

HOW CAN ASYNCHRONOUS COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATIONS APMC BE EXPLOITED TO HELP DEVELOP THE SPEAKING SKILLS OF THE SAUDI ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER?

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ABSTRACT: *Computer mediated communications cmc, are classified into two types, synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous cmc are methods of communication in which communicators respond immediately to each other, e.g. chatline and SMS while asynchronous cmc has a time difference between the period of production and reception of messages, such as emails and bulletin boards. These networking technologies have had an enormous impact on language learning at various parts of the world. Saudi Arabia, is witnessing an unprecedented increase in the importance of English as a lingua franca as an answer to its economic needs. However, Saudi community is basically conservative and sex-segregation is maintained at schools which result in limited opportunities for language interaction. Therefore, asynchronous cmc seems to be compatible and has a particular relevance to the Saudi learners because it cuts out the potential for the cultural problems which might be imposed by the above norms and practices of the society. This paper will investigate the viability of introducing asynchronous cmc as vehicle for interaction to the Saudi ELT classrooms from a linguistic, interactional, cultural and teaching perspectives.*

KEYWORDS: Asynchronous CMC, Interaction, English language Teaching, Language productivity, Flaming, Cultural-sensitivity

INTRODUCTION

One of the most unique advantages of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in language learning is its high accessibility of meaningful interactions amongst learners and competent members of the target language society. Beatty (2003) defines meaningful negotiation as a mutual but equal discussion between learners who share an interest in order to reach an agreement. However, these advantages could be attributed to the fact that CMC possesses interactionally and linguistically distinctive features from face-to-face F2F interaction, such as the absence of non-verbal cues, its text-based communicative discourse, and a different turn-taking system. CMC discourse can be defined as the typed language exchanged between peers through electronic dialogues. However, only a few studies examine CMC with regard to the linguistic, cultural aspects of interactions in second language acquisition (SLA) Saudi English classroom. Moreover, thus far, no study has examined how the interactional features of asynchronous CMC may contribute to second language learning at Saudi English Language teaching ELT context. The asynchronous CMC is not affected by the time difference and is more accessible than the synchronous ones; however, asynchronous CMC possesses noticeable features from synchronous CMC in terms of interaction, for example, lower response rate and the absence of turn adjacency (Blake, 2000). Similarly, there are linguistic differences for example longer and more formal and

complex discourse (Sotillo, 2000). Therefore produced written speech output of such interaction is distinctive from the synchronous written speech, and it is thereby beneficial to probe how features of asynchronous output speech may facilitate English language learning in Madinah College of Technology MCT.

It is significant to pose that the author did not implement a methodological study to analyse the discourse of MCT students due to the fact these studies tend to be lengthy and require plenty of resources, and permissions. Instead, by presenting the advantages of asynchronous CMC coupled with handful successful studies about it, the author hopes to whet the appetite of the MCT stakeholders to deploy asynchronous CMC to their English language teaching ELT materials. These studies share some similarities with MCT students such as the low level of English language, English is their foreign not second language, and most importantly cultural-sensitivity issues. Furthermore, these studies relate to MCT ELT method because the studies covered a wide panorama of interactionist research approach field from a cognitive-oriented and sociocultural perspectives. The majority of the studies concluded that cognitive language development was attained through a successful meaning negotiation between more competent users of asynchronous CMC (Dwyer, 2005; Perez, 2003). Likewise, the social and cultural knowledge were acquired through scaffolding by their capable peers (McNeil, 2014; Salabber, 2000). Scaffolding was identified by Alahmadi (2007) as where learners rely on each other to produce a comprehensible output and receive a conceivable input. Needless to say that those findings were reached by means of analysis discourse coupled with well-tailored observation method. The following sections will outline a concise overview of Asynchronous and synchronous CMC as a new vehicle for interaction from a linguistic perspective, its linked SLA arguments, how they are associated to Saudi context.

LANGUAGE PRODUCTIVITY IN ASYNCHRONOUS CMC

Linguistic view

Initially, the author should like to point out the reason behind this section is to equip the reader with a deeper account and explained understanding of the acclaimed advantages of CMC in language learning contexts similar to those of MCT. This concise overview should highlight the potential of CMC at MCT from an interactionist perspective so as to thrive Second language acquisition SLA with this promising and worth-performing new era of English language teaching ELT. As CMC is a distinguishable means of communication, it holds both spoken and written attributes. Its unique discourse is a mix communication of written and spoken. Contemporary research (Dwyer, 2005; Alahmadi, 2007) conclude that salient feature of CMC discourse such as record of earlier messages, text-based nature, the absence of non-verbal cues, and the virtual environment illustrate that CMC discourse is not just a mix of spoken and dictated communication, but also maintain a number of unique features of communication which do not comply to any of the old-fashioned interactional forms.

A considerable number of studies propose that CMC in ELT could augment SLA. This includes more incidents of meaning negotiation (Alahmadi, 2011), well-structured utterances (Kelm, 1992), interlocutor centeredness (Chapelle, 2003), equal turns-taking,

comprehensible output (Warschauer, 2001), sociolinguistic knowledge acquisition (Kern, 1995), semantic and morphosyntactic improvement (Salaberry, 2000), and student-steered learning (Gleason & Suvorov, 2012). Many of these studies focus on the participants' perceptions toward CMC such as Alahmadi (2011), who concludes that learners reported positive attitudes toward the deployment of computer-assisted class discussion CACD as a disguise of CMC at their English classes. Many researchers discuss the privileges of CMC as a vehicle for scaffolding amongst learners irrespective of time and place limitations (Alahmadi, 2007; Perez, 2003). Such researches were acted so as to imitate the traditional situations of F2F interaction which help create successful SLA. Long (1989) and Gass (1997) were early pioneers of interactionalists who utilized a cognitive-oriented approach. They argued that interlocutors are capable of promoting their innate interlanguage through stimulating contexts such as salutations, reconfirmation, alternative negotiation, refractive and negative feedback, focus on form, and modified/comprehensible input/output. Contrarily to the cognitive-oriented approach, Lantolf (2005) ventured interaction from a sociocultural perspective who stressed the fact that interlocutors are able to construct an innate knowledge and form their language competence by means of embarking in interaction with the aid of cumulative scaffolding that is supplied by more skilled learners at the context.

As discussed earlier, asynchrony and synchronous CMC help build unique modes of communication. This uniqueness created new terms in our life such as "cyberspace" or "virtual third culture" each of which possess its distinctive social and interactional features. Asynchronous CMC discourse maintains pre-determined discourse and linguistically dissimilar attributes compared to those of synchronous interactions. These encompass but are not limited to semantically and syntactically dense discourse (Salaberry, 2000). In addition, the stark contrast between the length of the time difference between the creation of the message and reception of the reply between synchronous and asynchronous CMC results in the earlier possessing varied linguistic and sociocultural features than the latter (Perez, 2003). Needless to say, those learners enjoy more time to well-form and maintain their language utterances at asynchronous CMC than those of synchronous one. Therefore, asynchronous discourse seems to promote more facilitative conditions for English language teaching (ELT) (Beauvois, 1997). Alahmadi (2007) dissimilates these interactional features such as multi-issues at a thread, decent reply rate, absence of turn adjacency, and high engagement. Having said this, it is axiomatic that asynchronous CMC may generate a more anxiety-free atmosphere where learners enjoy more time to think and make their utterances at their own pace (McNeil, 2014). As this section briefs the literature review of CMC, the next section will venture

Interactional Perspectives on Asynchronous CMC

The conclusions drawn from the earlier researches on asynchronous CMC help understand the interactional descriptions of asynchronous CMC. It is an unprecedented territory of communicative interaction with characteristics of both articulated and written aspects. The author defines communicative interaction as the ability of the communicator to maintain the stream of the discussion by means of initiating new topics or providing comprehensible feedback on what has been said. Beauvois (1997) described it as caught and slowed speech. The previous arguments elucidate that CMC discourse contains some unique interactional aspects that do not fall into any category of any interactional nature. The author will discern the interactional features of CMC

in comparison with those of traditional F2F interactions. The rationale behind illustrating the discrepancies and similarities between synchronous and asynchronous CMC discourse, is to highlight how asynchronous CMC can be exploited to provide a successful SLA at MCT.

Anatomy of asynchronous CMC

Old-fashioned F2F interactions lack compositions or letters. These are unique features of CMC discourse. Moreover, written nature of CMC needs to be typed at keyboard; hence the speed of interaction is reduced. This slow well-monitored relaxed asynchronous CMC discourse enables learners to obtain more time to think and work their utterances well (McNeil, 2014). Furthermore, interlocutors can keep a record of their whole communication to refer to. The discourse written nature enables learners to enhance their awareness of their oral and written utterances (Warschauer, 2001). More significantly, the potential fear experienced by learners when they miss pronounce a word or they utter strange dialects is cut (Alahmadi, 2011). Such intimidated situations can negatively affect ELT at a given context (Gleason & Suvorov, 2012).

The second unique characteristic of CMC is the absence bodily language and face expressions. These non-verbal cues include but not limited to signaling, gestures, stress, pitch of voice, .. etc. They are abundant at F2F interactions and function as aids to the overall conveyed message. Despite the fact that CMC discourse is limited to typed text, emoticons were invented to substitute these cues (Hutchby, 2001). Emoticons are a clipping of the two words "emotion" and "icons" and can be defined as little graphic icons representing a status, for example they could depict a smiling, yawning or frowning face. Since their invention, they are very common and are deployed frequently and variously by CMC learners (Alahmadi, 2011). Further, these emoticons are not functionally identical to nonverbal cues at F2F such as laughter or summons. The question whether asynchronous CMC learners employ these emoticons spontaneously or cognitively is an under-researched area at the realm of CMC. Kern (1995) and Sotillo (2000), found that the absence of physical peers at asynchronous CMC creates a positive influence on English language learning. Moreover, the author has noticed during his sixteen years expertise in ELT at MCT that F2F interactions seem to be spontaneous though sometimes intentional, stressed, quicker and full of linguistic or visual clues such as frown, smiles and surprise. On the other side of the coin, the author has noticed that asynchronous CMC discourse seem to be less spontaneous, , relaxed, slower, anonymous, and full of emoticons and pronouns such as "I" and "you". Since this sections has discussed both asynchronous and synchronous CMC interactional features, the next section will discuss the viability of each type to MCT.

Asynchronous VS synchronous CMC; comparison and contrasts

The salient most noticeable attribute between asynchronous and synchronous CMC is that at asynchronous CMC interlocutors do not expect to receive messages simultaneously as in synchronous CMC. This lack in synchronicity yields more focused, clearer, longer and accurate interactions (Perez, 2003). Moreover, asynchronous CMC enjoys a great quantity of formal style and idioms (Blake, 2000), whereas the feeling of sharing the same time at synchronous CMC results in plenty of colloquial words (Alahmadi, 2007). It is axiomatic that more planned language production manifested at syntactically semantically rich structure may foster facilitative

conditions at MCT ELT classrooms. Notwithstanding, the delayed messages with lower response rate may result in meaning negotiation and scaffolding collapse and this will lead the discussion to return to its early stages of initiation (Salaberry, 2000). Building on the consumption that speech is a reproduction of thought (Alahmadi, 2011), the author of this article argues that ample opportunities to refer to resources are available at asynchronous but synchronous CMC. That is, more information available for participants to elaborate and rely at. By the time one learner composes and sends a message, he is expecting to receive a reply. When the reply comes unexpected, new and interesting due to new resources, the involvement will increase. Learners' expectations (Beavious, 1997) is crucial at language learning, this feature will provide the recipient with type of knowledge that he is not accustomed to. This would detonate motivation. As far as this newly feature is concerned, the author is unaware, to date, of any study that has addressed this promising feature. Having discussed the differences between asynchronous and synchronous CMC, it may interesting to shed lights on the interactional framework for asynchronous and synchronous CMC.

CMC discourse interactional features: turn-taking and turn adjacency

In order to disseminate the interactional structure of the both types of CMC we need to follow an "anatomy" of each product. To explain, discourse analysis oriented frameworks were adapted so as to figure out these interactional structures. By discourse analysis, we mean retaining the printed whole product of the written discussion and then examining its features. Both Dwyer (2005) and Alahmadi (2007) have implemented discourse analysis to audit these structures.

The most salient feature of the CMC discourse is its unorganized scheme of taking turns. This is due to the lack of visual cues for which learners trapped at typing incomplete utterances and "give way" for their peers when it does not apply. Concerning the asynchronous discourse this turn-taking is well-managed due to the time lag between each reply. This is accomplished by means of delayed/slow response rate between each interlocutor. Hutchby (2001) proposes that both CMC types turn-taking construct strife for learners to carry out a well-maintained turn taking as compared to face to face F2F situations. Hutchby clarifies this well (2001:183-184) at his seminal book (*conversation and technology*) by stating that:

1. *Participants can only 'take a turn' in the ongoing conversation by typing something in their talk-line box and pressing <Enter>.*
2. *That 'turn' only reaches all others on the channel once it has been accepted and distributed by the server (temporal lag).*
3. *There is a difference between a turn's course of production (typing in) and its public 'enunciation' (sending), such that other turns may appear in the interim which disrupt the turn's sequential relationship with its intended prior.*
4. *While all this is happening, the conversation is going on in a scrolling window on the monitor screen; which means that, on occasions of high traffic through the server, the prior contribution to which a turn is intendedly tied may have scrolled off the screen by the time the second contribution appears*

Needless to say that at synchronous discourse learners enjoy equal amount of participation as Beauvois (1997) describe this student's day at court. Gleason & Suvorov (2012) argues that learners are not threatened and feel their self-esteem is

maintained. This flexibility reflects on their development of language output being more comprehensible, syntactically rich, lexically varied (Blake, 2000).

Considering taking turns at CMC discourse is incomplete without discussing a crucial interactional feature of "turn adjacency" (Dwyer, 2005). The notion of "turn adjacency" can be simplified by considering the adjacency pair which is composed of two utterances by two interlocutors at a sequence. For example, the utterance "Hi" requires a response utterance of "Hello". This pair adjacency explains the notion of "turn adjacency" and how it affects both types of CMC. The author argues that asynchronous CMC discourse thrives with undisrupted turn adjacency. The potential of collapse at scaffolding, accumulative meaning negotiation and turn taking is always present and represent a real hazard at the logical flow and flexibility of the discussion at synchronous CMC. This positive feature of turn adjacency stands out and fits perfect for the learners at MCT. Kelm (1992) discovers that turn adjacency is always intact at asynchronous CMC discourse even in the case of multi-addressees. Kelm *ibid* proposes that a participant can respond/initiate a message by writing for example " I'd like to comment on the issue raised by Smith on ... ". Building on the idea that CMC discourse encompasses two crucial structures; turn taking and turn adjacency, the author points out that CMC discourse follows a scheme of prediction where one addressee "gives way" for the other. This pre-allocated utterance will add to the notion that CMC is a "great equaliser" by Beauvois (1997). Having discussed how turn is administered at this section, the next section will further elaborate on CMC discourse from a pragmatic perspective.

Asynchronous CMC: Pragmatic view

Cultural-sensitivity at MCT

The metalanguage of given human nation can be mainly composed of four main elements; syntax, semantic, phonology and pragmatics. As far as pragmatic is concerned in the context of MCT, the researched sample speaks Arabic as their mother tongue and live in Saudi Arabia. It may be interesting to shed lights on the Saudi culture which plays a pivotal role at such study. Alahmadi, (2011) argues that culture is mainly religious but conservative where Islam plays a fundamental role in regulating the values, norms, practices of society and attitudes. The significant mark that overtly influences the Saudi learning system is the sex segregation. The profound outcome of the use of the asynchronous CMC in MCT could open closed doors for means of communications of both sexes. Therefore, gender segregation is moderately avoided because although they are substantially apart, they still can interact using asynchronous CMC discourse. However, opening the discussion for uncontrolled parties can potentially backfire. Flaming, which can defined as unacceptable behavior or offensive words that violates the netiquette, is a real hazard at CMC discourse with cultural-sensitive context like that of MCT.

Alahmadi (2007) presented an unprecedented solution for this hazard; Computer-assisted class discussion CACD. He denotes that CACD has a particular relevance to the Saudi learner because it cuts out the potential for the cultural problems. However, CACD is a promising and potential solution in this case because the online interaction will be confined to space and time limitations. Hence, flaming is partially avoided. For the purpose of this article, asynchronous CMC discourse can cut the potential for

cultural problems through applying techniques such as scrutiny, monitoring the texts, and by educating learners with appropriate and sophisticated netiquettes. Moreover, CACD has once been employed in Saudi EFL classrooms and fostered the interaction between MCT learners (Alahmadi, 2007).

Learners' perception

It goes without saying that pragmatic privileges of asynchronous CMC optimise cooperative learning by means of providing more time for the learner to observe both his and his addressee's utterances. This is due to the time lag (Hutchby, 2001) that grants learners to ponder at the received message. The result is more confident users (Gleason & Suvorov, 2012) where recipient can use search engines or refer to people. Over and above, they can enhance their observation not only on what they have received but also what they will produce (McNeil, 2014).

This low-anxiety atmosphere at asynchronous CMC (Perez, 2003), where learners practice student-centered learning style unconsciously (Warschauer, 2001) leads to a more scrutinized and thoughtful discourse (Chapelle, 2003). Emails, for example, show a higher ratio of syntactic diversity and semantic density (Sotillo, 2000). Warschauer (2001) depicted a triangle where the base of the pyramid was the face to face F2F situations, synchronous CMC came in the middle, emails followed, and finally was the word processing at the summit. Immediacy decreases and well thought of discourse increase as one is going up. Bulletin boards, which are elder cousins to email, are briefer, not as accurate, have fewer subordination and connective phrases, and partially formal (Alahmadi, 2007). The author maintains that at bulletin board and all asynchronous CMC learners enjoy more opportunities for editing their utterances and rearranging their thoughts as compared to synchronous. This could promote more anxiety-free learning environments. In addition, asynchronous CMC is more beneficial to second language acquisition SLA because of the idea of involvement. By involvement, the author means that the learner is aware that he is composing his message to a pre-allocated addressee which enhances his inclusiveness (Gleason & Suvorov, 2012) and confidence. Having discussed the pragmatic features of asynchronous CMC herein, the following section will focus on interactional theories embedded in asynchronous CMC.

Asynchronous CMC Interaction in SLA research

CMC present unprecedented opportunities to MCT learners for communicative interaction. This section will largely approach SLA from an interactionist perspective; therefore, it will include a brief overview of the current situation of ELT at MCT. Learners begin learning English at their elementary schools and continue through, intermediate and secondary schools for four hours a week; in case of higher education, the language is also mandatory. Most English language teaching ELT, however, is focused on learning grammar and vocabulary by means of reading and translation, i.e Grammar-Translation Approach GTA. These traditional forms of teaching, i.e. where students anonymously learn and are dependent on their teachers, disregard many recent approaches to language learning (Alahmadi, 2011). He *ibid* indicates that it would appear that the most important, but neglected, aspect of the English language is learning through communication and interaction. In fact, some interactionist scholars, for example, Pica, (1994), Gass (1997) and Long (1989) claim that interaction-generated teaching method is a vital tool for successful SLA.

Seen from that angle, the most significant advantages of asynchronous CMC is that learners' language use is equal to if not higher than in F2F conventional classrooms which can consequently generate more opportunities for language learning. A considerable number of researchers claim that learners prefer CMC to F2F (Kelm, 1992; Hutchby, 2001; Beatty, 2003). Learners at MCT already found CMC less threatening than F2F (Alahmadi, 2011). The author speculates that asynchronous CMC will have a positive influence in encouraging cornered learners at MCT to practice the language and to communicatively interact more than they do in F2F conventional classrooms. F2F atmosphere at MCT is responsible for the poor linguistic competence. In regard to this topic, a number of researchers claim that a flashing example of the benefits of asynchronous CMC is that students produce more language output with a higher level of language complexity (Kern, 1995; Blake, 2000). Likewise, MCT learners could embark at negotiation of meaning and produce collaboration which are essential incentives to carry out an interactional competence, hence is the optimal target.

It is crucial to maintain that each study findings should be contextualised. This means that others' conclusions are not guaranteed findings. This is because the context is different and thereby the findings of a given study may not be applicable to MCT. Kern argues (1995; 79) that CMC "...is not a panacea for language acquisition, nor is it a substitute for normal classroom discussion".

Cognitive and sociocultural approaches

The next discussion pivots around two prevailing interactionist approaches in respect to SLA. Those are "cognitive-oriented approach" and "sociocultural approach". They substituted the predominant Chomsky's grammar-focused approaches. Interactionist advocates, come up with those two functional approaches where they stressed the dominant role of interaction. According to them, language acquisition is born at circumstances where communicative interaction is rehearsally practiced.

Interaction, at the cognitive-oriented approach, is shown as a condition for personal cognitive development (Gass, 1997; Long, 1989; Pica, 1994). Interlanguage, a halfway of mother tongue and target language, is a cornerstone of cognitive-oriented approach. On the occasion of asynchronous CMC, the interlanguage is emphasized by means of code-switching where learners retain to their mother tongue when faced with difficulty at target language. Asynchronous CMC can generate ample opportunities for scaffolding, meaning negotiation, comprehensible modified input, conceivable output, autonomous learning, and student-steered asynchronous CMC discourse. By so doing, one can notice that interlanguage could be emphasized at MCT. If MCT would incorporate asynchronous CMC at their English language curriculum, their learners could be exposed to facilitative conditions to develop their interlanguage and hence their communicative competence/interaction.

On the other side of the coin, the sociocultural approach views interaction as a social background. Building on the pragmatic perspective, interlocutors can form their knowledge by involving in interactive activities (Lantolf, 2005). Contrary to the cognitive approach, the sociocultural approach articulates that language is not a mere cognitive innate skill, yet it is a social paradox, achieved and practiced interactively (Alahmadi, 2007). It is beyond the scope of this article to trace how Vygotsky's

approach influenced sociocultural approach and it suffices to point out that they are intra-related. To spell out the essence of sociocultural approach, it considers learning to first take place at an interpersonal level and eventually at an intrapersonal level where social and linguistic competence is constructed. Seen from this perspective, asynchronous CMC could change MCT traditional classrooms into educational communities. Consequently, asynchronous CMC can potentially build online communities or "virtual schoolhouses". Unprecedentedly, it could lead to one of the ways in which a more interactive element is deployed at MCT classroom. The author stresses that the stakeholders are cordially invited to implement a merge of these two approaches as Warschauer (2001) states that the sociocultural view is not necessarily in contradiction to interactionist approaches but rather examines interaction within a broader social and cultural context".

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a concise critique for the purported advantages of exploiting asynchronous CMC at MCT ELT methods. The reason was a humble attempt to convince the stakeholders to deploy asynchronous CMC at MCT curriculums. The article has shown how this promising leap can positively influence ELT at MCT from four main perspectives. These were; linguistic, interactional, pragmatic, and SLA respectively. Each of which proved to be either fostering ELT or applicable to the current situation at MCT. First, the author stated that in terms of linguistic features, asynchronous CMC yields syntactically dense and semantically varied utterances. Also, the sentences are longer, formal and accurate due to the time lag feature that allows learners to plan and think of their language product. Secondly, the interactional attributes of asynchronous CMC being mainly; turn taking and turn adjacency create positive influence to language learners. Chief among them were, well- structured utterances, interlocutor centeredness, comprehensible output, semantic and morphosyntactic improvement, and student- steered learning. Thirdly, pragmatic suitability of asynchronous CMC shows that it is utterly appropriate for the cultural-sensitive Saudi classroom. Flaming was presented as a potential hazard, yet computer-assisted class discussion is the solution. In the case of more sensitive situations, scrutinizing the electronic discourse by means of applying filters and educating learners of sophisticated netiquettes were suggested. Finally, the article presented how turn is administered at synchronous CMC in the light of two predominant approaches; cognitive-oriented and sociocultural. It was concluded that a hybrid approach in asynchronous CMC could produce ample opportunities for scaffolding, meaning negotiation, comprehensible modified input, conceivable output, autonomous learning. Finally, it is axiomatic that this paper cannot provide an account of all aspects of asynchronous CMC as a facilitator of communicative interaction at MCT. It should be seen as inductive rather than definitive. Further research of greater depth and from different perspectives is required to help.

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