

## Chapter 7

# The Nature of ‘Talk’ in Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication in a Vietnamese Tertiary EFL Context

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This classroom-based research aims to investigate the nature and quality of talk in synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) among Vietnamese tertiary EFL learners. Participants included 60 students in their sixth semester of an eight-semester BA in TESOL program in a large university in Central Vietnam. Using a sociocultural lens, the nature of discussion was compared in two modes of exchanges, SCMC versus face-to-face (FTF), through analysis of discussion transcripts supported by questionnaire data, interviews and observations. The first level of analysis, participation, revealed that the online students, collaborating in an academic task for the first time via SCMC, produced fewer words, but spent more time, during the discussion process. More equal contribution was a marked feature of the SCMC mode. For the second level of analysis examining the interactional nature and pattern of discussion, transcripts were analyzed according to socioaffective, organizational and sociocognitive themes, and their emergent subcategories. Clear differences were evident between the two settings regarding group processes, leadership, negotiation and consensus. It is argued that for these tertiary Vietnamese EFL learners, the FTF groups were more product-oriented in the discussion task, while the online groups presented a more process-oriented style of learning.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Improving English language education in Vietnam is a key national priority, strongly supported from the very highest levels of government, underpinning Vietnam's sustained commitment to opening its door to the world. In a recent conference on Higher Education Quality (MoET, 2008), the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education and Training exhorted that the national scheme enhancing the wide usage of English in Vietnam must be achieved. A further goal is that by 2015 all students graduating from university will be capable of communicating successfully in English language speaking communities. While the importance of English has been broadly and overtly acknowledged, the gap between rhetoric and current realities is marked: chief among these factors are prevailing practices related to teacher-fronted, examination-oriented English language classrooms (Nguyen, 2010a). Given the high national goals for English language proficiency, and the evident spread of information technology in Vietnam in recent years (Internet World Stats, 2010), the government is concerned to strengthen the application of ICT in education and administration as part of Decree 64 (Vietnamese Government, 2008). The academic year 2008-2009 was themed by the Ministry of Education and Training as "The Year of ICT Application", aimed at connecting schools to the Internet and integrating new technologies into the curriculum. This initiative, focused on improving teaching quality and modernizing educational management, is considered an initial step in bringing technology into the Vietnamese educational system. The research reported here was conducted at the time of these first initiatives, and aims to contribute to them by investigating the potential computer-mediated communication (CMC) may offer when first introduced into Vietnamese tertiary EFL classrooms.

The application of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) into language

education has been extensively and intensively researched for the past twenty years, from earlier generations (Ortega, 1997; Weisband, 1992) till more recent studies (Liang, 2010; Nguyen, 2008; Payne & Ross, 2005; Peterson, 2009). SCMC is considered as one of the two basic modes of CMC, along with ACMC (asynchronous computer-mediated communication). Based on research regarding the nature of 'talk' in the SCMC modality, this text-based method of synchronous communication is believed to allow learners to communicate with some discourse functions and negotiation sequences similar to the face-to-face (FTF) medium, and also to facilitate learner monitoring of language usage through increased participation and interaction.

The amount of learner participation has been the subject of much inquiry into SCMC, with results suggesting that SCMC has the role of equalizing participation, fostering greater participation (Fitze, 2006; Kern, 1995), and liberating marginal members (Honeycutt, 2001). Classroom research on SCMC, for example, demonstrates that learners experience less anxiety during electronic communication than in FTF interactions, possibly due to the reduction of non-verbal cues (Warschauer, 1997), which is facilitating in terms of participation. Even students who do not consider themselves to be fluent participate as much as others in SCMC mode (Warschauer, 1996). Kitade's study (2000) showed that SCMC helped augment learners' participation in various classroom activities because this environment was believed to provide opportunities for more varied modes of interaction than the traditional FTF classrooms. In particular, Kern (1995) reported that students in electronic discussions used a wide variety of discourse structures and noted that this variety was greater in the electronic discussions than in the oral discussions, resulting in increased participation, negotiation of meaning and authentic interaction. SCMC has been seen as facilitating for learners who are timid in FTF interactions.

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