

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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I will first discuss the role of synchronous electronic interaction in FL acquisition and the effectiveness of task-based instruction (TBI). I will then describe the design of the study: the TBI, online tools, material development, and procedures for task-based activities. I will then report the results of the study and conclude with students' feedback and comments on the use of the virtual classroom and TBI. Finally, I will give suggestions for future improvement.

Synchronous Electronic Interaction and Foreign Language Acquisition

Like face-to-face conversation, computer-mediated communication (CMC) takes place in a real-time interaction in which users negotiate meaning by modifying their written language. A message is typed on a computer keyboard and is immediately displayed on the screen. During the online negotiation, learners are exposed to input, feedback, and output in a way similar to what they would experience through face-to-face interaction. These exposures to input, output, attention to feedback, and linguistic form are essential to SLA (e.g., Gass, 1997; Krashen, 1985; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994; Swain, 1985).

Previous studies investigating the effects of online interaction have shown that the use of synchronous online discussion facilitates teaching and enhances learning (see Beauvois, 1998; Kelm, 1992; Kern, 1995; Lee, 1997b; Oliva & Pollastrini, 1995; Pelletieri, 2000). These online interactions not only supported the development of students' language skills, but also fostered students' interest and motivation in language learning in general (e.g., Cononelos & Oliva, 1993; Lee, 1997b; Lunde, 1990; Oliva & Pollastrini, 1995). For instance, Beauvois (1998) found that students enrolled in intermediate French who used an electronic synchronous communication software program (*Daedalus InterChange*) for class discussion did better on oral exams than those who spent the same amount of time in oral discussion in the classroom.

Recent research points to three benefits of CMC. First, CMC provides for more equal participation than face-to-face interaction (Beauvois, 1992; Chun, 1994; Kelm, 1992; Kern, 1995; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996). CMC is special, for example, in that it allows shy and less-well motivated learners to interact with others (Beauvois, 1992; Kelm, 1992). Both modified input and output are often constructed collectively in a social context rather than by the learner in isolation. During online collaborative communication, learners have opportunities to observe and study information projected on the screen. They may copy useful vocabulary, expressions, and linguistic aspects from each other (Lee, 1998; St. John & Cash, 1995).

Second, CMC allows the learner sufficient time to process input, and monitor and edit output through a self-paced learning environment. The learner reads and types

comments at his or her own pace (Kelm, 1992; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). At the same time, the learner pays attention to certain aspects of discourse on the screen (Warschauer, 1997). The learner reexamines and edits these text-based forms to make the interaction more meaningful and comprehensible. In other words, learners are more aware of the language structures that they and their peers use to compose messages. Subsequently, this may lead them to attend to feedback or attempt self-correction frequently. Learners benefit from the focus on form in attempting to overcome incorrect target language features; this internal monitor supports language acquisition (Lightbown & Pienemann 1993; Lyster, 1994; Pica, 1996).

Finally, CMC increases language production and complexity (Chun, 1994; Kern, 1995). Producing output pushes the learner to use the target language which is essential for SLA (Swain, 1985). The reduction of teacher talk in CMC is in favor of learner language production. Learners receive two or three more turns to use the target language (Kern, 1995; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996) than they would in the traditional classroom setting (face-to-face oral communication). Learner-learner online interaction, therefore, should result in greater language production than that achieved in teacher-learner interaction.

Researchers who have measured the complexity of language used in CMC differ in their observations. Kelm (1992) claims that the interaction in CMC is similar to real conversation, and that learners' output contains simple and short sentences rather than complex ones. Warschauer (1996) argues that the exchanges are longer but the level of interaction is lower. Many factors (e.g., focus on form, strategies of language use, knowledge about language, etc.), however, may affect the quality of language development in CMC (Ortega, 1997; Warschauer, 1997). Swaffar (1998) points out that online exchange helps FL students "engage more frequently, with greater confidence, and with greater enthusiasm in the communicative process than is characteristic for similar students in oral classrooms" (p. 1). Indeed, FL learners benefit greatly from using CMC – benefit that is maximized with the application of meaningful task-based activities. The following section thus describes the task types that promote meaningful language use.

Task-Based Instruction and Foreign Language Learning

FL instruction has moved away from the traditional approach – one focusing on the study of the language itself – to a communicative approach, whereby learners use the target language through negotiation with others. Tasks that promote communication, that is, meaningful use of the target language, are crucial to SLA.

Several studies have investigated the effects of types of tasks (e.g., of a "one-way" vs. a "two-way" task) on learn-

ers' performance (Pica et al., 1993; Shortreed, 1993). A two-way task involves an exchange in which two interlocutors negotiate meaning. Because the partners interact in this task type, input and output may be modified accordingly. A one-way task only allows one participant to give information to another without feedback.

Doughty and Pica (1986), on the other hand, define two types of information exchange: "required" versus "optional" information exchange. Their study showed that the amount of interaction was greater in a required information-exchange task than in an optional information-exchange task. They further investigated the effectiveness of types of conditions (teacher-fronted vs. learner-learner interaction) on two different tasks (decision-making vs. information-exchange task). The results demonstrated that the information-exchange task using the learner-learner condition produced more negotiation using comprehension and confirmation checks and more clarification requests.

Duff (1999) believes that problem-solving tasks require more turn taking between negotiations, whereas debating tasks result in longer turns, complex structure, and extended discourse. Learners use different types of language for different types of tasks. Other researchers have also highlighted the impact of task type in the context of TBI (see Crookes & Gass, 1993; Foster, 1998). Finally, Lee (1995) suggests that foreign language practice needs to "move from structured input and output practices to more open-ended types of communicative activities" (p. 148).

Overall, the key is to structure tasks that involve learners' active participation in sharing, exchanging, and debating information relevant to life experiences through self-expression and self-discovery. TBI fosters this goal of creating a theme-based context by using open-ended questions that allow learners to use the target language in a meaningful way. In addition, TBI reinforces the application of a particular vocabulary and grammatical structure in which learners are aware of the gap between the L1 and L2 linguistic systems. Through information exchanges, learners pay attention to both meaning (idea) and form (structure), thereby enhancing the development of their L2 language. Online task-based activities aim to build learners' language proficiency at the advanced level of describing, narrating, explaining situations, and expressing opinions in different contexts.

The following is a description of a pilot project that used online chats and task-based activities to develop students' communication skills.

Pilot Project Goals

One of the most important goals for students in third-year college Spanish is to acquire skills in expressing, defending, and articulating their points of view. The goal of the

online chatroom and TBI was to create a collaborative learning environment in which students used the target language to discuss, exchange, and debate issues related to real life. Discussions on real-world topics encourage students to use their thinking skills and communication strategies and challenge them in the use of specific vocabulary and grammar structures during composition.

TBI employs topic-based and two-way information exchange. Open-ended questions for online discussion are designed to allow students to express themselves fully and freely using different communication strategies. This type of exchange allows students to learn from each other by reading messages sent by their peers. The process of negotiation also helps them pay attention to what they or their peers have said and then provide feedback. Through regular online interaction, students become more skilled in using what they have learned during the information process. All task-based activities for this project were integrated into the course syllabus.

Procedure

The project was divided into several stages. The following section describes each of these stages in detail.

Stage 1: Accessing Online Communication Tools through Blackboard

The *Blackboard* program was chosen to achieve synchronous electronic interaction. *Blackboard* contains a template that is easily integrated into language courses because it allows teachers to bring the course online using multi-channel web tools (for more information, visit <http://www.blackboard.com>) *Blackboard's* software capabilities create a unique instructional tool: online chats that can be combined with TBI.

When integrating online technologies into foreign language courses, teachers should make sure that students feel comfortable using the course software. It is therefore important to conduct training sessions before executing online activities. At the beginning of the semester, the researcher informed students about the online course and provided all students with a one-hour training session in which they learned how to login, logout, access, upload, and download information from *Blackboard*. Students used their e-mail accounts and passwords to login. The researcher provided them with the handout, "10 Steps to Getting Started with *Blackboard*." Students were also informed that they could log into the Blackboard homepage to get further assistance when necessary.

Two major tools provided by *Blackboard* were essential to the students' participation. The first was the "Digital DropBox," one of the communication tools with which the user can upload, download, and send documents to other users. The second one is the "Virtual Classroom," whereby

users chat online. Students were divided into groups of two or three. They logged into the “GroupPage” from the Virtual Classroom to chat with their peers once per week. The Virtual Classroom enables users to store the online discussions in archives, which can be accessed when needed.

Stage 2: Creating Task-Based Material

Task-based online activities were created to reinforce students’ communication skills. Online material for daily assignments and weekly online discussions was stored under “Assignments” in *Blackboard*. Open-ended questions were based on the topics from the reader *Facetas* (pub. Heinle and Heinle). Assigned readings included articles about everyday topics, such as the role of men and women in modern society or environmental issues in Latin America. These topics served as a point of departure for online tasks. Six topics, each with a dozen open-ended questions, were posted online. For each assignment, students chose two questions and wrote an essay in response to each.

The open-ended questions were designed to be broad and relevant to real life so that the students could relate the issues to their own experiences. At the same time, the questions targeted the use of specific vocabulary and structures so that these functional skills could be reinforced and developed from skill-getting to skill-using. For instance, the topic of chapter 1 is “¿Qué significa ser joven en el mundo actual?” (What does it mean to be a young adult in today’s world?). A set of open-ended questions relevant to the world of young adults was created for individual essays and online discussions (see Appendix A for sample questions). Questions were structured in such a way that the students were required to use new vocabulary and expressions learned from the chapter. At the same time, students accessed different functional skills including describing, narrating, and hypothesizing situations. These task-based activities aimed at getting students to recycle ideas and reinforce skills through online discussions within small groups after writing individual essays.

The next stage focused on the activities of essay writing and online discussion, a combination that enabled students to gain language proficiency.

Stage 3: Executing Online Task-Based Activities

As mentioned earlier in this paper, all assignments outside the classroom were posted in *Blackboard*. Students were required to execute several online activities during the semester to reinforce their communication skills. These online task-based activities were scheduled in their course syllabus as part of the course requirements and were worth 30% of the final grade. The procedure for the major activities was as follows.

Online essay writings. For each class, students wrote

short essays to answer the open-ended questions found in the “A escribir” (to write) folder under “Assignment” in *Blackboard*. Students composed approximately one page of writing. They were allowed to use a dictionary and/or grammar reference when necessary. After completing the assignment, students sent it via the Digital DropBox to the researcher located in *Blackboard*. The researcher then corrected the students’ essays by writing comments and correcting mistakes on usage, vocabulary, and grammar. For instance, the researcher circled each error and wrote the code for the correction, such as “vt” for verb tense, “voc” for wrong word, and “prep” for incorrect preposition. The assignments were then returned to the students through the Digital DropBox. The students retrieved the documents and then responded to the researcher’s feedback and corrected the errors. Finally, they downloaded the revised copies and placed them in their portfolios as part of the course requirement.

Online discussions. Online discussions create a virtual community where students enter into discussion and interact with others. Students were required to chat online using “GroupPage” under the Virtual Classroom (a synchronous chat program) in *Blackboard*. Once students log into the chatroom, they type their comments, click to send them, and their words appear immediately on the screens of all those who are connected. Unlike the asynchronous interaction, the online chat engages users in a real time conversation in which they receive immediate responses.

It is extremely difficult to chat online with a group of 17 students. The researcher, therefore, divided the class into six groups of two or three students. Each group determined their own schedule and chatted for one hour per week outside of class. Each week, students first read the topic-based questions posted in the “A charlar” (to chat) folder under “Assignment” and then logged into the chatroom for online discussions. So that participants would interact with each other as spontaneously as possible, no particular instructions were given to the students. However, they were encouraged to focus on the questions and were told not to use dictionaries during the online interaction. The researcher did not participate in any of the discussions. Students worked collaboratively within the group by exchanging and debating ideas. The researcher retrieved online discussions from the archives, and sent comments and feedback to the students via the Digital DropBox. Students then used the same guidelines for essays to correct their mistakes and to respond to the researcher’s questions and/or comments. These questions challenged students to elaborate and articulate their thoughts. Within their own groups, students were encouraged to consult with each other about corrections. Revised copies of online exchanges were placed in the portfolios for the final evaluation.

Stage 4: Evaluating Students' Portfolios

Evaluating students' work is crucial to learning outcomes. The researcher incorporated a holistic portfolio assessment into this course (see Lee, 1997a, for details). Each student compiled a learning portfolio that contained several major components, including selected revised samples of daily assignments, eight online discussions (both original and revised copies), and final self-evaluation. Each component was graded separately based on five categories: content, organization, language, style, and appropriateness. In addition to the portfolio, the researcher conducted a "Survey of Your Experience with Online Activities" at the end of the semester. The aim of the questionnaire was to ascertain students' reactions to the online task-based activities. A final oral interview with each student in the target language helped the researcher better understand students' learning processes and progress. Students were asked to describe their experiences with online activities and explain the most valuable, interesting, and difficult aspects of their learning process. All the interviews were recorded for the data analysis.

Students' feedback and comments. Students were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with the following course elements, ranking them from 1 to 5 (5 indicating the most satisfaction) and providing an explanation for each rating:

1. I enjoyed writing topic-based online essays.
2. I enjoyed weekly online discussions in a small group.
3. I felt comfortable chatting online with my peers.
4. I liked the topics we discussed online.
5. I found online exchanges useful for improving my writing skills.
6. I believe that chatting online enhanced my communication skills.

Overall, students reacted very favorably to the inclusion of the online task-based activities. Most students agreed that using TBI with the chatroom was an effective way to reinforce their knowledge of Spanish and develop their communication skills. When asked if they enjoyed chatting online and whether online discussions helped them improve their writing and communication skills in general (question 2, 5, and 6), most students agreed that the online exchanges provided them with a unique opportunity to use Spanish outside the classroom. They felt that the online experiences had a very positive effect on their language development and especially improved their grammatical competence. Students admitted that they struggled with trying out different structures to produce output until they and their partners achieved mutual comprehension. One student commented:

Producing output online provided me with opportunities to notice the gap between L1 and L2 and

forced me to think and write in Spanish more quickly and at the same time, helped me develop the metalinguistic skills by paying attention to both form and meaning.

This student's comment illustrates the comprehensible output hypothesis proposed by Swain (1985), in that increased output has enhanced the development of the learner's language system and has promoted SLA.

In order to provide immediate responses and feedback, the learner needs to be able to compose ideas quickly enough to stay on track and make interactional moves. Several students made the following observations about their new communication skills:

I realized that I wrote more quickly without worrying too much about making mistakes. However, I did notice my mistakes more when someone repeated what I wrote. I right away corrected my errors and the process of using different strategies for writing helped me communicate better in Spanish.

I worried more about getting ideas across and less on grammar. I have learned how to communicate on a less formal and more social level.

I could/can say things without going through English to Spanish translation most of the time. This aspect was extremely rewarding through online discussions.

I learned a lot about the written Spanish language. Chatting online was a good review of vocabulary and verb conjugations and usage. Writing in Spanish is easier for me now.

This study demonstrates that CMC is an effective way for learners to negotiate both meaning and form and reinforce their communication skills, especially in written communication. Online interactions did not slow student output production; rather, students strove to respond to the input quickly so that they could follow the flow. These learner-centered fast exchanges were also described recently by Sotillo (2000). In addition, students strongly agreed that CMC helped them develop both linguistic and metalinguistic skills as they used the target language and communication strategies during the negotiation (Long, 1996; Warschauer, 2000).

In terms of content, students praised the method and content of the online discussions and essay writings (questions 1 and 4). More than 80% of students commented that the topics were very interesting, especially because they were related to the class discussion and their own lives. The open-ended questions were broad enough for everyone to discuss, encouraging the students to express their ideas fully through negotiation. During the oral interview, one student enthusiastically stated:

Theme-based discussions forced me to use certain vocabulary and phrases to get my ideas across to my peers. When I got stuck, I had to use different communication strategies, such as ask for help or the use of comprehension and confirmation check, to make sure I understood the messages or was understood by my peers.

This student in particular used a recognized communicative strategy. She pointed out that she often asked questions for clarification when she had difficulty understanding messages from her peers (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). CMC pushes learners to produce output and at the same time promotes the use of communication strategies that facilitate SLA (Long, 1983).

Students reacted very positively to the application of TBI and its focus on two-way information exchanges. They asserted that these task-based assignments allowed them to use Spanish in a meaningful context and led them to reflect on issues relevant to their own lives and to listen to others' ideas and opinions. One student commented, "Online discussions were very stimulating and the content was very informative. It was a true learning experience for me. Chatting online was the best way I have ever learned to communicate with others in the target language." Another student pointed to the importance of using open-ended questions as prompts to guide students, especially when the instructor was absent during online exchanges. A particularly important observation from the instructor was that student-student interaction created more attempts for negotiation. That is, they had to negotiate more to make sure the messages were understood.

The student-student interaction also resulted in collaborative work, as students had to help each other to achieve mutual comprehension. This confirms that CMC offered the students a "collective scaffolding" learning environment, in which social, cognitive, and affective support of one another assisted them in performing a task through interaction (Donato, 1994; Ohta, 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Students pointed out that they felt less intimidated communicating with their peers online than in face-to-face interaction. Because the instructor did not assist participants in the discussion, students realized that they had to work collaboratively to make both input and output comprehensible to their peers.

Overall, synchronous electronic interaction benefited students because they had to access different functional skills to construct and negotiate meaning collaboratively. Task-based online activities also encouraged students to focus on form as part of the foreign language learning process as they expressed and exchanged ideas. In addition to the informal discourse typical of face-to-face conversation, the structured tasks allowed students to use more

complex language (e.g., subordinate clauses) to articulate ideas and defend opinions.

Conclusion and Implications

Online exchanges using TBI have created a new arena for SLA, that is, a place where learners can receive input and produce output through negotiation. This study suggests that the combined use of online interaction and TBI empowers students' communication skills by creating a lively environment in which they respond to real-time conversation about topics relevant to their interests. Confident as well as shy students participated in CMC – expressing their ideas, querying information given by others, and defending their opinions. More importantly, these topic-based activities allowed students to use particular lexical items and their previous knowledge of linguistic structure to interact with each other. Incoherent input and output led students to use a variety of communication devices to achieve mutual understanding.

From the pedagogical perspective, FL learners should be taught various communication strategies to improve CMC. For example, students should be encouraged to use what they can say in the target language as opposed to their first language. Circumlocution, approximation, repetition, and simplification are among other useful and effective communication strategies. When necessary, demonstrations of these strategies should be provided to students.

Online negotiation for both meaning and form facilitated the development of students' communicative proficiency including grammatical discourse skills and strategic competence (Savignon, 1983). Unfortunately, learner-learner interaction did not increase students' sociolinguistic competence because of the absence of native speakers. When possible, FL teachers should employ native speakers to enhance learners' appropriate use of social interaction rules. Before using CMC, foreign language educators need to be aware that quick cyberspace interactions impede students' production of correct and coherent discourse (Kern, 1995), especially during learner-learner interaction. Students need to be advised of the need to write correctly and thus maintain a balance between function, content, and accuracy. One corrective technique is to make students reexamine and revise their exchanges with guided instruction.

In closing, TBI combined with online chat serves as a valuable model of using online technologies to transform and enrich the FL learning experience. FL educators interested in integrating technologies into their teaching plans are encouraged to explore and experiment with TBI using the design provided by this study.

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Appendix A

Sample Online Discussion Questions

Escoja dos preguntas y escriba un ensayo para contestar las preguntas.
(Choose two questions and write an essay to answer the questions.)

11 de septiembre

1. Describa los momentos importantes en su niñez que siguen teniendo un gran impacto en su vida actual.
(Explain the important moments in your childhood that continue having a great impact in your current life.)
2. ¿Cómo afectan las experiencias de nuestra niñez a nuestros valores personales?
(How do the experiences of our childhood affect our personal values?)
3. ¿Qué significa asistir a la universidad para Ud.? ¿Cuáles son sus expectativas personales? ¿Cree Ud. que la educación forma una parte importante de la vida de un joven?
(What does it mean to you to attend a university? What are your personal expectations? Do you believe that education shapes an important part of a young adult's life?)

13 de septiembre

4. Hoy día muchos jóvenes tienen problemas con drogas y alcohol. ¿Por qué piensa Ud. que ellos tienen estos problemas? ¿Cómo es que los problemas familiares, de amistad, de vivienda, etc. influyen mucho en el uso de las drogas y el alcohol?
(Nowadays, many young adults have problems with drugs and alcohol. Why do you think they have these problems? Why do problems with family, friendship, and living situation impact on the use of drugs and alcohol?)
5. ¿Piensa Ud. que la juventud es la época más importante de la vida del ser humano? ¿Le gusta vivir en la época que estamos viviendo ahora? ¿Por qué sí o no?
(Do you think young adulthood is the most important time of someone's life? Do you like living in the 21st century? Why?)
6. ¿Qué es lo que a Ud. le preocupa más de este mundo? Explique.
(What is it that you worry about most in the world? Explain.)

15 de septiembre

7. ¿Qué significa ser joven para Ud.? ¿Cuáles son las actitudes y los valores que se deben tomar en cuenta para tener éxito en la vida?
(What does it mean to you to be a young adult? What attitudes and values should one take into consideration to have success in life?)
8. ¿Cómo sería una juventud ideal para Ud.? ¿Está contento/a con su vida actual? ¿Por qué sí o no?
(What would an ideal young adulthood be for you? Are you happy with your current life? Why?)

18 de septiembre

9. ¿Cree Ud. que la sociedad actual representa una imagen positiva o negativa para los jóvenes? ¿Preferiría Ud. vivir en otro planeta?
(Do you think that society today presents a positive or a negative image of young adults? Would you prefer to live on another planet?)
10. ¿Se siente frustrado/a algunas veces? ¿Qué hace para enfrentar sus problemas personales?
(Do you feel frustrated sometimes? What do you do to tackle your personal problems?)
11. Haga una comparación de la juventud de personas de diferentes clases sociales.
(Compare the young adulthood of people from different social classes.)