Chapter 7.1
Interactional Modifications in Internet Chatting

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ABSTRACT

Studies in computer-mediated communication (CMC) have shown that it has the potential to provide opportunities for ESL learners to actively participate in communication using the target language, to notice inter-language gaps in their language production, and to negotiate meaning by the use of interactional modifications (IMs). The use of certain types of communication tasks also seems to play an important role in how to increase the quantity and quality of interactions among learners. Such a role is believed to affect the effectiveness of language acquisition. This chapter reports the findings of a study that investigates Internet chatting interactions between 28 college-level Indonesian non-native speakers (NNSs) of English using two different communicative language tasks, a jigsaw task and a decision-making task, which are believed to facilitate language acquisition. The main aim of this chapter is to discuss how the differences in tasks may generate different frequencies and types of IMs, as well as the possibilities of employing the results of the study in a classroom environment.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the growth of the Internet and the availability of various computer programs that facilitate online communication have been utilized to facilitate language production of second/foreign language learners. Studies on computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Blake, 2000; Fernández-García & Martínez-Arbelaiz, 2002; Freiermuth, 2001; Kitade, 2000; Lee, 2002; Smith, 2004; Tudini, 2003) show that this form of communication has the potential to provide opportunities for ESL learners to actively participate in communicating using the target language, to notice inter-language gaps in their language production, and to negotiate meaning. The studies also indicate that these results have a positive influence on the acquisition of the target language. In addition to the types of interactional modifications (IMs) that the learners use in the negotiation of meaning, the use of certain types of communication tasks seems to play an important role in how to increase the quantity and quality of interactions among learners as suggested by

Gass and Varonis (1985) and Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun (1993). Such a role is believed to affect the effectiveness of language acquisition.

In addition to providing L2 practice, the Internet also provides opportunities for the learners to expand the use of the target language outside the classroom setting, and connects them with either native speakers (NS) or other non-native speakers (NNS) who are learning the target language. This real-life setting enables the learners to practice producing the authentic language. It has been noted that although many Indonesians receive many years of formal English instruction in junior and senior high school, there is very little opportunity for them to comprehend or produce the language as it is used in day-to-day or academic situations. The accessibility of the Internet through Internet cafes in various cities in Indonesia at affordable costs (see UNDP–APDIP, 2002) creates opportunities for students to communicate with the rest of the world using international languages like English and expand the scope of English learning within and outside the classroom setting.

By considering the positive results of studies on the effect of CMC interactions on L2 production as well as the growth and popularity of Internet usage in Indonesia, this study focuses on comparing certain communication tasks for IMs, which have been shown to promote L2 acquisition. In particular, this study compares two L2 communication tasks, namely jigsaw and decision-making tasks, conducted in NNS-NNS dyad interactions between Indonesian students studying English as a foreign language. The study aims to focus on three issues: (1) the frequency of each interactional modification used by subjects when engaged in the jigsaw and decision-making tasks in synchronous CMC, (2) whether different tasks influence the frequency of IMs used, and (3) the motives and factors involved in using IMs in the tasks.

It is hoped that by focusing on certain aspects of IMs, communication tasks, and dyad combination, this study may contribute some ideas about how to make use of Internet technology to supplement and expand face-to-face classroom communication materials to authentic day-to-day English in Indonesia or other countries with similar situations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Negotiation of Meaning and its Potentials for Language Acquisition

The process of negotiation of meaning starts when there is a communication blockage in an interaction between two interlocutors. When one interlocutor poses a question or comment, or gives a look indicating that he or she does not understand the other interlocutor's previous message, it implies that the other interlocutor has not successfully conveyed his or her message and a communication blockage has occurred. The other interlocutor, in response to this blockage, may choose several different types of IMs to make his or her message more comprehensible to his or her interaction partner.

Gass and Varonis (1982, 1985) proposed a model of negotiation of meaning to describe the process. There are four components in the model: a Trigger (T), an Indicator (I), a Response (R), and a Reaction to the Response (RR). This model was specifically designed to describe the interactions in NNS-NNS discourse.

The positive influence of interactions in facilitating second language acquisition in face-to-face/non-CMC settings has been widely discussed. Long (1996, cited in Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 294) proposed the idea of the *interaction hypothesis,* in which negotiation of meaning that triggers interactional modifications facilitates acquisition in a way that it intertwines "input, internal learners capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways." Pica (1994) is supportive of Long's position that

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