CMC and Face-to-face Communication in L2 Learning

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Bhatia and Richie (2009), in their book chapter, compare computer-mediated communication (CMC) and face-to-face communication by analyzing how learners behave when they learn a language in these two modes. Studies on face-to-face communication (e.g., VanPatten, 1990) reveal that learners have a tendency to process meaning before form because human interaction is conducted in real time. Speakers have to attend to the form (i.e., the oral output) and the meaning of the verbal production simultaneously. Previous studies on working memory (Li, 1999; Maehara and Saito, 2007) reveal that there is a trade-off between the maintenance and processing of information, as both involve working memory. VanPatten (2004), in particular, pinpoints that processing second language (L2) input involves making form-meaning connections in real-time comprehension, an online task that takes place in the working memory. As such, L2 learners have less memory space to store new information in face-to-face communication, given that the working memory is used for processing input. In contrast, CMC is said to provide more opportunities for focus on form. After all, when chatting online in L2, learners do not have to focus on both form and meaning at the same time the way they do in face-to-face interaction. They could take time to process, test out, and revise their linguistic production. This is what is considered an obvious advantage of using CMC for language learning.

On the basis of the above understanding, two questions regarding the differences between CMC and face-to-face communication arise. Firstly, one defining feature of CMC proposed by Bhatia and Richie (2009) is that it is *untimed*. Here, "untimed" communication is specified as not requiring immediate response. It is true that text chatting gives the learner more time to process both meaning and form. However, is all CMC untimed? For example, communication through video-chatting on Skype is similar to face-to-face communication in that it calls for immediate oral response. Taking this into consideration, the "timing" issue is not a sufficient criterion for differentiating CMC from face-to-face communication.

On a practical level, given that certain types of CMC (including text messages, e-mail and non-video online chatting) do allow untimed interaction, the nature of communication is most likely to be influenced. CMC might be beneficial to beginning learners as it is less intimidating; this prepares learners to survive in real-life face-to-face communication. For intermediate and advanced learners, however, it could be argued that CMC delays rather than promote language learning. Learners might find it too challenging when they encounter a timed conversation should they grow accustomed to untimed online chatting.

While CMC differs from face-to-face interaction in important ways, the former's potential in facilitating second language learning and teaching remains arguably considerable. In the chapter, Bhatia and Richie (2009) highlight two advantages of computer assisted language learning (CALL), namely that (a) CALL reduces learners' negative affect, and that (b) it offers a naturalistic learning environment for L2 learners. On top of these two merits, technology and the Internet give students the access to target language (TL) from a variety of sources, such as video clips of real- life conversations, online newspaper articles, and entertainment news in the TL. In

short, Computers and the Internet make it possible for learners to actively search for what they want to know, making the learning activity highly learner-centered and rich in content.

To conclude, human interaction cannot be completley replaced by CMC in language learning. As Bhatia and Richie (2009) suggest, the greatest benefit of the use of technology is not its function, of the tools but rather: "the effective engagement in meaningful interactions and real intercultural reflections" (p. 558). In other words, if technology cannot facilitate meaningful interactions, its role in language teaching and learning would remain peripheral. Given that technology has been increasingly involved in the acquisition process, we should be mindful of its strengths and weaknesses in L2 teaching and learning.

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