

Investigating the Impact of Online Synchronous Text-Based Interaction on the Students' English Language Awareness

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Abstract: This 4-week interpretive study explored the impact of online teacher's corrective feedback (OTCF) on L2 students' English language awareness during teacher-student synchronous text-based chats so as to improve the students' communicative skills. The sample consisted of the researcher as a teacher and three intermediate English learners majoring in business at a university in Bahrain. The data collection method used was the saved electronic chats between the researcher and the students on the MSN messenger. Interpretation of the data employed aspects of discourse analysis to describe and analyze the OTCF's impact on the students' communication. The analysis revealed that the OTCF helped the learners to notice and correct their written grammatical and lexical errors in an unthreatening and welcoming environment. However, based on the evidence that the research provided, the CMC did not necessarily support the development of the students' oral skill. The CMC's potential for wider dissemination and insights for future research were also addressed.

Keywords: Teaching, Skimming, Theoretical, Pedagogical.

Introduction:

Many English learners at university in Bahrain do not have the chance to practice their English with competent speakers of English outside the classroom, particularly in social and informal contexts. In this case, learners could unknowingly make mistakes in their spoken and written English which may become difficult to treat without intense practice and corrective feedback.

However, the synchronous text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) is thought to offer an opportunity for students to 'try out, evaluate, and reflect on their own performance through real interaction and authentic feedback' from their tutors (Satar & Ozdener, 2008: 295). This real-time communication is also claimed to enable interlocutors to exchange ideas, describe and narrate events, express opinions in a social context and help learners improve their spoken skills.

This small-scale study explores how the CMC text-based chats can impact the students' communicative skills by posing the following questions:

What is the impact of online teacher's corrective feedback (OTCF) on students' language awareness in English?

Literature Review:

The conceptual framework of this study draws upon Gass's and Mackey's (2006) Input-Interaction-Output (IIO) model, which is a branch of second language acquisition (SLA) theories that stresses the role of interaction in enhancing cognition. This model is based on several other theories such as the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), the interaction hypothesis (Long, 1983) and the output hypothesis (Swain, 1985). In brief, the input hypothesis concentrates on comprehensible language input as a condition for SLA while the output hypothesis considers comprehensible language output as the best way to expand the learner interlanguage. The interaction hypothesis, on the other hand, emphasizes modified output that is triggered by negotiation of meaning and feedback.

In general, feedback can be divided into two parts: implicit feedback and explicit feedback (Sanz, 2011). Dekhinet (2008) illustrates that the former encompasses recast, clarification request and echoing while the latter uses direct correction techniques to treat the erroneous L2 production (see Table 1 below for more details).

F.B. Strategies		Examples
Implicit Strategies	Recast (Long, 1996) The tutor corrects the tutee's inaccurate output by incorporating implicitly the correction.	Eg., This city is beautiful in response to the tutee's: This city beautiful.
	Confirmation check (Long, 1983) The tutor asks questions in order to incite the tutee to make a correction.	Eg., Can you try that again?
	Clarification request (Long, 1983) The tutor asks a question to the tutee to make a correction	Eg., What do you mean by X?
	Echoing The tutor repeats just the inappropriate word or utterance with an intonation that denotes that there is something wrong in his output. This might incite the tutee to self-correct.	Eg., . . . city beautiful?
Explicit Strategy	Explicit correction The tutor clearly tells the tutee his mistakes.	Eg., You should say, This city is beautiful.

Table (1), adapted from Dekhinet (2008: 411)

Previous studies that investigated the effectiveness of the CMC feedback in second language acquisition reported positive results. Lee (2002) conducted a qualitative study on the benefits of combining synchronous online interaction with task-based instruction (TBI) to enhance learners' communicative skills. Her sample was drawn from a class of 17 L2 Spanish learners at a university in the USA. The participants, who were divided into small groups of 3 to 4, had to use synchronous text-based chats to discuss open-ended questions on certain topics and write essays based on their discussions. The teacher provided coded feedback on the students' essays and the students had to discuss the feedback in their subsequent chats and produce a final version of the essays. Despite sketchy information about the research design, the researcher contends that 'the combined use of online interaction and TBI empowers students' communication skills' (Lee, 2002: 21) and enhances their lexical and grammatical knowledge. She also claims that it creates confidence in students, particularly shy ones, to participate actively in the discussions, and it promotes a friendly environment where students are able to 'receive input and produce output through negotiation' (ibid).

However, the very use of pre-determined topics in Lee's study is a weak point in the design as it restricts students' ability to link their online conversations to their lived experiences. In addition, there is an element of coercion in the study as the students' contributions were graded, which could indeed make the conversations look less authentic.

Dekhinet (2008) examined the impact of the instantaneous written CMC feedback on language awareness during 8 weeks of chats between native English tutors and non-native English students at the University of Dundee in Scotland. She claims that the online feedback 'was really advantageous, as NNSs [non-native speakers] had time to read, reflect, memorise and expand their English language knowledge repertoire' (420). She adds that it helped NNSs to notice how English 'works in conversations' and provides them with an opportunity 'to process their L2 [,]...read their NS [native speaker] tutors' postings, extract, gesture, exchange and build meaning' (ibid).

Although the students' written productions were not part of an assessed course, the topics, as in Lee's study above, were pre-determined by the researcher. Not to mention the fact that Dekhiinet's emphasis on employing native speaker tutors to help L2 students understand the pragmatic use of the target language so as to engage them in the Scottish culture might have overrode the students' L1 culture. This can have negative effects on students because they might feel that their preferred identities are not represented and will probably adopt techniques such as 'subversion' and 'resistance' (Kumaravadivelu, 1999).

The impact of text-based CMC on oral skills:

Despite the obvious differences between the text-based CMC and face-to-face (F2F) communication, there is a widespread belief that the CMC chat has a positive impact on the students' oral communication. Many proponents of this view (ex. Payne and Ross, 2005; and Satar & Ozdener, 2008) argue that the CMC possesses similar features to real-life communication, such as retaining "the conversational feel and flow" (Smith, 2003: 39) and allowing the use of first person and negotiation of meaning (Smith, 2005), which they think makes written output transferable to oral output.

However, Tudini (2002: 40) warns against taking this for granted and suggests that 'further qualitative research is required to ascertain whether any interlanguage development is short-term or long-term and whether it transfers to spoken language.' This being said, the analysis of her Italian learners' chat logs in an Australian context did not dismiss completely the possible influence of CMC on oral proficiency. Moreover, Smith's (2005: 33) findings in this area 'suggest a possible diminished role for uptake in SLA in a CMC environment.' He implies that teachers should be cautious about linking learner uptake with acquisition.

Significance of the current study:

Based on the brief literature review that I conducted in the above, it seems that there has been very little work done in CMC in the settings outside the West where English is a foreign language. In particular, there is no study, to the best of my knowledge, in my context, Bahrain, that looked into the impact of synchronous teacher-student CMC on students. Hence, this research aims to fill in this gap and contribute to the growing body of literature on CMC through conducting text-based chats with L2 Bahraini university English students on the MSN messenger.

Methodology:

This study is interpretive in nature. The epistemological assumption that informs the interpretive paradigm is subjectivism which believes that knowledge about objects (phenomena) is value-laden and it is dependent on the interpretation of individuals (Creswell, 2003). The role of the researcher is to extensively describe the meaning that the participants attach to the issue under investigation (Ernest, 1994) and co-create data with the participant (Olesen 1994 in Troudi & Alwan, 2010). The analysis of the data must closely capture the participant's constructed reality (Trochim, 2006).

The ontology of interpretivism believes in 'personal realities' that are constructed by individuals (Eloff & Ebersohn, 2004). Hence, in this study I do not seek objective results but acknowledge that my reflection on the research is subjective.

As this study seeks to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life (Yin, 1989) through a close observation (Golby, 1994) of the language development of an individual group, a case study was found suitable to meet this end.

The data collection method used was the saved online conversations between the researcher, myself, and the students. Although this method might be appropriate to investigate the phenomenon in its natural setting and context, it could have been triangulated with another instrument, such as interviews, to solidify the data. This said, interviews were indeed planned to be conducted but were cancelled because of time constraint.

Three Bahraini Arab university students of business participated in this study. The intermediate level students, two females and one male, aged between 22 to 25 years old. I selected the students using the snowball sampling technique where one participant suggests other participants (Monette et al, 2010). All of the participants were my former students.

The students gave their consent to use the data for publication and were given the right to withdraw from the research at any time. The confidentiality and anonymity of the data and the participants' real names were also reassured.

The online conversations were open-ended to make them authentic and spontaneous. Hence, there were no pre-determined topics to discuss but instead the topics were initiated during the conversations either by the teacher or the learner. Usually there were two or more topics in the same conversation. These included, but not limited to, personal issues, such as family, health and friends; news, travel, jobs, business, politics, study, technology, weather, sports, food, tradition and culture.

During the 4-week interaction (2 weekly hours of chat for each participant), explicit and implicit corrective feedback strategies were employed when learners made grammatical and lexical mistakes or asked for clarification. The explicit feedback provided overt correction of wrong forms while the implicit included recast, confirmation checks, clarification requests and echoing (see Table 1, above). However, students were not corrected all the time they made a mistake as this may disrupt the flow of the conversation.

Data analysis:

Qualitative and quantitative techniques were used to describe and analyze some extracts from the corpus. Aspects of discourse analysis, which focuses on patterns of spoken and written forms (Paltridge, 2006), was used to quantify all self-corrections that the students made to their mistakes and the corrections they made as a result of the teacher's enhanced corrective feedback. In addition, the noticed and unnoticed teacher feedback was also calculated. An Excel spreadsheet 2007 was used to produce a pie and bar charts to illustrate the quantitative data visually. All this quantification was meant to facilitate the qualitative analysis of the data.

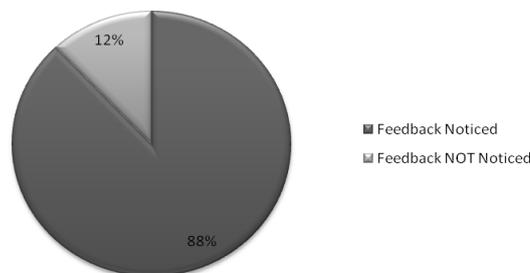
Results and Discussion:

Before I discuss the impact of my online feedback on the students, I would like to highlight an important issue which can be of interest for future research. In my chats with the students, they brought up many sensitive social and cultural issues, such as the role of parents towards their children, and they expressed their critical subjective opinions about them. For example, one female participant mentioned how she confronted her mother who wanted her to become a nurse but she refused. She bitterly described how this decision caused her to be isolated at home. Hence, it is worth looking into the potential of CMC in promoting sociocultural awareness in students. It is perhaps even more desirable to see the effectiveness of CMC in raising sociopolitical awareness among students by encouraging them to relate their subjective realities to power relations and inequalities in their society.

Feedback and language awareness:

According to Graph (1) below, 88% of the teacher feedback was noticed by the students and only 12% was not apparently perceived as feedback. The latter was largely categorized as implicit feedback.

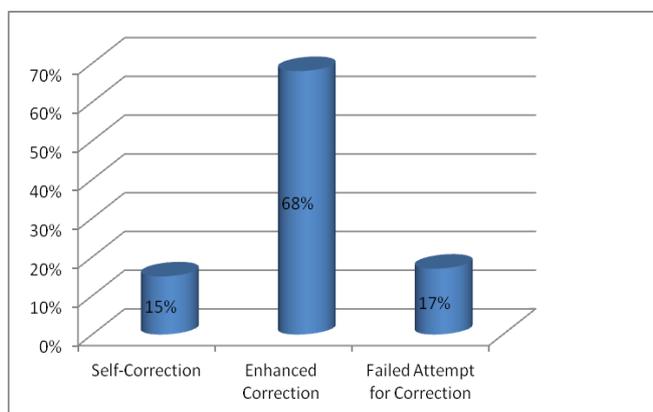
Language Awareness (1)



Graph (1)

In addition to this, Graph (2) below shows that out of the all the corrections that the students made in their turns, only 15% was self-initiated. This means that the students self-corrected their mistakes before any attempt for corrective feedback was given by the teacher. The quantitative data analysis also revealed that 68% of the successful corrections made by the students were triggered by the teacher’s explicit and implicit feedback. In this case, the students noticed the feedback and either immediately corrected their mistakes or confirmed their understanding of their errors.

Language Awareness (2)



Graph (2)

However, 17% of the attempted corrections, self initiated and enhanced, made by the students were unsuccessful especially those attempts that were sparked by implicit feedback. This could be an indication that the explicit feedback was more effective to draw the students’ attention to their mistakes. Extract (1) below provides an interesting example of an exchange of this kind:

Extract (1):

1	Khadeeja	you are in nice <u>wether</u> ;)	17	Khadeeja	same
2	Tutor	I don't like dusty <u>WEATHER</u>	18	Tutor	Well, there is a difference.
After a few turns			19	Khadeeja	May be
3	Khadeeja	i like going to beach but the <u>weather</u> bad	20	Khadeeja	iam boring me iam boring person
4	Khadeeja	i dont like <u>rouiten</u>	21	Tutor	Yes
5	Khadeeja	<u>iam boring</u> in hoilday i miss [name of her university]	22	Khadeeja	borad i feel it
6	Tutor	do you mean " <u>routine</u> "?	23	Tutor	That's it... You got it right now
7	Khadeeja	Yes	24	Khadeeja	ok sorry
8	Khadeeja	sorry wrong mistake	25	Khadeeja	Yes
9	Tutor	I, too, don't like the routine. <u>I feel bored</u> when I don't have anything to do!	26	Tutor	here is an example
After a few turns			27	Tutor	I am bored because the holiday is boring.
10	Tutor	[classical music makes me feel good] especially when I have to do <u>something boring</u>	28	Khadeeja	ok i undrestand now
After a few turns			29	Khadeeja	thanks
11	Khadeeja	yes my friendes we dont like it <u>you feel boring</u> in leacture math	30	Khadeeja	any thing <u>alse</u>
12	Tutor	but you know, sometimes the students feel <u>bored</u>	31	Khadeeja	<u>else**</u>

		because the teacher is boring!			
13	Khadeeja	yes but all teacher nice and they give a lot of practice		32	Tutor Do you mean anything wrong in the sentence?
14	Tutor	Do you mean all the teachers at [name of her university] are not boring teachers?		33	Khadeeja yes
15	Khadeeja	yes		34	Tutor Ah, Ok.
After a few turns				35	Tutor Well, I would say it this way: "I am bored in the holiday - I miss [name of university]"
16	Tutor	What is the difference between " I am boring " and " I am bored " [in your earlier sentence: "iam boring in hoilday i miss [name of her university]"]?		36	Khadeeja ok :)

In the first few lines of the above extract, Khadeeja, a pseudonym, and I were discussing the weather in Bahrain and the UK. Khadeeja misspelled the word 'weather' in line (1) but after a few turns, specifically in line (3); she spelt it correctly, probably because of the implicit feedback that I gave in line (2). Again in line (4) Khadeeja failed to spell the word 'routine' correctly and received explicit feedback in line (6) to which she confirmed her misspelling. However, in line (30) she managed to correct the misspelled word 'else' in the previous line (29) without receiving any help.

In line (4), Khadeeja began talking about her dislike to routine as she had been on a short mid-term break and this caused her to feel bored. However, she misuses the adjective 'boring' in line (5). In lines (9 and 10) I implicitly distinguished between 'bored' and 'boring' but Khadeeja did not seem to notice that because she made the same mistake in line (11). The implicit feedback was repeated once more in lines (12 and 14) but when explicitly asked about the difference between 'bored' and 'boring' in line (16), she thought they were the same. Triggered perhaps by the examples I provided in the previous lines and by my comment that these two words are different (line 18), Khadeeja successfully managed in lines (20 and 22) to differentiate between the two adjectives. In the subsequent lines, I overtly illustrated the difference by giving more examples and Khadeeja confirmed her understanding in line (28). Her curiosity to know if there were any more mistakes in her sentence in line (5) was evident in lines (30-33). I suggested a slight reformation of the sentence and Khadeeja embraced this happily.

As shown in the graphs and the extract above, the CMC text-based chat enabled the students to examine their messages on the screen carefully and correct their mistakes. The correction was either self-initiated or triggered by the teacher feedback. In both cases, the students might have become more aware of L2 rules and probably more able to bridge the gap in their interlanguage. However, this does not mean that the students will not repeat the same mistake in the future but they have at least attended to the 'features of the input that otherwise may have remained undetected' (McDonough, 2005: 81).

The student in Extract (1) welcomed the teacher feedback without feeling embarrassed about her mistakes. Indeed, all of the students whom I chatted with in this research felt the same, because I told them from the beginning that we 'are all here to learn from one another'. They were concerned about their English as one of them eagerly asked me if she had made mistakes and another asked if her English had improved since the English course she took with me last year. In the physical classroom, students might feel uneasy when they are corrected in front of their peers and this may restrict them from asking questions about their mistakes because they do not want to lose face. However, the story could be different in the online environment, particularly, in the CMC text-based chat which can create confidence in students to be more outspoken (Dekhinet, 2008; Lee, 2002).

The impact of CMC on oral proficiency:

As can be noticed from the above discussion, the feedback on errors that I and my students undertook almost all concentrates on issues with the written form, i.e. grammar, lexis, etc., rather than the sorts of issues that relate to spoken communication. Hence, one question would be how far CMC grounded in written

text can actually generate the opportunity to promote spoken language that the study is seeking to provide? I might argue here that the text-based CMC allows students to take more charge of the sorts of topics they would like to address and take more risks (Kelm, 1992), which are motivating and promote more communication and that this is an important element of oral skills development. However, it is perhaps debatable on the basis of the evidence that I provided here that it will necessarily support the development of the students' oral skill.

In addition to this, it is clear from the extract above that despite their grammatical mistakes, the students managed to get the message across. Therefore, the question is: are the corrections of the grammatical inaccuracies that this research focused on important for developing oral skills? Which is more important in oral communication: fluency or accuracy? If the goal of text-based CMC is to enable students to communicate well in face-to-face conversations, then it wouldn't be a big deal if they make mistakes in their grammar as long as they can make themselves understandable for the listener. Therefore, it is perhaps controversial to claim that the kinds of corrections that I focused on here were powerfully influential in improving the students' speaking fluency, which I think highlights the potential problems of CMC to genuinely enhance spoken language.

Limitations and suggestions for future research:

Although the study has provided some insights into the effectiveness of the CMC text-based chats in discussing sociocultural issues and raising the students' awareness of L2 written linguistic rules, it has some limitations which should be considered in future studies on this topic. For example, the teacher's corrective feedback, as previously illustrated, concentrated on written discourse rather than the sorts of issues that relate to linguistic interactional patterns such as turn taking, types of turns taken, length of turns and the analysis of who initiates turns and so on, which are thought to be similar to those of the F2F patterns. These patterns are thought to be transferable to spoken communication and therefore need to be investigated.

The potential of CMC in teaching:

Because one of the aims of this research is to contribute to education, it is important to address the potential of the text-based CMC as a teaching tool for wider dissemination. According to my experience with CMC in this research and based on my previous knowledge, there are many practical challenges to introducing this as a teaching and learning strategy. For example, it is time consuming and could be overwhelming for the teacher, especially if he or she has to chat with a large number of students. Hence, it is perhaps more practical to have a group or student-student CMC with supervision from the teacher.

Another challenge of CMC is concerned with the information technology (IT) skills of the teachers and the students. Although the use of the MSN messenger does not require a lot of IT skills, the chatters need to be skillful in typing so as to keep a similar feel and pace of the F2F conversation.

Finally, issues of access to CMC technologies by all students need to be reassured before using them by teachers. Failure to do this would result in devastating effects on disadvantaged students as they might feel ignored by the teacher, which could create psychological barriers to learning.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of the online teacher's corrective feedback (OTCF) on the students' language awareness so as to improve their communicative skills in English. Despite the limitations in the research design, this study found that the text-based CMC helped the students to notice and correct their written grammatical and lexical inaccuracies.

Based on these findings, I argued that the free space of the CMC may be helpful for students to control the sorts of topics they wish to discuss, which an important element in oral communication. However, my analysis of the data did not provide for a very powerful set of conclusions that the CMC, particularly the OTCF, did necessarily impact the students' spoken language. Such findings appear to be in conflict with most of the literatures on this topic which argue that the written output has a positive impact on the oral output. Hence, I agree with Tudini's (2002) suggestion that a more in-depth qualitative investigation of the effect of CMC on speaking is required.

The main implication of the findings is that although the text-based CMC can have good potentials raising students' linguistic, sociocultural and sociopolitical awareness, there are lots of practical challenges to introducing it as a teaching strategy in EFL. Beside its debatable effect on the students' oral skills, the one-to-one text-based CMC is time consuming and overwhelming for the teacher especially when he or she has to chat with a large number of students. Other challenges include the technical side of it as well as access.

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