Chapter XXI
CMC and Intercultural Learning

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ABSTRACT

One key theme in the area of computer-assisted language learning has been the potential of computer-mediated communication (CMC) for the language learning process. Here, CMC refers to communication conducted through the medium of computers connected to one another in local or global networks. It requires specific software tools and can be either synchronous (e.g., chat, audio- or videoconferencing) or asynchronous (e.g., e-mail, threaded discussion lists). This chapter explores how CMC might contribute to language learning and teaching. Starting off with an overview of the development of research in this field, a model for the analysis of successful telecollaboration procedures and processes is used for the discussion of a German-Australian exchange.

FROM SYNCHRONOUS COMPUTER-ASSISTED CLASSROOM DISCUSSION TO COMMUNICATING IN A VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

For the past 15 years, as the increasing number of publications on CMC in international journals such as language learning and technology, ReCALL and CALL shows, research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) for the purpose of language learning has been highly topical. But whereas early studies in the field were focused on synchronous, written communication in the immediate context of the language teaching classroom, more recent definitions include synchronous as well as asynchronous, written as well as spoken, communication via the computer. Research on CMC has moved, in other words, from the actual to the virtual, in many cases
transnational classroom, hence the terminology: ‘e-mail-tandem,’ ‘network-based language teaching/learning,’ and ‘telecollaboration.’

In the early to mid-90s, during the early phase of research, the focus was on synchronous CMC within the classroom. A seminal study was Kelm’s (1992) investigation of the use of synchronous computer networks in second language acquisition (SLA), a preliminary exploration of the impact of computer-assisted classroom discourse (CADC) in second language learning environments. Beauvois (1992, 1995, 1998) likened the computer-assisted discussion between language learners in a classroom setting to ‘conversation in slow motion,’ while Chun (1994) anticipated it would “facilitate the acquisition of interactive competence” (p. 17). In the same vein, Kern (1995) compared the quantity and characteristics of discourse through synchronous, written classroom interaction and during an oral class discussion on the same topic. When working online, learners had over twice as many turns, produced two to four times more sentences, and used a much greater variety of discourse functions than they did in their oral discussion. Furthermore, the distribution and direction of turns were radically different with much more direct student-to-student exchange in the online exchange. Both students and instructors responded favorably to CADC. Students were more enthusiastic than their instructors as the teachers critiqued the de-centering of authority, the reduced focus on grammatical accuracy, and the relative loss of coherence and continuity of discussion. A later study by Warschauer (1996) tested the claim that one of the benefits of computer-mediated communication was its more equitable level of student participation by comparing face-to-face with electronic discussion. In the context of the communicative competence teaching paradigm, classroom activities during this early phase of CMC research included dialogic interaction in the form of open-ended questions for discussion. Synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) was seen as supporting this activity because of its similarity with spoken communication.

The comparison of synchronous CMC with face-to-face discussion revealed more active communication by CMC learners, with both more turns and more tokens produced per turn. Contributions by learners appeared more complex in terms of morphosyntax and discourse structure while communication was more focused on the group than on the teacher—a trend which pointed toward the need for a transformation of the teacher’s role.

More recently, Payne and Whitney (2002) have once again raised the question of whether synchronous CMC can enhance oral communicative competence, stating significantly better results for synchronous CMC learners participating in an experimental group. In contrast, Abrams (2004) found that language productions by SCMC group learners increased in volume but not accuracy. Meanwhile, Payne and Ross (2005) have suggested a connection between working memory and language output. These researchers have explored how individual differences in working memory capacity may affect the frequency of repetition and other patterns of language in chat room discourse.

In the context of language education, one area of CMC which has generated great interest is asynchronous electronic communication between language learners in a virtual classroom (e.g., Fischer, 1998; Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999). This field of research has been referred to as ‘network-based language teaching’ (c.f. Lee, 2004; Müller-Hartmann, 2000; Warschauer, 2000) or ‘telecollaboration’ (Beatty & Nunan, 2004; Belz, 2003; Greenfield, 2003; O’Dowd & Eberbach, 2004) as well as ‘e-mail-tandem learning’ (Appel, 1999; Appel & Gilabert, 2002; Appel & Mullen, 2000; Brammerts, 1998; Kötter, 2003; Little & Ushioda, 1998; Woodin, 1997).

The aim of this chapter is to explore how CMC might contribute to language learning in such settings. Starting off with an overview of
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