

Chapter 6

Focus-on-Form and L2 learning in Synchronous Computer- Mediated Communication: Language Proficiency and Dyadic Types

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a study of the effectiveness of interaction in synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) context by comparing the nature of negotiations between learners of different proficiency levels in different dyadic types (NS/NNS and NNS/NNS). Dyads performed two tasks using textual SCMC interactions. Language-related episodes (LRE) were identified and used as a basis for individualized tailor-made tests to assess the learners' subsequent learning outcome. The results revealed that in the NS-NNS dyads, no significant difference in the frequency of LREs produced was found between the lower- and higher-proficiency learners whereas in the NNS-NNS dyads, the lower-proficiency learners produced significantly more LREs than their higher-proficiency interlocutors. Additionally, the learners of both proficiency groups interacting with NSs produced significantly more LREs than learners interacting with NNSs. However, no significant differences were found in the test performance of learners of different proficiency levels in either dyadic type.

INTRODUCTION

The interactionist theory of second language acquisition (SLA), which addresses incidental acquisition, highlights the importance of interaction in L2 learning (Lin, 2014). Important components in interaction process include input, apperception, semantic and syntactic processing, intake, incorporation into the learner's linguistic system and output (Chapelle, 1998). CMC, in a text-based form, can easily be

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5140-9.ch006

saved, archived, reevaluated and edited, all of which encourage reflection and interaction (Harasim, 1990; Warschauer, 1997).

For input to become intake, a learner is required to focus his/her attention on features of the target language (Chen & Eslami, 2013). Long (1991) first coined the term focus on form (FonF) to describe this attentional process. As argued by Schmidt (1990), noticing at the level of awareness is the prerequisite of any intake of input. FonF ‘overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication’ (Long, 1991, pp. 45–46). The importance of incidental focus on form is based on three principle claims about second language acquisition (SLA):

(a) learners acquire new linguistic forms as a product of attending to them in contexts where the primary concern is with message rather than code; (b) learners frequently experience difficulty in attending to and producing linguistic forms in communication because they possess a limited information-processing capacity; and (c) learners benefit from the opportunities that arise in communication to give focal attention to form (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001a, p. 281-282).

As submitted by Ellis (2016), there is evidence that focus on form results in richer types of classroom interaction that benefit the incidental acquisition of non-targeted features compared to focus on forms. Focus on forms involves traditional language teaching consisting of the presentation and practice of items drawn from a structural syllabus. Doughty and Williams (1998) emphasized that focus on form and focus on forms ‘are *not* polar opposites’ and that the essential difference is that focus on form “*entails* a focus on formal elements of language, whereas focus on forms is *limited* to such a focus” (p. 4). As argued by Ellis (2016), focus on form entails various techniques designed to attract learners’ attention to form while they are using the L2 as a tool for communicating. In contrast, focus on forms entails various devices (such as ‘exercises’) designed to direct learners’ attention to specific forms that are to be studied and learned as objects.

Although the effectiveness of planned focus on form has been examined in various contexts (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998), studies that have investigated the effects of incidental focus on form are limited (Loewen, 2005; Williams, 2001).

Previous literature has recognized the positive impact of incidental focus on form during learners’ interaction and negotiation of meaning on second language learning in face-to-face contexts (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001b, 2002; Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006; Loewen, 2002; 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005; Loewen & Philp, 2006; Murphy, 2002; Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Williams, 1999, 2001). A limited number of studies have also examined the occurrence and the effects of incidental focus on form on learners in online settings (Gurzynski-Weiss & Baralt, 2014; Lai & Zhao, 2006; Loewen & Reissner, 2009; Rouhshad, 2014; Rouhshad, Wigglesworth, & Storch, 2016; Sahin, 2009; Shekary & Tahririan, 2006; Tam, Kan, & Ng, 2010).

Text-based online chat, a synchronous form of computer-mediated communication (SCMC) has potential for increasing the occurrence of focus on form. The conversation flow, i.e., turning-taking frequency and speed, in SCMC is slower than face-to-face interaction, and therefore learners have a longer time to process the target language that they receive and produce (e.g. Shintani, 2016). Additionally, in SCMC users can easily save and access previous messages to engage in self-correction, a process that usually increases their language quality during authentic interactions. It is believed that computer-mediated communication (CMC) has the potential to be an intellectual amplifier for language learning (Altun &

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