Effects of Different Types of Tasks on Junior ELT Students’ Use of Communication Strategies in Computer-Mediated Communication

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ABSTRACT

This study describes the use of communication strategies in a synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) environment and examine whether task type has an influence on the frequency and variety of communication strategies (CS) used in this environment. To this end, use of CSs in three different communicative task types: jigsaw, decision-making and opinion-exchange were examined, based on and adapted from Dörnyei and Scott’s (1997) and Smith’s (2003) CS taxonomies. The data for this study was collected from 36 junior ELT students studying in a Turkish university. The results showed that the participants made use of a variety of CSs that were previously observed in face-to-face communication, and they used some CSs which are peculiar to CMC environment. It was also found that task type affected the frequency and type of CS used, favoring jigsaw task types in resulting more use of CSs.

Keywords: Communication Strategies, Computer-Mediated Communication, English Language Teaching, Second/Foreign Language Learning, Task-Type

INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that many foreign language students with an excellent level of grammatical proficiency experience difficulties in using the target language (TL) to express their communicative intentions. Several research areas such as language learner strategies (O’Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford, 1990; Chamot, 2005; Hurd & Lewis, 2008), interaction (Long, 1996; Gass, 2000) and communication strategies have contributed to our understanding of oral production of foreign language learners. Communication strategies (CS) are defined as techniques used by the learners of any given language to overcome communication break-
downs because of lacking linguistic resources in target language. Selinker (1972) was among the first scholars who mentioned communication strategies to account for certain classes of errors made by second language (SL) learners. He also identified acceptable inaccuracy in these learners’ production while trying to express their meaning in spontaneous speech resulting from gaps in their abilities in the target language knowledge. Later, Varadi (1983) argued that communication starts with language learners’ desire to communicate a meaning in the TL. When learners face a problem in conveying their intended meaning because of insufficient linguistic abilities in the TL, they use various strategies to maximize their potential for communicating and these are called communication strategies.

In the past few decades, a growing interest in the use of technology in language learning classrooms has been observed. Especially, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has drawn teachers’ attention owing to its potential use for interactive and collaborative language learning (Warschauer, 1997, Schwienhorst, 2002; Lee, 2002a; Lee, 2009). The literature reveals that, in CMC, beneficial interaction and meaningful communication among learners in TL are fostered and language learning is facilitated when communication contexts based on carefully designed tasks are employed (Blake, 2000; Pelletieri, 2000; Darhower, 2002; Chun, 2003; Smith, 2003; Peterson, 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication Strategies

Factors controlling the use of different kinds of CSs have been investigated by many researchers and Bialystok (1990) identified three potential factors that influence the choice of CSs: nature of the task, proficiency level of L2 learners, and features of the communicative context. Whether speakers use the same or different CSs in first language (L1) and L2 during the course of communication has been one of the interests of CSs research. Bialystok (1990) argued that the use of CSs by second language learners is a distinctive second language phenomenon and several studies show that communication strategy use is not only an L2 phenomenon but it is present in L1 as well (Bongaerts & Poulisse, 1989; Kellerman et al., 1990; Yule & Tarone, 1990). Yule and Tarone’s (1987) study with Asian and South American EFL learners showed that participants from different cultural backgrounds and with different L1s did not use CSs related to their culture based information. However, learner variables and especially the proficiency level of the learners were found to affect the use of communication strategies (Bialystok, 1983; Paribakht, 1985; Chen, 1990). Bialystok who categorized CSs as L1-based and L2-based strategies found that those learners who were determined as high proficiency level as a result of a cloze test used significantly more L2-based CSs like circumlocution, approximation and description and used significantly fewer L1-based CSs such as codeswitching and literal translation than low-proficiency level learners.

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and Language Learning

According to the interactionist perspective, it is very important for language learners to become engaged in meaningful interactions in the target language since during this interaction, they are exposed to input, encouraged to test hypothesis related to the language, produce modified output and receive feedback. Swain’s (1985) proposal of the Output Hypothesis argues that when learners receive external feedback such as clarification requests and corrections from their interlocutors, or when they have opportunities to monitor their production and receive internal feedback, they notice the gaps in their target language linguistic knowledge.

CMC is originally defined as a form of electronic written, or text-based communication. When designed carefully, it provides a platform to engage learners in a meaningful communication environment. The textual nature of CMC removes certain aural and visual cues
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