friday

Ann 10:55:09 PM

meet lots friends who like 中文 (Chinese language)

Tutor 10:55:20 PM

whose birthday?

Ann 10:55:43 PM

you may know him

Ann 10:55:47 PM

rafferty

Tutor 10:56:06 PM

do not know him

Ann 10:57:18 PM

the guy who live with MAX

Ann 10:57:25 PM

坐轮椅的 (he is a wheelchair user)

Tutor 11:01:03 PM

Oh, hope you learn something from them :)

Ann 11:01:55 PM

😊 yes THX (From Online Tutoring Program)

As the transcripts have indicated, peer learners use their native language (中文, 坐轮椅的) to express the words they are not familiar with. Although these two chatters can be understood by each other, these productions may not be comprehensible to native speakers. Such tolerance among peers for code-switching or errors may hinder language acquisition because they are not pushed to modify their output. If negotiation of meaning of unfamiliar words does not occur, learners are unlikely to be aware of the gap in their interlanguage. As a result, learners may cease to develop their L2 proficiency.

To solve this problem, teachers should include among the chat participants native speakers or proficient speakers whose native languages are different from the learners. When such speakers are included, learners will always have to use the target language. They will also develop a sense of the need to use the target language. Gradually, they will notice the gap in their interlanguage by interacting with native or proficient speakers and producing more native like language. It is worthwhile to point out that Freiermuth and Huang's model involves two groups of students from different language backgrounds learning the target language. Although this model forces students to use the target language, students may not fully benefit from the interaction. After all, neither of these groups is able to create native-like language or authentic input.

Inviting native speakers to L2 classes in a university is feasible, but it is difficult to find native speakers in an FL setting. Teachers in an FL setting may

consider working with sister universities located in the country where the target language is spoken. Barfurth, *et al*, in "Computer-Mediated Communication in Korean-English Chat Rooms: Tandem Learning in an International Languages Program" show that the teacher can actually pair Korean and English-speaking peers, each learning the other's language. Native speaker students of either language can learn L2 through chatting. The report indicates that chat interactions between proficient and beginning speakers promote knowledge building within this cross-linguistic learning environment. Learners do produce their L1 in this type of chatting; however, it is considered as authentic input for the recipients since it is produced by native speakers. Data from chat transcripts show that these students were able to learn and teach contextually meaningful and appropriate linguistic terms and cultural behavior through chat interactions with each other. Further, language learners could develop awareness of self in relation to others (49).

Learners in the study of Barfurth, *et al*, fully benefited from chatting to promote SLA because the input was authentic. The authentic input from native speakers can enhance learners' pragmatic competence, which is a fundamental aspect of communicative competence. Without this competence, learners will encounter difficulties in communicating with native speakers due to social or cultural differences. As demonstrated in the following example (5) obtained from the UNC Pembroke English Language Institute online tutoring program:

(5) Lily 7:42:38 AM

How are you, older Brother?

Tutor 7:43:02 AM

Well, we usually do not call people “brother” unless they are blood related. You can call me Larry.

Lily 7:43:38 AM

Sorry I don't know that.

Tutor 7:44:02 AM

No worries. (From UNC Pembroke English Language Institute Online Tutoring Program)

In many Asian countries, there are special words to call one's older peers. “Older Brother” is a direct translation from Chinese “哥哥” which is a respectful term to address older peers. Obviously, Lily did not have this pragmatic knowledge until the tutor pointed it out. If this student communicates with her learning peers who are unfamiliar with this cultural difference, she obviously will not be corrected, and that is why proficient speakers or native speakers should be incorporated into chatting. Barfurth and his colleagues discuss Korean honorific discourse in detail. Here is the example (6) they give to illustrate the Korean honorific discourse in terms of how students appropriated language. These two students, each learning the other's language, were paired together for the first time in chatting activities.

(6)

Conversation, week 14

E9: whos this?

K2: 미치 [Mitch]²

E9: wha??

K2: 니가 준이지. . [You are Joon, right?]

E9: ya

K2: 너 몇살?? [How old are you?]

E9: 14

K2: 그러냥. [Oh, yes.] 너 한국으러 몇 살이야 [How old are you in Korean age?]

E9: 15

K2: 너 몇년도에 태어난거양? [Then which year were you born?]

E9: 87

K2: 나는 85 년 [I was born in 85.]

E9: oh

In this section of chatting, Barfurth and his colleagues noted that the Korean student asks the age of his partner three times. In western culture, it is usually inappropriate to ask the age of a person, especially a female. The Korean student probably was unaware of such inappropriateness and there is a specific reason for the Korean student to ask the age of the other partner. Korean is an honorific language and speakers cannot produce appropriate output unless they know the age of the addressee. Certain words may sound rude or inappropriate when used to address or refer to people of a certain age group. For example, “a regular Korean word for the English word *eat* is 먹다 (meokda), while an honorific Korean word for *eat* is 잡수다 (japsuda)” (63). When Korean students talk to people older than themselves, they choose the honorific words. Therefore, it is normal for Korean students to ask their partners’ age in order to produce

appropriate output. In the beginning phase, neither Korean nor Canadian students knew this cultural difference, so many Canadian students may have thought the Korean students rude because they asked people's age whereas Korean students felt the Canadian students impolite since they did not use appropriately respectful forms of address. However, as time went on, the Canadian students realized the importance of being asked their age and they "adopted the honorific forms of address to show respect for older students" and many other cultural misunderstandings were resolved. In other words, the students "gradually came to understand how to talk in a culturally meaningful way and learned that appropriate speech is context dependent" through the mediated learning process of chatting among peers (63).

Teachers not only need to create authentic input by including native or proficient speakers but also to play an active role in the tasks. In general, the teachers act as educational facilitators and social mediators. They should encourage students' participation and create an online community through the use of activities. To do so, teachers need to help the students "build friendships among themselves before asking them to talk to one another" (Barfurth, *et al* 59). For example, teachers can encourage "activities such as posting pictures and biographical information, getting-to-know-you games, social icebreakers, or teacher-started discussion threads that involve personal topics" (Williams, *et al* 394). As time goes by, students will overcome "their feelings of uncertainty by sharing their positions as experts in one language and novices in the other, each in

turn being a teacher and, at the same time, a learner in a technology supported discourse learning community” (Barfurth, *et al* 59).

Task-based online chatting helps students get involved in meaningful communication, which is critical to SLA. Based on the benefits of online chatting, such as overcoming classroom anxiety and providing equal turn-taking opportunities, online chatting should definitely complement face-to-face communication in SL/FL education. However, the successful implementation of online chatting as an educational tool needs the teachers’ efforts. The teachers need to create chatting guidelines and carefully monitor students’ output to ensure that the students have a safe and productive virtual environment. Since chatting takes place through computer software, the occurrence of technical issues is inevitable; therefore, the teacher also needs to give appropriate technical support to students. Finally, teachers should design motivating tasks to engage students in meaningful communication which involves negotiation of meaning.

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