

Enhancing Learners' Communication Skills through Synchronous Electronic Interaction and Task-Based Instruction

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Abstract: *Online interactive exchange offers the learner many opportunities to use the target language to negotiate both meaning and form in a social context that is crucial for second language acquisition. This paper discusses a pilot study using synchronous electronic chats combined with task-based instruction (TBI) to enhance learners' communication skills. TBI focuses on the two-way exchange of information on real-life topics. This pilot study shows that computer-mediated communication using less structure-controlled but more open-ended exchange had a significant impact on the process of language learning. Students benefited from online task-based activities because they had to access different functional skills to construct and negotiate meaning collaboratively. However, foreign language educators need to be aware that the quick cyberspace interactions impeded students from producing correct and coherent discourse, especially during learner-learner interaction. One corrective technique is to make students reexamine and revise their exchanges with guided instruction.*

Introduction

The primary goal of foreign language (FL) teaching is to create a communicative environment in which learners express themselves in the target language. Synchronous electronic interaction, that is, text-based instantaneous communication, allows learners to share ideas and receive responses immediately in real-life chats. Through this written exchange, learners use the target language to negotiate both meaning and form. During the negotiation, learners receive input and feedback from their peers. At the same time, they produce output in a social context that is crucial for second language acquisition (SLA) to occur (Swain, 1995). However, a major challenge for FL teachers is to create an instructional plan that fosters natural interactional exchanges but at the same time enhances the development of learners' language skills.

This paper aims to demonstrate the impact of online, task-based activities centered around open-ended questions on the process of language learning. Real-life topics chosen for these activities tap the learners' fund of knowledge and experiences. Through online negotiation, language learners use different functional skills including describing, narrating, and expressing opinions that are essential for the development of language proficiency. It is hoped that this article will add to FL educators' knowledge about how to build students' communication by incorporating task-based activities and synchronous online technologies into their teaching plans.

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