Fostering EFL College Students’ Register Awareness: Writing Online Forum Posts and Traditional Essays

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ABSTRACT

This study explores 19 Taiwanese students’ writing in weekly online forum posts and traditional essays. Results drawn from discourse analysis of students’ writing in both types of writing tasks showed that the semester-long online writing accompanied by explicit instruction on essays and basic academic writing conventions appeared to help raise EFL students’ consciousness of register in the two writing contexts and help them make appropriate linguistic adjustments. Quantitative analysis using three measures of syntactic complexity revealed that the students tended to use syntactically more complex sentence structures in essays than in online forums. A number of typical informal or online linguistic features characterize the students’ online forums more frequently than in essays. Finally, although most of these EFL college students seemed able to take different approaches to online writing and essay writing at the end of the semester, some students adopted the same rigorous approach to both types of writing as a result of a strategic response to avoid losing face or being misunderstood when writing in a public domain. The results suggest that providing EFL learners a forum where they can express themselves in less formal language is beneficial.

Keywords: Essay Writing, Linguistic Features, Online Writing, Syntactic Complexity, Writing Styles

INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, the widespread application of text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) has radically changed the nature of text forms, the ways we use language, and the way we interact with each other (Lotherington, 2004; Lotherington & Jenson, 2011; Pennington, 2003, Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000). Previous studies have demonstrated that text emerging from CMC has shown itself as unique discourse sharing the features of both spoken and written registers (e.g., Baron, 1998; Collot & Belmore, 1996; Crystal, 2001, 2011, Davis & Brewer, 1997; Murray, 2000, 2005; Yates, 1996). The new form of language use, nevertheless, may be a challenge to foreign language learners who are not aware of the differences between the writing style they learn from traditional textbooks and the writing style they are exposed to in their daily online practice.

Numerous studies have explored how L2 students respond to online communication writ-
ing (e.g., Bloch, 2002; Davis & Thiede, 2000; Fageeh, 2011; Lee, 2010; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010; Warschauer, 2007), how L2 students have explored the text features displayed in L2 students’ writing in one type or across different types of CMC modes (e.g., Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2006; Kwasiński & Crowston, 2005; Li, 2000; Fageeh, 2011; Sotillo, 2000), and how L2 learners’ literacy is shaped by online communication (Lam, 2000, 2004; 2009; Lee, 2010). However, little research has yet addressed how English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students respond to writing tasks involving different registers, in particular, when online writing is incorporated into traditional writing courses. The current study aimed at exploring how EFL students deal with two types of writing tasks—asynchronous online posts and traditional essays—how they perceive the difference between the two writing contexts, and whether they make linguistic adjustments for different types of writing tasks. The results can provide valuable information to EFL writing pedagogy concerning the application and design of CMC-related writing tasks or activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The language use emerging from CMC has been identified as new forms of literacy (e.g., Crystal, 2001, 2011; Cummins, Brown, & Sayers, 2007; Lotherington & Jenson, 2011). As Crystal (2001) notes, various online discourse forms, such as e-mail, chat groups, and virtual worlds, display distinctive linguistic features governed by situational factors embedded in a specific format of the Internet. The time- and space-independent features of CMC result in the lack of visual paralinguistic and nonverbal cues which characterize face-to-face communication (Crystal, 2001, 2011; Dresner & Herring, 2008; Herring, 1996; Murray, 2000; 2005). CMC users usually generate simplified registers such as the use of abbreviation, simplified syntax, symbols, and formulaic phrases in their CMC writing (Murray, 2000). Furthermore, since language used in CMC context is full of “idiosyncrasy and variation” (Crystal, 2001, p. 15), the discourse generated in diverse online discourse communities is usually “socially transformative, enabling better communication, as well as more flexibility and expressiveness” (Kwaśnik & Crowston, 2005, p. 79).

Given the new forms of discourse and the unique writing styles of CMC in L2 learning contexts, some studies have addressed the issues of how L2 learners write in CMC or how they respond to the discourse of CMC (e.g., Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Lam, 2000, 2004; 2009; Lee, 2002; Li, 2000; Sotillo, 2000). Focusing on the differences between synchronous and asynchronous CMC modes, Sotillo (2000) verified that the dynamic registers shown in her L2 learners’ writing demonstrated different syntactic complexities when using different CMC modes. In a study examining the linguistic features of L2 students’ writing in four different modes of email tasks (i.e., narrative, informative, persuasive, and expressive), Li (2000) found that her students’ email messages showed significantly different linguistic properties with or without audience interaction. A corpus-based study by Lee (2002) also found language- and cultural-specific features in her L2 students’ writing via email and instant messaging. These findings suggest that diverse CMC discourse contexts may create text of different registers that demonstrate context- or mode-specific linguistic features.

Another group of studies have explored how L2 learners meet the challenges of emergent online literacy and adapt themselves to the online community while interacting with L1 writers. Davis and Thiede (2000) found that through emulation of their L1 peers’ writing styles in asynchronous computer conferences, three of their L2 students demonstrated awareness of language variation and conformed to online discourse conventions. Bloch (2002) found that his L2 students used appropriate linguistic choices and formed various rhetorical strategies for different communicative functions when writing emails to their L1 writing instructor. Chen (2006) also found that a Taiwanese graduate student raised awareness of language
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