

## Review

# Learners' communicative competence in English as a foreign language (EFL)

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Accepted 12 June, 2011

Moving from the 'focus on form' teaching approach such as grammar translation and audiolingualism, recently more language teachers have noticed the failure of form focusing approach in developing learners' communicative ability in real-life situations and shifted to adopt the communicative language teaching (CLT). The CLT approach highlights learners' communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) which is defined as learners' ability to efficiently express what they mean in the target language and successfully achieve communications in real-life situations (Lightbown and Spada, 1999; Power, 2003). In order to do so, learners not only need to acquire the linguistic but pragmatic knowledge of the TL (Hedgcock, 2002). It is suggested that competence, both linguistic and pragmatic, is the knowledge developed and acquired through exposure and use (Kasper, 1997). In other words, without sufficient exposure needed for learners to notice and acquire the language input and chances to use the knowledge, communicative competence is not likely to be promoted. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that the integration of computer-mediated communication (CMC) into English as a foreign language EFL learning can increase both input (exposure) and output (use) of the target language that is needed for learners to promote both their linguistic and pragmatic competence.

**Key words:** Communicative competence, computer mediated communication (CMC), authentic and interactive learning tasks.

## INTRODUCTION

Moving from the 'focus on form' teaching approach such as grammar translation and audiolingualism, recently more language teachers have noticed the failure of form focusing approach in developing learners' communicative ability in real-life situations and have shifted to adopt the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. The CLT approach highlights learners' communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), which is defined as learners' ability to efficiently express what they mean in the target language and successfully achieve communications in real-life situations (Lightbown and Spada, 1999; Power, 2003). In order to do so, learners not only need to acquire the linguistic but pragmatic knowledge of the target language (Hedgcock, 2002). It is suggested that competence, both linguistic and pragmatic, is the knowledge developed and acquired through exposure and use of the target language (Kasper, 1997). In other words, without sufficient exposure needed for learners to notice and acquire the language input and chances to use the new knowledge, communicative competence is not likely to be promoted.

Unlike ESL learners who need to use the TL in

everyday life for surviving in the target culture, EFL learners generally do not have adequate access to the TL outside of the classrooms and practice what they have learned in the classroom. Learners normally return to the real world speaking their mother tongue as soon as they leave the classroom (Campbell, 2004). In classrooms, although teachers now have gradually adopted approaches that focus on meaning and language use, due to the linear mode of face-to-face interaction, the learning outcome is still not efficient enough. EFL teachers now urgently need a solution to increase exposure and use of the target knowledge both inside and outside of the classroom.

The purpose of this paper, which is to suggest the integration of computer-mediated communication (CMC) into EFL learning can not only increase both input (exposure) and output (use) of the TL that is needed for learners to promote their English proficiency, but also promote learning motivation, learner autonomy, social equality and identity. This paper firstly presents: rationale of the CLT approach and, limitations of traditional EFL classrooms to implement it, subsequently, pedagogical

benefits of CMC in language learning are presented. Principles of using CMC tools in foreign language teaching were also presented, which was followed by the conclusion.

### **THE RATIONALE OF THE COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING APPROACH**

Prior to the CLT approach, traditional approaches that focus on structure and form were preferred in language classrooms; however, for its failure to develop learners' communicative skills in the target language, language teachers have gradually acknowledged the strength of the CLT approach. Traditional approaches have its origin in the study of Latin and Greek, the languages of religion, literature and philosophy of the middle ages. It concerns itself with the analysis of formal written language and ignores the study of everyday spoken communication (Lyons, 1981). The rationale of the CLT approach is that the teacher should act as a facilitator to create a student-centered classroom and engage learners in authentic-like and meaningful communications with the goal to increase comprehensible language input for learners and expect them to generate more output (Huang and Liu, 2000).

#### **Focus on meaning and language use**

Language is used for communication. In real-life communication, we use language to express what we mean (Lightbown and Spada, 1999); however, language is more than a tool for communication, it also represents social and cultural background. Learning merely the target linguistic knowledge cannot successfully engage learners into real-life communications in the target culture; they also need to acquire the target pragmatic competence, the capacity to incorporate cultural knowledge into language use and choose appropriate language in different sociocultural contexts (Bachman, 1990; Hymes, 1972; Kasper, 1997).

Unlike grammar translation or audiolingualism that merely focuses on learners' ability to produce accurate language form and structure, the CLT approach emphasizes the learners' ability to efficiently use the target language in different contexts (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). By pairing up learners and involving them in a wide range of meaningful interactive discussion tasks the teacher expects to promote the learners' ability to achieve the communicative goal, rather than forming grammatical sentences.

#### **Create more comprehensible input**

The other purpose of the CLT approach that involves learners into meaningful communication is to create more comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982) which is based on long interaction hypothesis (1983) which holds that when

learners are involved in two-way meaningful communications requiring information exchange they tend to produce more negotiated language modification. Examples of negotiated language modification are the following: comprehension check, 'do you understand?', clarification request 'what did you say?', or confirmation checks, 'did you say 'the cat'?' Although learners are not always able to produce comprehensible language essential for a successful communication by using these strategies in paired interactions, they are able to obtain more comprehensible input than in teacher-student interactions (Lightbown and Spada, 1999) and have more chances to notice the linguistic gap between their non-native like language and the TL. It is proposed that the gap-noticing can often help learners to know what is still needed to be learned and benefit the learning (Blake, 2000).

### **THE LIMITATION-INDIVIDUAL INEQUALITY USED BY TL IN TRADITIONAL EFL CLASSROOMS**

Although the CLT approach attempts to involve learners in more authentic and interactive learning tasks that promote both comprehensible input and learners' language output, due to the nature of face-to-face interaction, teachers still find it challenging to exploit the approach and maximize the learning; especially when it is a true case in EFL classrooms. Unlike English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, EFL learners usually do not have the need to use the TL outside of the classroom; generally their only chance to put the language knowledge into use is in the classroom. However, for the linier mode of traditional face-to-face interaction, EFL learners generally have limited time and chance to speak and use the TL in traditional classrooms (Campbell, 2004). In a face-to-face interaction, turn-taking is required.

The interaction mode is linier: when someone is talking, the other needs to be silent and wait until his interlocutor finish talking, the interaction is bound to be either learners interacting with the teacher or a learner interacting with other learners (Hansen, 2001).

Factors, such as personality type, learning and response pace, motivation, and language proficiency can all lead to individual inequality to speak up in class or in groups. For example, learners who are shy, slow, or afraid of making errors may choose to speak less in the classroom or group discussions. Insufficient access to the TL both inside and outside of the classroom certainly is an obstacle to foster EFL learners' language proficiency. Nevertheless, with the advent of computer mediated communication technology, ways of communication and learning have been efficiently changed (Leh, 1999; Cheon, 2003). By using CMC tools such as e-mails, chat rooms, discussion rooms, video or audio conference, users worldwide can easily achieve communication, without boundaries of time and space. It is therefore proposed that CMC can be used to compensate the deficiency of interaction both inside and outside of EFL

classrooms.

## **PEDAGOGICAL BENEFITS OF CMC IN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

### **Increase interactive communication and exposure to the TL**

By bringing CMC into language learning and teaching, the interaction pattern can be changed. Proponents of CMC suggest that teachers can encourage a greater amount of interactions by using CMC tools both inside and outside the classroom (Blake, 2000; Blin, 1999; Leh, 1999; Warschauer, 1997). Learning is no longer restrained in time and space, through the internet, learners are offered opportunities to communicate and learn collaboratively with learners worldwide (Kern, 1996; Shield and Weininger, 2004). EFL learners do not need to passively listen to audio tapes alone after class; through the use of the internet and CMC tools they can easily participate in more interactions by posting and replying messages on discussion boards, writing and replying e-mails to their keypals, or joining online chat rooms whenever suitable. Learning becomes a 24 hour process. This new way of learning that engages learners in authentic social interactions can greatly expose learners to the TL and enable them to practice what they have learned in the classroom (Blake, 2000; Campbell, 2004, Leh, 1999, Lightbown and Spada, 1999).

### **Create opportunities to participate in the target socio cultural context**

Other than more exposure to the target language, learners can also have more opportunities to take part in the target social and cultural context and learn the pragmatic knowledge, something which is very difficult to be achieved in EFL cultures. For example, by using e-mails to send photos, audio or video attachments learners can introduce their families, countries, and cultures to their keypals. microphones and web cameras enable learners to participate in online communications that almost resemble traditional face-to-face conversations, although the interaction cannot be as immediate as real-life communications due to transmission time. Nevertheless, through audio or video communications, learners are able to obtain both verbal (for example, intonation) and non-verbal (for example, facial expression) cues that are essential factors to develop social competency (Shumin, 1997).

### **Promote English proficiency**

In terms of the effect of CMC on language proficiency, many researches have proposed its positive effect on the development of the learners' language proficiency. Pennington (2004) suggests the efficiency of electronic

writing tools such as the word processor that enable learners to easily compose and revise texts and check spelling, and grammar can promote learners' confidence in their ability to write better and generate more writing products. Web-based communication tools such as e-mails, web journals, and discussion boards that allow learners to easily give and reply to comments motivate learners to actively engage in interactive tasks and promote writing quality. Braine (2004) proposes that involving learners in real-time online interactions with other classmates and the teacher can transform the teacher-centered classroom to be more student-centered. Communicative writing skills can be promoted because learners actively and freely use the target language to express what they mean with other learners. Learners no longer passively learn grammatical rules and they are unable to use them effectively. Fotos (2004), she asserts e-mail exchange can be as interactive as speech interactions although there are less non-verbal and verbal cues. Learners can use new forms of cues (for example, [:]) = smile, [I am ANGRY] = to emphasize emotion and language (for example, [Btw] = by the way) to achieve speech-like interactions. In her research, EFL learners who were involved in e-mail exchange learning tasks turned out to have promoted their English proficiency, especially in reading and writing skills.

Hubbard (2004) suggests CMC tools such as internet telephony, audio and video conferencing, voicemail or voice discussion board can all be used to promote learners' speaking proficiency. By engaging learners in tasks of recording speech and sending files to other learners, communicative speaking skills can be achieved.

### **Encourage motivation and learner autonomy**

Involving learners in authentic and meaningful interactions with learners worldwide via the internet can also promote motivation for learners to keep learning. Motivation of learning can often support learners to become more responsible and willing to engage in their own learning defined as learner's autonomy (Blin, 1999; Lightbown and Spada, 1999; Toyoda, 2001). For example, during the process of collaborative learning where learners focus on meaning exchange, they may actively utilize their language knowledge learned in class-room and check their language output before sending out their messages or e-mails. The process of checking language output from resources can often cause learning to take place. Teachers are no longer responsible for learners' learning; rather, they act as facilitators to help and shorten the distance between learners and the outside world.

### **Promote social equality and identity**

Unlike traditional face-to-face communication, online and more face-saving than face-to-face communication (Hansen, 2001). Learners often feel more comfortable

to participate in online discussions than in traditional face-to-face discussion; learners are more willing to express their personal opinion because they are not stared at by the whole class (Hansen, 2001). Moreover, in CMC communications, learners have more time to plan and check their language output (Pennington, 2004). For example, learners are allowed to think before they post messages or write e-mails to their key pals; they are able to check their spelling and grammar from dictionaries and revise anytime they want. Learners who are afraid of embarrassing making errors in class are more willing to contribute through online communications (Pennington, 2004). Thus, every class member can have equal chances to practice the target language in the classroom discussion board or online community; individual differences leading to social inequality to speak in traditional classrooms can be overcome.

Other than having equal chances to practice the TL, learners are also allowed to express their identity; diverse opinions can exist simultaneously and discussions in class can be extended after class.

## **PRINCIPLES OF INTEGRATING CMC TOOLS INTO LANGUAGE LEARNING**

The goal of integrating CMC into language learning is to expose learners to as much language input as possible and motivate them to be more autonomous to the learning. Although language teachers are no longer the center of language classrooms, to maximise the efficiency of CMC in language learning, teachers should carefully consider issues of how to design learning tasks, monitor learners' learning, and evaluate their language progress (Robertson, 2003).

### **Design language and cultural-related learning tasks**

Most learning activities designed for L2 or FL learning focus on rule drilling; learners may learn the rules but not necessarily acquire them or know how to use them in real-life situations. To transform the learned knowledge into competence, adequate opportunities to put the learned knowledge into use is essential (Kasper, 1997). Teachers, therefore, need to design learning tasks with clear objectives and consider what learning tasks or materials are to benefit students' acquisition of both the target linguistic and pragmatic knowledge (Chapelle and Hegelheimer, 2004). It is suggested that learning tasks and materials should be designed with language and culture-related goals (Opp-Beckman and Kieffer, 2004).

### **Create motivation: Collaborative learning**

One important reason to design learning tasks for learners to achieve is to create motivation. Teachers can involve learners in doing a collaborative project with

another learner; for example, the project can be to write a story journal together online. By using the feature of blogs, learners can exploit their imagination, exchange ideas online and keep a story journal together. With motivation not only to complete the story but make the story interesting, learners are more likely to actively participate in the discussion and engage in the learning.

### **Control learners' learning progress**

The other advantage of designing a learning task with a clear objective is to control the learners' learning progress (Hubbard, 2004); without doing this, learners may be lost in the process of learning. For example, if the teacher does not design a task for learners to achieve (for example, to know more about your friend and introduce him/her to the class), learners may feel confused about what is needed to be discussed, learned, and achieved. Or, they may encounter unpredictable difficulties during the interaction that the teacher did not teach prior to the task.

### **Design tasks with same goal but in different forms**

According to the psycholinguistic aspect, when a new word or phrase is learned by a learner, it is firstly stored in his short-term memory; only when being exposed to the same term several times is the learner able to acquire the new term and store it into his long-term memory (Moras et al., 2001; Nation, 2001). This suggests that merely involving learners in one single task is not likely to promote acquisition and competence of the target new knowledge. When designing learning tasks, teachers should plan several different tasks with the same goal; for example, if the objective is to expect learners' to perform appropriate speech acts. Through more exposure and practice from different tasks with similar goals, learners are more likely to acquire the target knowledge.

### **Encourage online opinion exchange**

To create an environment where interaction between learners can occur is another goal of using CMC to support language learning. Other than one-on-one e-mail interactions, constructing an asynchronous discussion board to extend classroom discussion is another way to help develop the learners' ability to express agreement or disagreement with others' opinion (Opp-Beckman and Kieffer, 2004). When engaging learners in group discussions on a classroom discussion board, the teacher becomes the key to encourage online opinion exchange and give help when learners face communication breakdown (Campbell, 2004). Although the discussion board should be student-centered, teachers still play an important role to monitor learners' interaction and learning progress. For example, if the teacher finds one

learner tends to speak less or does not reply to other learners' messages, the teacher should remind him of the importance of giving and replying to comments (Campbell, 2004).

## CONCLUSION

Because of insufficient authentic resources and the need to use the target language, EFL learners generally encounter difficulties developing communicative competence. Although CLT is now being gradually adopted, due to many factors such as the linear feature of face-to-face interaction, learners' personality, learning and response pace, teachers find it challenging to maximize interaction in traditional EFL classrooms.

Researches on computer-assisted language learning (CALL) propose that the integration of CMC into EFL learning can provide learners with more authentic input and more opportunities to participate in the target socio-cultural contexts; both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge can be promoted. Moreover, motivation, learner autonomy, social equality, and identity can also be encouraged through the use of CMC inside and outside of the classroom.

Further research of whether EFL learners' communicative competence can be fully developed with the help of CMC tools still needs to be done. However, for EFL learners who desperately need more authentic exposure and the opportunities to use the knowledge learned in the classroom, the use of computer mediated communication tools both inside and outside of the classrooms certainly can benefit the learning and develop learners' communicative competence to a certain extent.

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