Online Communication: An Outlet for Textisms

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Abstract

The Internet is the fourth revolution in human history coming after language, writing, and print. It paved the way to online communication. This form of communication provides EFL learners with more opportunities to practice the English language with each other or even with native speakers outside the boundaries of traditional classroom. Online communication modalities have developed rapidly to be easily used as long as there is an access to the Internet. Texting is the common feature of this use. However, the popularity of texting among young learners can affect their literacy; especially with the use of textisms (e.g., abbreviations, nonstandard spelling). Thus, there is a persistent need for empirical evidence to be with or against the use of online communication.

Keywords: Online communication; EFL learners; Texting; Textisms; WhatsApp

I.Introduction

Having Ph.D. degree in 1010, the researcher occupied herself practicing the English language. She wanted to 'live the language'. Using the Internet, she got acquainted with some sites of language exchange partners. She spent long time learning how to communicate effectively with people living in different parts of the globe using text, video and audio components of various Instant Messaging (IM) applications (e.g., Yahoo!, Hotmail, Skype, … etc.). These applications helped her simulate real face-to-face (F2F) communications and interact with native speakers who live far away; experiences she never tried before.

Soon, she realized the potential pedagogical benefits of the various modalities of online communication for EFL learners in specific. These learners do not have the chance to practice the language after they come out of the classroom; more important, they can communicate with native speakers. Besides, instructors and learners can interact with each other for enhancing language learning outside the traditional contexts of the classroom. This encourages connectivity of instructors with their learners.

Moving from a university to another in Egypt and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (i.e., Mansoura University, Suez Canal University, Majmaah University & Qassim Private Colleges), the researcher found a minimal use of online communication in EFL learning; exclusively, using e-mail for sending courses materials and homeworks – if any. For about three years, the researcher committed herself to study the pedagogical implications of this type of communication for developing different skills of English.

II.History

The Internet is less a technological fact than a social fact. It has qualitatively transformed everyday communication in every realm: commercial, financial, professional, educational, recreational, and

interpersonal (Thorne, 2000). Its rapid growth; arguably, the fastest growth in history is bringing about the fourth revolution in the means of production of knowledge on a par with the three previous revolutions of human communication: language, writing, and print (Warschaucer, 1997).

Language teachers have embraced the world of online communication the Internet has introduced. Many online communication tools – e-mail, discussion forum, chat – are familiar to many language teachers. Recent tools – blogs, wiki and RSS feeds – may be less familiar but offer powerful opportunities for online communication for both language teachers and learners. The underlying technology of these new tools is XML "extensible markup language" which enables machine processing of Internet documents. Some considered it as the signal of arrival of the second-generation Web (Godwin-Jones, 2003).

According to Kawase (2006), the term 'computer-mediated-communication' (CMC) – the ancestor of online communication – was first used by Hiltz and Turoff (1978) in their study of computer conferencing. Since the 1980s, people have started using computer conferencing in academic and business settings. Since that, interaction through computers has steadily gained popularity. The many ways in which learners can interact using computers can be divided into two broad categories:

1.Asynchronous computer-mediated-communication (ASCMC)

This mode of CMC does not necessitate that the interactants must be present at the same time. It includes first generation tools (e.g., e-mail, discussion forums, bulletin boards, … etc.) which may give learners more chances to think and answer. Now that most e-mail programmes support formatted text and graphics, e-mail is more attractive and versatile than before where multimedia can be embedded directly in messages. However, many instructors have increasingly turned to discussion forums which facilitate group exchanges and maintain automatically a log of all messages in threaded, hierarchical structures. While dedicated software for creating discussion forums exists such as WWWBoard, many instructors have access to built-in forum creation in a learning management system (LMS) such as WebCT and Blackboard or voice-based forums such as Wimba (Godwin-Jones, 2003; AbuSeileek & Qatawneh, 2013).

2.Synchronous computer-mediated-communication (SCMC)

It is commonly referred to as chat (i.e., real-time discussions via online channels). The attractiveness of instant messaging for language learners resides particularly in the addition of voice and video options with online/offline status alerts in chat systems such as AOL Instant Messengers, (AIM), MSN Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, …etc. which provide transcripts of chat sessions (Godwin-Jones, 2003). To send a message, it is first entered into a discrete text window, and then, when posted, it takes its final place in the shared window as an 'e-turn' – as Thorne (2000) calls it – as a distinct block of text tagged with the sender's name in an ongoing two- or multi-party discussion. This representation of one's message as a unified and emplaced utterance objectifies it in a way that is distinctive from the experience of producing it. The speed of exchanges forces short, spontaneous messages which more closely simulate spoken exchanges than in the case in, for example, discussion forums. However, SCMC – for Kawase (2006) – is different from F2F interaction in different ways:

a. Participants do not receive visual paralinguistic or nonverbal clues when interacting. Instead, they use abbreviations, exaggerated punctuation, and symbols to express emotions.

b. Greetings and closures are not always needed in SCMC, as the computer screen identifies who is talking.

Computers and smart phones connected to the Internet have become a necessity for daily life. In addition, educational uses of the Internet communication tools have grown in popularity exponentially over the past decade all over the world: The Internet mediation of language-based, online communication is a primary for First and Second World learners. Nevertheless, there is a limited use of it by Arab learners. The use of smart phones, for example, operated by Android system with different chat applications (e.g., WhatsApp, Tango, Viber, ChatON…etc.) is straightforward and practical to implement, especially in distance learning or hybridized courses where F2F contact is limited (Sykes, 2005). It has become a simple and inexpensive matter to create language-learning groups all over a country and around the world. Actually, this opened a new approach called Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL).

III.Advantages of Online Communication

Different scholars (e.g., Sotillo, 1997; Warschauer, 1997; Sykes, 2005; Kawase, 2006; Zeng and Takatsuka, 2009) used different modalities of online communication. They came with the following advantages compared to F2F interaction both inside and outside the classroom, as follows:

1.It is a hybrid form of communication that brings speech and writing together. That is, although online chatting clearly involves reading and writing, learners' output is considered to have combined characteristics of speaking and writing. It is similar to speaking in that the output takes place in real time, and the stress on particular words and phrases can be indicated using italicized or bold-faced text. At the same time, it is also similar to writing in that it produces a relatively per moment record of the discourse.

2.Participation increases in quieter learners because they tend to participate in a written discourse as much as participants who normally dominate the classroom. Mesh (2010) confirms that learners show less inhibition, less social anxiety and greater willingness to take risks. He refers to this phenomenon as "disinhibition." He quotes its definition from Adam Joinson (1998) as "any behavior that is characterized by an apparent reduction in concerns for self-presentation and the judgment of others" p. 44.

3.Chat tends to produce more complex language than traditional F2F communication. Learners can compose their utterance at their own pace and they can view each other's language as they produce it. The visual display of their utterances provides opportunities for conscious attention to and reflection on their language use as well as prompts for further interaction.

4.Online communication is time- and place-independent. Learners communicate with each other anywhere and anytime as long as there is an access to the Internet.

5.This type of communication enables quick feedback and real-time interaction. Accordingly, learners can develop a strong sense of being part of a learning community, thereby increasing their engagement and motivation.

6.Chatting leads to more balanced participation in the TL with less domination from the teacher. Besides, it encourages teacher/learners and learners/learners to construct and share knowledge. In this respect, Warschauer (1997) mentions that (a) the exchanges were viewed as real, not pedagogical; (b) learners developed free and spontaneous, though not flawless communication while using highly complex

structures and vocabulary; (c) learners expressed deep satisfaction at being able to manage themselves as leaders and contributors in the target language; and (d) learners benefited substantially from the increased opportunity to practice TL outside the classroom.

7.Online communication allows multimedia documents to be published and distributed via links among smart phones which can provide an access to up-to-date authentic information. For example, learners can work collaboratively to plan and carry out tasks or role-plays related to their own personal interests gathered from a variety of sites all over the world.

Thus, in online communication, learners have real-time conversational exchanges. It has beneficial features which make it a useful medium for creating an effective learning environment where learners can learn language, learn about language, and learn through language.

IV.Texting VS Textisms

Chat applications (apps) of Android smart phones are very popular among young learners. The most important common point of these apps is that they require 'texting'. Although they provide its users with video and audio options, they usually prefer texting. It is near-synchronous, and associated with distinctive styles of conversation and writing features such as 'textisms'. Lyddy, Farina, Hanney, Frrell and O'Neill (2014) define them as "language variants such as abbreviations and nonstandard forms of words and include features such as letter and number homophones (c for 'see', 2 for 'to'), contractions (txt for 'text') and nonconventional spellings (nite for 'night')" p.547. They use 'squeeze-text' to describe the principal features of textisms in the following ways:

1.Words may be shortened to the minimum syllable length, often by removing vowels.

2.Articles and conjunctions may be omitted.

3.Its use demonstrates an appreciation of the sounds of language; especially, numbers or letters may be substituted for graphemic units (e.g., gr8 for 'great,' 4 for 'for,' 2 for 'to,' c for 'see,' or sum1 for 'someone').

4.Common phrases may be represented by acronyms (e.g. LOL, 'laugh out loud').

5.Capital letters might be omitted or used for emphasis.

6.End-message punctuation may be absent.

With all these features, there is a concern over the impact of texting on learners' literacy. Messages using textisms are faster to write than those in standard English, but they took nearly twice as long to read, and may be associated with more reading errors. However, more empirical treatments are required to provide evidence for or against the effect of online communication.

Being an assistant professor at Humanities and Administration College, Qassim Private Colleges, Buraidah, KSA, the researcher observed that chat apps are very popular among learners. They use them as a means of general communication not for learning purposes. Consequently, she used the WhatsApp to attract them to practice the English Language after classroom time. Actually, the app was very effective. It is clear from the screenshots below in Figure 1 that they were highly-motivated to share what they have studied and to receive feedback from their peers and from the instructor, who was a member in chat groups.

Figure 1: Screenshots of students' use of WhatsApp in learning

V.Conclusion

It is important to consider that online communication, whether it is integrated into the language curriculum or used as a self-access system, is not to be taken as a panacea or even worse as a complete substitution of classroom instruction. It has to be a supplementary work of what is done in the classroom. Its benefits are noted; especially, it requires neither training nor funding. It has to be planned and structured carefully without disregarding the teacher's role. This has to lead to changes in terms of learner independence, and to provide that appealing and challenging characteristic in learners, we as teachers all desire: learning autonomy.

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