Synchronous Text-Based Computer-Mediated Communication Tasks and the Development of L2 Academic Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Studies on the use of synchronous text-based computer-mediated communication (SCMC) tasks have mostly focused on how they could be used to facilitate the learning of different aspects of a second language. Recent research from a functional perspective has suggested the need to examine the impact of SCMC tasks on the development of L2 academic literacy (Mohan & Luo, 2005). With the increase use of SCMC tasks in ESL writing and other content-based courses, it is necessary to examine the potential of SCMC tasks in facilitating the development of L2 academic literacy. Drawing on the approaches and findings from research on dialogic argumentation (e.g., Seibold & Meyers, 2007), the study examines the development in using argumentative moves in SCMC discourse for a group of three ESL students, and explores the differences between the group and one focal student from the group. The findings suggest that although both the group and the focal student have demonstrated a growing tendency of understanding and responding to others’ views, differences existed between the group and the focal student, indicating that SCMC tasks may help facilitate the development of L2 academic literacy. The differences between individual students may be an important factor and could be better understood by examining students’ learning experiences together with their perceptions of the tasks.

Keywords: Academic Literacy, Argumentative Discourse, Case Study, Synchronous Text-Based Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC) Tasks

INTRODUCTION

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) develops based on the idea that computer technologies can facilitate interactions between a human and a computer as well as those between humans through computers (Chapelle, 2003). Defined as “communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers” (Herring, 1996, p. 1), computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become an important strand of research in CALL, and
has been further classified as synchronous CMC such as synchronous text-based CMC, or chat, and audio- or video-based chat, or conferencing (Levy & Stockwell, 2006), and asynchronous CMC such as emails and discussion boards, depending on whether communications happen in real time or not. Although the introduction of multimodality has opened up more possibilities of CMC applications in L2 teaching and learning (e.g., Peterson, 2010), synchronous text-based computer-mediated communication (SCMC) tools still hold, arguably, huge potential for L2 learning.

Early research focused on comparing SCMC to face-to-face interactions and examining whether or not SCMC would lead to more interactions (Böhlke, 2003; Kern, 1995) or more equal participation (Warschauer, 1996). The primary focus on learning L2 through interactions has given rise to empirical studies framed by the Interaction approach of SLA (Blake, 2000; Blake & Zyzik, 2003; Coniam & Wong, 2004; de la Fuente, 2003; Fernández-García & Martínez-Arbelaitz, 2002; Fiori, 2005; Jepson, 2005; Lai & Zhao, 2006; Lee, 2001, 2002; Loewen & Reissner, 2009; Pellettieri, 2000; Salaberry, 2000; Sauro, 2009). Increasingly, sociocultural theories of L2 learning have been used to examine the impact of contexts and interlocutor-related factors on how learners may benefit from the use of SCMC (Darhower, 2002, 2008; Lee, 2004, 2008; Oskoz, 2009; Peterson, 2009; Shin, 2006; Vandergriff & Fuchs, 2009; Warner, 2004).

However, most previous research on SCMC and L2 learning has focused primarily on examining how SCMC may help learners develop their linguistic competence by facilitating the learning of different aspects of a language such as vocabulary and grammar, or the learning of different skills such as speaking and writing. Only a few studies have looked at the role of SCMC in facilitating the development of L2 academic literacy (Luo, 2005; Sun & Chang, 2012). With the increasing use of SCMC in both language courses (e.g., Blake, 2009; Sauro, 2009) and content-based courses (e.g., Belcher, 1999; Chen, Belkada, & Okamoto, 2004; Liang, 2010), and the potential benefits of SCMC for the development of academic literacy (Mohan & Luo, 2005), it is meaningful and necessary to expand the scope of research on the instructional use of SCMC.

Therefore, the goal of this paper is to report a study examining the potential of SCMC tasks in helping three ESL students develop the ability to construct effective arguments, an essential aspect of academic literacy that has been shown to be particularly challenging for ESL teaching and learning (Chandrasegaran, 2008; Hinkel, 1999; Hyland, 2002; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Knoblauch, 2011). Situated in an undergraduate ESL academic writing class, this study focused on documenting the patterns of change in using argumentative moves of the group and one focal student from the group throughout eleven sessions of group work in SCMC based on framework and findings from studies on dialogic argumentation (Kuhn, Goh, Iordanou, & Shaenfield, 2008; Seibold & Meyers, 2007). Meanwhile, the study explored the differences between the group and the focal student in their development of the use of argumentative moves.

In the next section, I discuss the potential role of SCMC in facilitating learners’ development of the ability to construct effective arguments. I then summarize different approaches to the categorization of argumentative moves. In the method section, I describe the context and the procedure of the study. I then present and discuss the findings with regard to the use of argumentative moves in the SCMC discourse for the group and the focal student. Lastly, I discuss the limitations of the study and future research in the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SCMC, Academic Literacy, and the Ability to Construct Effective Arguments

While most previous studies have demonstrated the potential of SCMC in creating favorable social and cognitive conditions for L2 learning
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