

EFL Learners' Perceptions of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) to Facilitate Communication in a Foreign Language

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Abstract—This study explores perceptions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners on using computer mediated communication technology in their learner of English. The data consists of observations of both synchronous and asynchronous communication participants engaged in for over a period of 4 months, which included online, and offline communication protocols, open-ended interviews and reflection papers composed by participants.

Content analysis of interview data and the written documents listed above, as well as, member check and triangulation techniques are the major data analysis strategies. The findings suggest that participants generally do not benefit from computer-mediated communication in terms of its effect in learning a foreign language. Participants regarded the nature of CMC as artificial, or pseudo communication that did not aid their authentic communicational skills in English. The results of this study sheds lights on insufficient and inconclusive findings, which most quantitative CMC studies previously generated.

Keywords—computer-mediated communication, EFL, writing

I. INTRODUCTION

WITH the invention of the information super highway, technology has become more accessible and efficient. It is continually developing and adapting to changes. The Internet removes barriers of communication, which previously existed because of physical boundaries.

Foreign language educators adapted the ideas of communication technologies as a unique way, not only to facilitate interaction between instructor and learner, and learner and learner, but also to connect EFL learners with native speakers of the target language, [47; 18; 26].

Research studies looking at the CMC integration into EFL classrooms document the effects it has on language learner's speaking and writing skills [3; 25; 26; 33]. However, the majority of studies are conducted in experimental settings with participants receiving different CMC treatments. The effect of each treatment is measured as gains or difference between a pre-test and a posttest conducted within a short period of time. Given the fact that communication skills in a foreign language take a long time to develop, and little is known about communication using CMC, the researcher in this study decided to employ a qualitative case study approach.

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The researcher used this approach when examining EFL learner's perceptions of using either asynchronous, (e-mail) or synchronous, (chat CMC) to facilitate their communication skills in English. Over a period of four months, the researcher observed a blended EFL writing course at a southern university in Taiwan. Her observations focused on participant's use of communication strategies when engaged in either online or offline communication in English.

For example, she concentrated on how participants tackled communication breakdowns or information gaps arising in a virtual environment, and the diversity of language use for communication purposes. She also focused on the efforts demonstrated when using English to communicate either asynchronously or synchronously. Semi open-ended interviews were conducted for five volunteer participants, who wished to describe their experiences, and perceptions when using CMC. Extant data including CMC protocols and participant's reflection papers were analyzed to gain an overall understanding of what behaviors participants demonstrated in the process of using CMC. Also analyzed was how they perceived their experience.

In this paper, the author seeks answers to following research questions.

1. What activities do EFL learners, in Taiwan's higher educational system engage in when using CMC as a tool for language learning purposes?

2. What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks identified by participants regarding the use of CMC? CMC is a tool to facilitate communication in English. Is it beneficial?

3. What communication patterns characterized this MC experience? And how do participants perceived the experience?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The quality of learner's interactions in the CMC environment has been neglected in previous studies. Issues like language student's learning strategies, perceptions of the use of technology and CMC tools, as well as, the communication strategies they employ in the CMC environment were less studied utilizing a qualitative research method. Qualitative method is able to "get closer to the actor's perspective through detailed interviewing and observation" (p.10) and "lay emphasis on processes and meanings, stress the socially constructed nature of reality how social experience is created and given meaning." [9].

Most studies investigating the use of CMC in language instruction in higher education look at its effect from the perspectives of language professionals and researchers. There are not many studies conducted uncovering student's perspectives on using the technology. The researcher proposed that student's input regarding how they perceive an innovative technology in their learning process is highly valued prior to implementation of any instructional intervention. Questions, such as how students use CMC in and out of classrooms, and to what extent do they use it, as well as, what they perceive as the benefits and barriers when using the technology must be thoroughly examined. But the most important question posed is; when they engage in CMC activities, what communicative behaviors do they demonstrate? Specifically, do the behaviors promise an improvement in communicative competence, while producing a satisfactory global picture of its use in foreign language classrooms? The present study was a qualitative case study and was examining the synchronous and asynchronous communication experiences and perspectives of EFL learners enrolled in a blended EFL writing course.

The researcher hoped to understand their perceptions, advantages and disadvantages by obtaining a description of student's experience with CMC tools, the researcher then hoped to understand their perceptions of the advantages, disadvantages these techniques brought to their language learning experience. It is therefore, necessary to review past studies conducted on this perspective, and a number of theoretical constructs related to communication and language learning.

Communicative language Teaching

Audio-lingual methodology was widely embraced by foreign language educators in the 1970s. This particular method emphasized the development of learner's linguistic competence as opposed to their communicative competence. The former competence was regarded as a prerequisite before communicative competence in the target language. It specifically refers to the learner's ability in mastering linguistic patterns and accurate articulation of the sound system of the target language [35].

However, the latter refers to a competence that would enable the learners to actually function, and operate successfully in an authentic environment. An environment is where the target language is used. Savignon [35] defined communicative competence as following.

"[Communicative competence is] the ability to function in a truly communicative setting- that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, or one or more interlocutors." (P.8)

Communicative language teaching, (CLT) is proposed and geared to remedy the weaknesses of Audio-lingual approach in the 1980s. In the past it was widely witnessed that language learners, who can perform exceptionally in discrete tests failed to carry on ordinary conversations in the target language. When closely examining the language teaching method, researchers found out opportunities for meaningful communication in the

foreign language classroom were either fake or scarce. Simply having students repeat, and practice set dialogues will not ensure the students will operate successfully in a natural setting. A natural setting involves unpredictability and diversity. Savignon therefore proposed, "Promoting authentic communication will require a restructuring of the traditional classroom environment" [35].

She suggests that teachers change their role as an authority in the classroom, to one that encourages meaningful expressions among students. In addition, in real communication activities, the focus should not be asking students to adhere to the foreign language at all times. Nor should any inaccuracies be pointed out for group learning purpose [35]. The trend of emphasizing the importance of communicative competence of foreign language learners has greatly shifted the focus of language instruction. The focus was shifted to integrate activities and ideas for meaningful purpose in authentic contexts. This is integral to development.

A study was conducted investigating Japanese second language in-service teacher's views, and actual practice of communicative language teaching in their classrooms. Sato and Kleinsasser [34] reported that in-service teachers "resorted to their personal ideas and experiences, solidifying their notions of foreign language teaching in further pursuing their evolving conceptions of CLT" (p.494).

Teachers as practitioners care little about past literature that has documented CLT. Instead, they implement CLT in their classrooms using their self-defined meanings pertaining to CLT. This study was significant because it exposed issues of what researchers and practitioners perceive as CLT, its principles, implementations and notions. Teacher's perceptions of CLT affect their implementation of CLT in the classrooms.

In this study, the researcher examined EFL learner's perceptions of the use of CMC to foster their communication skills in English, under the premise that EFL instructors perceive CMC technology as a tool, which enables communication to take place in a foreign language classroom. CMC integration is an ideal practice of CLT in the classrooms.

Computer-mediated communication and foreign language instruction

Researchers, interested in studying asynchronous electronic communication, suggest that electronic text embodies both written and oral discourse. [8; 14; 15]. Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth [17] these researchers examined the difference of message composed by email, and word processing. The results indicated that no significant difference was found between email and word-processed writing. However, participants tend to produce shorter text, when composing it via email. Additionally, word-processed texts involve more text-initial contextualization. Research shows that e-mail is a valuable tool in improving language learners' vocabularies and grammar abilities. [1;12]. The e-mail messages written by first-language partners serve as language models, which second-language learners reference when they draft their reply messages [12]. Target language e-pals' feedback on second-language learner's writing is especially varied when writing advice from the

instructor is not immediately available in traditional EFL/ESL learning environments. In addition, the informal nature of e-mail messages contains a high frequency of colloquial language usage, which is otherwise not available in formal language instruction. Mastery of standard use of the target language is the priority.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It was through the lenses of social constructivism that the author conducted the study and analyzed the data. For the past three decades, social constructivist pedagogical theories stemmed from the philosophy that social constructivism has practical implications for instruction and learning [20; 32; 19].

Social constructivism classrooms emphasize the importance of knowledge construction, and learning through interaction with their peers, instructional materials. Students in constructivism classrooms are viewed as active participants in the knowledge-construction process, rather than passive knowledge recipients. Also, the role of the instructors changed. They instructor's no longer distribute the knowledge. Instead they actively facilitate the learning process.

Vygotsky's studies [46] on the role that language plays in human behavior are explained through the notion of Zone of Proximal Development. According to Vygotsky, social interaction plays an important role in the language-learning process, and the zone refers to the distance between children's actual development and their potential development. Vygotsky emphasizes the role society plays in helping children learn their native language. Computer mediate communication helps create a virtual social learning environment in which a foreign language is learned through interaction, negotiations, and accommodation to each individual and his or her peers.

The success of the language learning experience lies on each individual's contribution in the knowledge construction process. Each individual constructs his or her own internal dialogue in the foreign language basing it on feedback and negotiation of meanings and reinforcement given by their peers.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Case study through the lenses of phenomenology

This study was conducted employing a qualitative case study through the lenses of phenomenology. According to Creswell, "a case study is an exploration of bounded system," which is bounded by 'time and place', and it is the case being studied-a program, an event, an activity or individuals." (p.61). Creswell further suggested that "the context of the case involves situating the case within its setting... the focus may be on the case that because of its uniqueness, required study" (p.62). The study was explored using a case study approach because of its uniqueness. CMC-enhanced communication is a primitive and pioneering application of technology. It is a worthy study, because it only deals with learners learning a foreign language. The CMC in this study is further defined as technology used in fostering communication in the foreign language. Instead of

technology that people do for business or other communication purposes.

In addition, focusing the investigation on the nature of the communication, i.e. the lived experience of the EFL learners when they engaged in on-line interaction practicing the foreign language, a phenomenological approach was adopted accompanying the case study.

According to Husserl, phenomenology is a "systematic and disciplined" methodology that discovers the "essences" of human experience; it emphasizes the "subjectivity" of each lived experience as encountered by the individual by a method of "reflection" [11]. Different EFL learners have different opinions and perceptions, exposure to the experience of on-line interaction. The researcher discovered the "essential, invariant structure" of the experience, by conducting several in-depth interviews.

Furthermore, Berger and Luckmann [5] define the task of a Phenomenologist as: "capturing how people construct their reality." One of the theoretical frameworks of the phenomenological perspective is symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes the importance of "social meanings". People attach "social meanings" to the world when they act and respond to it [6]. The current study is based on an incident of "social interaction", which happens as a result of engaging in language practice.

V. RESEARCH PROCEDURES

A. The Site and the Participants

Taiwan is the research site. The city university is located in the southern part of Taiwan. The university is well known for its satisfactory preparation, and job training for students. They prepare students for careers upon completion of their studies. The curriculum puts emphasis on the development of student's ability to secure a job in different disciplines of their choice. Therefore, facilities and courses are provided and designed, taking into account practicability and applicability.

Hands-on exercises, field trips and team projects are major activities integrated in most course syllabi. The university launched an Internet platform, and several pilot courses were made available online. If they were received well, a proposed plan of converting the traditional campus into an electronic campus would be put into action. The Ministry of Education in Taiwan promoted this idea. The university has a program entitled applied foreign language. This program's goal is to prepare students for careers as interpreters, English secretaries, and business representatives in foreign institutions and agencies. It also prepares them as English teachers in elementary schools. The program set a minimum requirement of TOEFL 530 for students. They must meet this goal before a bachelor degree of language and arts is awarded.

The program, as its name implied, emphasizes the application aspects of its language instruction. Students in the program received a lot more training in using the language.

Facilities such as video players, interactive language labs, and a digital library that houses multimedia language learning

materials, satellite devices and Internet access are provided to assist language learning. The program recently offered a course that instructs students in making use of Internet resources for self-regulated language learning purposes. The case study encompassed two entire sessions of an EFL writing class during the spring semester of 2004. The 96 students, ranging in their ages from 19 to 23, have been studying English as a foreign language for more than 3 years. They are now in the second year of the program. Most of the students choose this program as their major, because of their interest in the English language. Also, a degree from this program promises attractive careers for graduates. Most of the students are bilingual and also speak Japanese. The program requires its students to master at least two foreign languages. The class meets once a week, for 3-hour periods, lasting 15 weeks and consisting of one semester.

The instructor of the class is an experienced language educator, and has been a respected faculty member in the university for nine years. She obtained her Master's degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TESOL) from the U.S. in 1993. She now successfully teaches four language skills in the program. The program encourages instructors to use technologies whenever it is applicable in the instruction of both languages. The instructor, with interest in discovering the potential of technology in language learning, formally integrates technology in the course syllabi. Since the goal of the class is developing student's writing skills in English, the instructor deems it necessary that students practice writing extensively.

However, it is impossible for a single instructor to give individual feedback, so the instructor devised an alternative in which students get feedback from their peers, while the instructor stays behind the scene to facilitate the feedback. This was made possible by having students exchange their ideas and give feedback about specific writing assignments. This was accomplished by engaging in either asynchronous or synchronous interactions conducted via e-mailing or chat room discussion. The instructors generated an e-mail exchange list for the two sessions of class, and exchanged e-mails on real-life topics predetermined. Internet Relay Chat (IRC) was also established for students, who have preference for instant and real-time communication. Students were required to submit essays after discussing ideas and getting feedback from their peers. The CMC activities were continued for duration of 10 weeks, and a training session was established, teaching students how to write, reply and forward e-mail.

Passwords and usernames were given to students for accessing chat rooms established specifically for this class. Coping strategies were shared with students in regard to the handling of miscommunication or no-communication among peers. Students were advised to reflect the communication process as a learning-to-write process, and all the e-mail messages and chat room protocols were automatically stored in a course website. These communication messages constitute the major sources of data for this study.

B. The Researcher Identity

The researcher in this study was a participant observer, who spent eight years in residence, at the university from 1994 to 2002 as a full-time lecturer. The instructor was familiar with the department, the school, its environment, faculty members, policies and administrations.

Familiarity with the research environment and participants may add subjectivity to the design, development and results of the research. However; it was because of this familiarity that the researcher was able to gain full access to the people, extant documents and interested activities and was fully able to seek answers to the research question. Therefore, the researcher, argued that her identity should be regarded as more an advantage than as a disadvantage.

In addition, Lincoln and Guba [29] argued that a natural study would demand a "prolonged engagement" of the researcher to "establish credibility" (p.301). The researcher therefore claimed that her prior experience, and familiarity with the setting and its people should be regarded as more an advantage than as a flaw or a disadvantage to the study.

Furthermore, the researcher endeavored not to let her prior background affect her observations, and employed different techniques that promised both the reliability and validity of the research.

Additionally, the researcher is a constructivist, who claimed that knowledge is constructed rather than acquired by the learner via social communicative or negotiated process. People learn from assistance by experts or engaging in social communication. This is especially true in language learning. Language is a form of communication instead of a self-monologue. Language skills are more effectively developed in meaningful social contexts, where, feedbacks are given as impetus for learners to sensitize their incompetence or the target language. Learning takes place in an environment in which collaboration, problem solving, and scaffolding are encouraged. She also believes that technology has an essential role in facilitating the creation of this learning environment.

The interest of the researcher, in regards to the technology use in language learning, has prompted her to the formation of the research question. The researcher is looking at the questions from student's perspectives as opposed to her perspective.

Most instructors have a strong opinion regarding what class activities are good for language learning without resorting to student's points of view. The researcher believes that appropriate and successful class activities for language learning should reflect student's' perspectives and preferences. When analyzing the data, the researcher, as an instructor of foreign languages, looked for characteristics that would indicate participants' communication difficulties. She knew these would make up the most interesting findings of the study, because she expected that virtual communication in which environment cues were not readily available for information decoding would create more challenges for students. It would create challenges for students, who already experienced difficulties in face-to-face communication using the foreign language.

C. Ethical Issues

During the conduction of the study, two main ethical issues arose. Since the inquiry of the study is about EFL learner's experience and perspectives of using CMC to facilitate their communicative competence in the target language. It is desirable to approach the inquiry by understanding the shared experience of two students who were paired up in the communication process during the time of the study. Understanding this is vital in gaining a satisfactory picture of the experience because communication is a mutual process, and not a one-way street. His or her online interlocutor may affect one student's experience of the communication. Therefore, when the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews, she had to inform both participants in the pair of what their interlocutor thought about the shared experience of on-line communication.

Revealing this fact may be taken personally by the informed participants, and may affect their relationship if the experience reported was not satisfactory. The researcher handled this ethical issue, by changing her original way of conducting the interviews. She conducted analogous interviews to focus group interviews, in which two participants in a pair were interviewed together. Therefore, the researcher paid special attention to the language she used when trying to clarify interpretation from the participants. The ethical concerns were the confidentiality of the interview data. The instructor, who had passion toward using technology in the classroom, would like to know how her students received her CMC integration in the writing class. She would like the researcher to share with her what participants said in the interviews. Although the results of the study, in which interview data would be a part, will be shared with the instructor, the researcher ensured the participants the instructor would have no access to what they had said during the interviews. The instructor tackled the dilemma by telling the participants that she will have access to their interview protocols. Although she would have access she would not have an identifiable reference.

VI. FINDINGS

Employing and Shifting of communication strategies

Frequently communication breakdowns were observed for foreign language learners. These breakdowns occurred during interactions where learners experienced difficulties expressing intended meanings in the target language. These difficulties arose due to interlocutor's limited linguistic competence, or insufficient understanding of the background the shared context was based on. Communication strategies were then employed repairing communication breakdown or sustaining conversation. Long (30) described strategies employed to avoid communicative breakdowns or to repair them when they did happen. These strategies include, using questions, convey limited information at a time, checking comprehension, using self-repetition and "here and now" approach. Although, these communication strategies usually were directed to face-to-face communication when they were first proposed, they applied to virtual communication also.

Chen: "Can you imagine a little boy had to work outside? "

Chen: "Even if they worked for many years but do not go to school, they can't increase their knowledge."

Chen: "Education is important to cultivate professional talent."

Yudi: "It's so difficult for the little boy."

Chen: "usually I think working experience is important."

Chen: "Usually high science and technology man are the result."

Yudi: "Is the "result? "

Chen: "I mean people in science and technology needs to have a lot of working experience."

Chen: "Can you understand that?"

Yudi: "oh.... yeah I see."

Participants, in the process of communicating ideas using the target language, separate intended meaning to let his/her interlocutor understand him/her, a strategy that Long [30] mentioned as conveying limited information at a time. Regular checks of comprehension in terms of meanings or linguistic patterns also assisted maintenance of the virtual dialogues.

Language transfer

Benefits of CMC as compared to face-to-face interactions are documented. Smith [38] pointed out the evidence that "benefits gained through classroom-based CMC may transfer over to spoken language...the text-based medium may amplify students' attention to linguistic form. "

One participant reflected that when she chatted with her e-pal, she repeated the lines from her e-pals and narrated silently as she typed the response,

"I usually read (speak) out loud my e-pals' sentences before I type my response because I think the reading out loud will help me focus, and ensure that I understand what he said." (Quote from reflection paper by Joan)

Most participants enjoyed the way of 'speaking' English in other ways as one of them said,

"Although chatting is not really using the mouth to speak, I did type what I intended to say. I think it is speaking in slow motion." (Quote from reflection paper by Chen)

Participants recognized the importance of transferring the idea shared through online communication to real essay writing.

"I found that after exchanging email discussion with my e-pals, it becomes easier for me to generate and organize ideas when I have to sit down and write an essay." "Writing (compositions) used to be a headache to me; however, I feel it not that difficult when I had someone to discuss the topic with..." (Quote from reflection paper by Mary)

For language learners, writing in the target language could be a major challenge when linguistic competence is limited; however, just like native speakers who may not necessarily be good writers, language learners may simply have writing difficulties because of insufficient knowledge about the topic. Preplanning tasks involving peer discussion, scaffolding and feedback may convert an isolating writing process, to one that is analogous to mutual construction. CMC makes this mutual construction more instant, intense and traceable as some participants note:

"I always print out the conversation between me and my e-pals and read them aloud. If I can find some words or sentence patterns that I don't know, I ask my e-pal, and this is the way I learn and improve my English..." (Quote from reflection paper by Mary)

Students perceived the benefits of chatting and writing online, through which they gained more practice with the language. They were using the language to negotiate in an authentic way, which according to Savignon [35] is an important means when developing communicative competence in a foreign language.

Expectation and frustration

Problematical peer interaction

While an online communicative environment gives students opportunities to express their opinions. They suffer from uncomfortable experience working with their peers. When asked about the experience of online communication with their peers, participants indicated they felt very excited at the beginning of the communication, but, as time passed and the excitement faded, they only wanted to finish their discussion as soon as possible.

"We have too much homework to do and it is time consuming to type and then wait, especially my partner has a very slow computer and he types very slowly. We only want to meet the minimum requirement of this assignment and then do something else." "I rarely talked things other than the assigned topic with my partner. We usually set up the time to chat on line at very late night and we both are tired from the work today...we get into the topic right away...no soft talks or greetings at all..." (Quote from reflection paper by Joe)

A positive experience usually depends on mutual understanding, and a shared belief of working together as a participant noted,

"I work very closely with my partner. We both treat the online communication very seriously. She always accommodated my change of schedule and we appreciate each other's opinion very much..." (Quote from reflection paper by Helen)

The above observations contradicted online literature, which suggests that tasks of collaboration should be integrated into course if collaboration among students is expected [45]. In this study, collaboration is structured into the course; however, willingness to collaborate declines as time passes, and instructor monitoring is infrequent. Participants report reasons that impede frequent contacts with their partners include heavy study loads, as well as other personal factors. Some students have part-time jobs, and it is difficult to decide on a fixed communication time. Limited access to a computer is also reported as another factor that impedes regular contacts. Some students have to use computers in the library, which has limited hours of public access.

Scarce idea exchange

Participant's perceptions differ of the online communicative experience using the English language. Students were expected to do readings and research before getting online and exchanging ideas with peers on predetermined topics. Some

students skipped readings and therefore were unable to contribute intellectually in the discussion. Sara noted this problem in her interview.

"My partner doesn't do the readings at all, every time we discuss; I have to go over the readings first for him. And he simply had no idea about what to talk about. I had a feeling that I was wasting my time and I was more like his tutor." (Interview with Sara on March 28/2004)

This observed phenomenon was not at all uncommon in both traditional face-to-face and virtual classroom environment. Students who are diligent and serious about learning act the same regardless of learning environment or tasks. But for those who don't take learning serious, the virtual learning environment provides a get-away from being responsible for his and other people's learning as one participant said,

I am hesitant to say this but it is true. Having been required to collaborate with a person who doesn't cooperate was a nightmare. My partner rarely responded to my e-mail. I can see that it did not take more than 5 minutes of his time to reply my email if he replied at all. We were required to send and reply each other's email twice a week and I always sent out mine at the beginning of the week but did not receive his sometimes until one week later. I cannot finish my homework this way. I was being patient for the first couple of weeks but then I decided to let the teacher know because I cannot finish my homework and it was not because of my own problem but because of my partner's irresponsibility. The instructor was kind enough to change my partner..." (Interview with Joe on March 24/2004)

Also noted in Vonderwell's case study [45], "disadvantage of not having the teacher in the classroom was the delay of immediate feedback or communication" (p.84), self-regulated learning is harder to implement in the online environment, which teacher presence may impede interaction among learners; however, instructor's no-shows also entail unforeseen disadvantages.

Conceived language learning

Purposeful learning from interest generation to habit development to automaticity

For EFL learners, the learning environment does not provide ample opportunities to practice the language in real and meaningful contexts. Learning tasks instructor's designs in the classroom are mostly based on artificial or commercially made materials, and don't entail motivation for communication on the learners' part. Computer-mediated communication created a learning environment, which meaningful tasks are integrated in making communication real and purposeful. Since most EFL learners are more familiar with drills and textbook-based communication patterns/modes, real communicational tasks are a challenge for them but also trigger them to sensitize their limitation in the target language. Therefore, they provide impetus for learning. As Sara said in the interview,

"When the instructor told us that we would do online discussion with a student that we don't know, I felt it was odd...how can we discuss assignment with someone that we did not even meet before? However, I can say now that I really

enjoyed the experience and I appreciated a lot for our instructor to plan this for us. I had to admit that I have not ever used English so much before. For this activity, we had to write email to our partner twice a week and also need to set up a time for online chatting and we had to do all the discussion in English. At the beginning, I felt a lot of pressure...twice a week is really too much for me. However, as time goes by, I don't feel I am required to do so; instead, getting online and discuss with my partner became part of my weekly schedule. I even rescheduled some major events to fit my partner's schedule. My partner and I even decided that we will continue the on-line discussion in English after we are not required to do so." (Interview with Sophie on March 20/2004).

Developing a constant contact with the target language is a vital factor when learning a foreign language. In EFL environment, where having access to the native speakers of the target language is impossible. It is important in building connections with other language learners. This is another way to stay 'brushed' with the language. Electronic partners sharing the same belief can set up goals and schedules to practice the language and provide feedback to each other for improvement. A long-term effect of this on-line communication may be foreseen with learners feeling more comfortable using the language, and level of automaticity can be achieved. This participant reflected on his English before and after the online communication:

"I am not the type of student who would raise his hand in class and answered teacher's question...I am kind of silent most of the time in the classroom. However, I usually score very high in any examinations, but I just don't feel comfortable speaking English in front of class. It is now changed. Because I have opportunity to virtually talk with classmates, I felt it not that odd to speak English. I find that I could actually 'say' the words, phrases or slogans that I used in my emails or chat room discussion. This change was amazing and makes me realize that I can really use English to express myself. English, to me, is not longer lists of words, grammar rules or sentence patterns that I read from textbooks. I feel using the language is a better way for me to remember it longer and more correctly." (Follow-up Interview with Sophie on March 21/2004).

Participants perceived on-line communication as a learning device that effectively reduces stress and frustration, which commonly occurs in traditional classrooms. Also a means that knowledge about language can be put into application, the notion of which echoes second language acquisition theories, that learning tasks, which were authentic and applied in nature, were beneficial in language transfer [36].

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The quality of authentic communication depends on the nature of tasks, instructor monitoring and characteristics of learners. Students regarded instructor-initiated tasks as challenging and less interesting. Students preferred to be given a recommended list of topics to choose from. When designing tasks for online communication, instructors need to take into

student's language ability, interest, pedagogical effect of the tasks and the online environment into consideration. Some tasks are received in traditional classrooms, but not in online learning environment.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, instructor authority is a major issue in online learning environment. Although second language acquisition theories proposed the importance of instructors giving up authority to let students have control over their own learning.

In a current study, we found out that little instructor authority indeed impeded student learning in the online environment. Students may choose not to reply, or can delay reply until later because the instructor is not checking all the time. From student's perspective, appropriate instructor intervention is needed to ensure students are on the right track and at the same page in the on-line learning process. Regarding learning characteristics, language learners bring with them different perspectives about how a language should be learned, as well as different learning styles.

Students with different learning styles may find it difficult to collaborate, interact or communicate with peers in an environment that is unfamiliar to them. Some students may feel comfortable about learning that is mediated by computers, but others may not.

Vonderwell [45] proposed that instructors "need to understand student expectations and motivations in the online environment" (p.88). Also, we found out that while students all agree that compared to regular classrooms; online discussion involves less stress and anxiety. They still felt confined in their expression by their limited English ability. Communication may not create such a difficult in face-to-face situation in which environment cues and facial expression are available to decode information.

In an online environment, strict use of the target language is unavoidably a challenge to learners with limited language competence. Communication strategies are therefore, recommended to repair communication gaps. Instructors should familiarize students with the use of communication strategies, so that they don't feel frustrated when communication breakdown occurs.

Savignon [36] proposed online negotiation facilitates language learner's development of linguistic competence and discourse skills; however, CMC studies also well documented that learners are less care in their language use in online environments. This phenomenon was observed in the study when some participants indicated that their partner's incorrect use of English has a negative effect on their own writing. Proposed that instructors needed to encourage students to write correctly even when the nature of the writing is casual. Alternatively, students may be advised to re examine their writing and revise.

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