

**The Effects of Computer-mediated Communication on Japanese EFL Learners'
English Proficiency**

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Abstract: This study investigated the connection between CMC and pragmatic instruction by measuring the effects of online chat and traditional face-to-face discussion on the acquisition of disagreement strategies in English. Japanese undergraduate EFL learners served as participants. A mixed methodology was used, and both quantitative and qualitative data from multiple sources were collected. The findings suggest that synchronous CMC is likely to be effective for pragmatic development in the Japanese EFL context.

Introduction

The strong group sense at the heart of CMC helped renew interest in collaborative learning—students working together to achieve learning goals. Collaborative learning, rooted in the constructivist approach to education, serves as the pedagogical foundation for computer-supported collaborative learning, or CSCL (Chapelle, 2001). The constructivist approach holds that individual cognitive development occurs through collaboration, and its quality is partially indicated by the discourse produced during interaction among people (Chapelle, 1998), especially when there is genuine negotiation and construction of meaning (Warshauer & Kern, 2000). Thus, CSCL is informed by constructivist principles and uses CMC to enhance learning. One particularly interesting tool for CSCL is electronic discussion, which reflects secondary orality and may induce a strong group sense among learners.

A number of CMC studies have expounded upon the potential benefits of network-based communication for L2 acquisition (Kitade, 2000; Pellettieri, 2000), focusing on its ability to induce negotiation of meaning. They have claimed that this type of communication may enhance learners' interlanguage even more than oral conversation because learners

can actually *view* their language as they produce it. Thus, they are more likely to monitor and edit their messages.

Recent research has suggested that synchronous CMC language use is more accurate than that found in face-to-face interaction (Salaberry, 2000). As Warschauer (1996) noted, the discourse in written electronic conferences is more lexically complex, so the range of vocabulary in online chat discourse is expected to be richer than in spoken discourse. As a measure of syntactic development, *t*-units have been used to compare the syntactic complexity of language produced by ESL learners engaged in synchronous and asynchronous CMC interactions (Warschauer, 1996; Salaberry, 2000). Electronic exchanges tend to be longer than FTF exchanges, and electronic discussions tend to include more formal expressions (Warschauer, 1996).

Chafe and Danielewicz (1987) claim that written discourse is produced more slowly than spoken discourse because of the mechanical constraints associated with written language, whether it is typed or handwritten. The slow process of language production allows access to more lexical resources in long-term memory. Conversely, spoken discourse is produced with fewer mechanical constraints, relatively rapidly. In this process of rapid production, speakers have little time to sift through all the possible choices they might make.

However, as in Japan, people in collectivist societies are especially sensitive to face and its relation to politeness because they are relatively more group-oriented than Westerners. In order to reduce threats to the other party's face, speakers tend to use more polite language based on their cultural norms. Watanabe (1990) claimed that because Japanese people regard the situations for and the purposes of disagreement as threatening to relationships and solidarity, they try to disagree as indirectly and politely as they can. Politeness makes a situation less face-threatening and communication smoother (Ide, 1989). As a result, verbosity is characteristic of the interlanguage of advanced L2 learners (Blum-Kulka, 1991). It is interesting to investigate how the CMC environment alters the development of the pragmatic function of disagreement in Japanese students of English as a foreign language.

CMC may present tremendous possibilities for interlanguage pragmatic development because it affords the possibility of presenting pragmatic-based materials in a contextualized, authentic, and personalized manner, while at the same time addressing

other language skills. The use of either synchronous online chat or face-to-face (FTF) discussions to enhance subsequent asynchronous CMC in Japanese EFL learning is assessed in this study.

This study is guided by the following research question: Which mode of discussion—computer-supported or face-to-face—will better promote academic achievement among undergraduate EFL Japanese learners? To answer this, the features of texts produced by students in each context, as well as their writing achievement, are analyzed and compared. Specifically, students' performance on an individual writing essay test and on a team-based collaborative writing activity on a BBS are scrutinized. To determine if the effects of one type of discussion do or do not have an equivalent impact on both groups, or if students exhibit a greater lexical range, the type-token ratios for the essay writing exam were calculated.

Participants

The sample was comprised of 77 participants performing group tasks in one of two modes of discussion. All participants were attending a university in Tokyo, Japan. Women represented 20% of the sample and men represented 80%. They were non-English majors (32 in architecture, 45 in information science) taking a required English course; thus, many of them were not very motivated. All participants had studied English for at least six years (through junior high school and high school) at the time of this study. Their TOEFL score ranged from 380 to 430.

The course in which this study takes place drew heavily on team-based collaborative discussion. A team is a group of people coming together to collaborate. Members aim to achieve a shared goal or task for which they hold themselves mutually responsible (in this case, to produce a collaborative writing on BBS).

Research Variables

Based on the research question identified for this study, several dependent and independent variables have been identified.

The dependent variables in this study are writing proficiency, group performance in writing on BBS, and pre-and post-test essay writing. These variables were measured

independently. Team presentations on BBS were analyzed after a series of FTF or online chat interactions with classmates by counting the number of words per team of both groups, the average words per *t*-unit, and error-free *t*-units for each week. The independent variable is two modes of discussion, chat and FTF discussion.

Procedures

The students spent five weeks in each mode of discussion as part of their regular writing class requirements. In order to determine whether or not there were significant differences between students prior to the start of the instructional period, an essay writing placement examination was given during the first week of class, and the results were used to group students into teams consisting of 4 to 6 members. The rationale for this format is that it takes time for group members to get to know each other well enough to start functioning effectively as a team. In order to ensure that the team will have sufficient resources (Michaelsen, 2002), team-based learning proponents recommend groups of four to six learners. The purpose of these teams was to work together to explore topics and improve skills. When students work together in a collaborative environment, good group dynamics for each team should be developed. The class met for 90 minutes once a week for five weeks. After students met in the classroom for one hour, some groups discussed assigned tasks, interacting FTF with classmates, while the other groups spent the remaining time doing the same via text chat. In each 90-minute class session, students read an article on a given topic and took a 20-minute quiz to check comprehension. The topics were: violence, the death penalty, gun control in the U. S., animal rights, and university entrance examinations. The topics were provided as general guides for open discussion, and students spent 15 minutes in discussion mode (either FTF or text chat). Team members spent the final 15 minutes of each class drafting essays on the BBS for a group presentation. The proportion of women to men was almost the same in both modes of discussion: 2 to 8. A majority of the participants had used the Internet and e-mail prior to this study.

Text Features Measures of Pre-test Essay Writing Test

Analysis of the pre-test scores preceded the statistical analysis of the post-test scores. To determine if there were significant differences between students in FTF and chat modes prior to the start of the instructional period, measures of central tendency (means and standard deviations) were compared, and a *t*-test was performed on data obtained from

placement writing essay examinations. The data collection instrument used for pre- and post-tests was the TOEFL Writing Essay Test, produced by Educational Testing Service (ETS).

Table 1 (see Appendix) shows the means and standard deviations for the text features measures (*t*-unit) of the writing essay placement test. Although the standard deviations for two indicators of syntactic complexity showed that there was a wider distribution of scores or variability in FTF group ($SD = 25.5$), chat group ($SD = 33.2$) for the total words; and FTF group ($SD = 6.05$), chat group ($SD = 2.5$) for the average number of words of per *t*-unit, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups on those two indicators, and thus the two population variances are equal. A two-tailed paired *t*-test showed that there were no initial significant differences in mean scores of the four pre-test measures between students in FTF and chat modes. Each existing significance value in the total *t*-units ($p = .58$), total number of words ($p = 0.36$), *t*-unit length, and the average number of words per *t*-unit ($p = 0.81$) were larger than the significance level (.05).

Syntactic and Lexical Development: Proficiency Ratings

In addition to *t*-unit measurements, ratings of syntactic and vocabulary mastery were obtained from two native-speaking EFL teachers to determine which mode of discussion better promotes academic achievement. Overall syntactic proficiency was rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Very Low”) to 6 (“Very High”). This produced a more precise measurement. *T*-tests were used to compare the mean scores between students in FTF and chat modes, and measures of central tendency (means and standard deviations) were compared to investigate whether or not there were significant differences between students in FTF and chat modes.

As Table 2 (see Appendix) indicates, a two-tailed paired *t*-test showed there were no significant differences in mean scores of the four pre-test measures between students in FTF and chat modes. Each significance value for syntax ($p = .057$) and vocabulary ($p = 0.337$) for the proficiency rating was again not significant, but the *p*-value in the syntax was the closest, at 0.05. This result suggests that while it is marginally significant, it is not statistically significant. On the other hand, syntax, or the average number of words per *t*-unit ($p = 0.81$) for *t*-unit measurements were larger than the significance level (.05).

A One-way ANOVA was performed on the *t*-unit measurement and proficiency rating for the students, indicating the mean scores differences of syntactic and vocabulary mastery in two modes of discussion groups.

As Table 3 (See Appendix) shows, the results from the syntax rating measure were similar to those obtained in the text features analysis. Proficiency rating and *t*-unit measurements revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the two modes of discussion in terms of academic achievement. However, in syntax on the proficiency rating, there was nearly a significant difference ($f = 3.756, p = 0.057$).

Team Performance

Team collaborative writing on BBS was analyzed to look for evidence of the development of English syntax and lexis. Compared with students in FTF groups, students in CMC reported feeling freer and more comfortable. This benefit can enhance the quality of synchronous communications. This suggests that synchronous CMC discussion with comfort will enhance subsequent asynchronous CMC team performance.

To determine if the psychological benefit gained in synchronous CMC discussions carries over to subsequent asynchronous team performance, I compared improvement from the first to the fifth week to see if the collaborative writing produced over the five-week interaction period consistently improved on most measures.

As a measure of syntactic development, the number of words per *t*-unit was calculated for all the messages produced by both groups on BBS. Although *t*-units have been shown to be a stable index of the development of L1 (Nutter, 1981), the average number of words per *t*-unit does not reflect the accuracy of the structure produced. Accordingly, the average number of error-free *t*-units and the amount of error-free *t*-units as a percentage of total production were calculated as an additional measure of syntactic mastery (Larsen Freeman, 1978; Scott & Tucker, 1974).

Both FTF and chat groups showed better performance (e.g., more error-free *t*-units in the 5th week) on the collaborative writing assignment. The average number of error-free *t*-units for chat groups was 51.64%, and 50.96% for FTF groups. TTR was 0.51 for chat groups and 0.49 for FTF groups. Comparing the first two weeks to the last two weeks, none of the four measures for FTF groups revealed a statistically significant difference in

performance; however, for chat groups, the total words ($p = 0.096$) there was a marginally significant difference at $p < .05$, indicating a small tendency for the total words in chat groups to increase. The TTR of chat groups was also marginally significant ($p = .0089$) although it was in the opposite direction; the first two weeks of writing had a marginally significantly higher TTR.

While the number of words per team in chat groups increased each week, in FTF groups, the number of words rose and fell inconsistently. The percentage of error-free *t*-units in chat groups increased, while in FTF groups, it decreased from the first week to the fourth week. The TTR from the first week to the fourth week increased only slightly in the chat groups. The textual features on BBS measured for four weeks for both groups are presented in Tables 4 and 5 (see Appendix).

Discussion

Proficiency ratings for the post writing essay exams revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the two modes in terms of academic achievement. The results of the syntax rating measure were similar to those obtained in the text features analysis. However, the result of the lexical complexity measurement, unlike the *t*-unit measurement, revealed that chat groups used more lexically complex sentences. Even though there were only marginally significant differences, chat groups appeared to obtain slightly more syntactic development than FTF groups.

This study contradicts Warschauer's (1996) finding that electronic exchanges tend to be longer than FTF exchanges and that electronic discussions tend to include more formal expressions. In this study, FTF interaction was found to be longer. The chat groups used more informal expressions such as "so," "too," "also," "because," and "let's," as seen in data from a written chat (lines 1, 11, 10 and 15 in Table 6, Appendix).

On the other hand, most participants in FTF groups were well-prepared so as to save face and to express their opinions as if they were making a speech, often taking a glimpse at a draft. As a result, the FTF exchanges were longer and tended to include more formal expressions, such as "on the other hand," "moreover," "this is because," "in addition," "therefore," and "in my opinion." Such expressions were not present in the chat group discussions. A rather formal style is seen in the FTF discussion (lines 7, 10, 11, 14, 16 in Table 7, Appendix).

The language used by online chat groups was less complex than by FTF groups, probably because there were fewer mechanical constraints on the written mode of language. In the process of rapid production in written chat, learners may have had little time to relax and thus settled for the first words that occurred to them. Another possible reason for the longer and more formal utterances in FTF groups may be that the participants intended to mitigate face threats and express their opinions in a polite way. As explained by Ide (1989), politeness makes a situation less face-threatening and communication smoother. A possibly related explanation is that in face-to-face communication, the native language for Japanese EFL learners is more easily transferred to a foreign language. Considering the fact that the Japanese language is marked by highly honorific expressions, face-to-face interactions occur without significant delay. A previous study (Blum-Kulka, 1991) also showed that verbosity is characteristic of the interlanguage of advanced L2 learners. This is an effect of social and psychological distance and a result of pragmatic transfer. Thus, verbosity in FTF groups seen at the discourse level might be the result of transfer from Japanese to English. The results suggest that in face-to-face situations, pragmatic competence seems to converge toward L1 norms, which contradicts the notion that in general, speakers have the chance to be either more or less formal depending on contextual factors, such as the social relationship between the speaker and listener.

To sum up, students used more English in online discussion than they did in the FTF context. However, in FTF groups, pragmatic competence seems to converge toward L1 norms, an indication of transfer from the L1. Although synchronous CMC is not suitable for everyone due to the speed of typing, participation is more equal and seems more active and collaborative in synchronous CMC than in FTF. Thus, synchronous CMC is likely to be effective for pragmatic development in the Japanese EFL context, since the pragmatic pressure related to face is reduced. Since a non-threatening environment is essential for EFL learners to learn the target language effectively, written chat can be useful in the intermediate Japanese EFL classroom, especially when students are hesitant to speak in the target language for fear of losing face. As Beebe and Takahashi (1989) reported, “face-threatening acts are particularly important to study because they are the source of so many cross-cultural miscommunications” (p. 199). This study further indicates that a non-threatening environment is essential for EFL learners to learn the target language effectively. However, the heavy processing burden placed on chat group members tends to lead to a smaller number of turns and hinders interaction. In FTF groups, learners may feel more solidarity with the other members of the group, which

may increase the number of turns and promote the use of exclamations in communicating strong agreement.

Further Research

While this study shows the usefulness of chat in EFL instruction, the participants were intermediate undergraduate learners of English who knew relatively simple structures at the time of the experiment. Advanced learners who know more complex structures have more chances to use them in CMC discourse, which may affect the development of syntactic complexity in their oral production. Therefore, more advanced learners will have to be involved to further investigate this issue. Furthermore, the relation between students' performance and participation and the learning styles of Japanese learners should be explored in a longitudinal study.

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Appendix

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for the Text Features Measures of Writing Essay Placement Test ($n = 32$ FTF, $n = 37$ Chat)

Indicators	Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>P</i>
Total clauses	FTF	7.90	2.70	0.14	0.89
	Chat	7.80	3.30		
Total <i>t</i> -units	FTF	2.90	1.60	0.56	0.58
	Chat	2.68	1.81		
Total # words	FTF	70.70	25.50	0.35	0.73
	Chat	68.20	33.20		
<i>t</i> -unit length	FTF	13.24	6.05	-0.38	0.70
	Chat	13.80	5.65		

M = mean

SD = standard deviation

t = values from t-test

p = probability level

*values significant at $p < .05$.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for the Syntax and Vocabulary Rating of Post Writing Essay Tests ($n = 32$ FTF, $n = 34$ Chat)

	Proficiency Rating				<i>t</i> -unit measures			
	Syntax		Vocabulary		Syntax (average # of <i>t</i> -units)		Vocabulary (TTR)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
FTF	3.18	0.82	3.03	0.91	11.48	4.98	0.71	0.10
Chat	3.59	0.86	3.23	0.54	11.18	5.78	0.73	0.12
<i>t</i>	1.94		0.97		0.21		-0.41	
<i>p</i>	0.06		0.34		0.84		0.69	

Table 3. *Summary of Analysis of Variance for Comparison Between Syntactic and Vocabulary Mastery in Chat and FTF Group Discussion (n = 27 FTF, n = 27 Chat)*

		<i>M</i> (CMC/FTF)	<i>f</i>	<i>P</i>
Proficiency rating	Syntax	3.59/3.18	3.756	.057
	Vocabulary	3.23/3.03	0.933	.338
<i>t</i> -unit measures	Syntax (Average # of words per <i>t</i> -unit)	11.17/11.48	0.520	.820
	Vocabulary (TTR)	0.70/0.7260	0.606	.439

Table 4. *Textual Features Measures from the First Week to the Fifth Week for FTF Groups on BBS (n = 18)*

	FTF group	<i>M</i>	SD
1 st week	Total words	187.6	29.7
	Avg. words per <i>t</i> -unit	12.8	2.9
	Avg. words per error-free <i>t</i> -unit	11.3	6.72
	% of error-free <i>t</i> -units	43	20.58
	Type-token ratio	0.51	0.04
2 nd week	Total words	176.6	37.48
	Avg. words per <i>t</i> -unit	12.3	2.05
	Avg. words per error-free <i>t</i> -unit	11.4	0.99
	% of error-free <i>t</i> -units	54.8	11.24
	Type-token ratio	0.4	0.04
3 rd week	Total words	125.6	16.97
	Avg. words per <i>t</i> -unit	11.6	0.35
	Avg. words per error-free <i>t</i> -unit	10.6	0.99
	% of error-free <i>t</i> -units	54.1	26.52
	Type-token ratio	0.53	0
4 th week	Total words	160.3	27.58
	Avg. words per <i>t</i> -unit	14.4	1.63
	Avg. words per error-free <i>t</i> -unit	14.7	1.84
	% of error-free <i>t</i> -units	40	21.21
	Type-token ratio	0.49	0.08
5 th week	Total words	186	9.19
	Avg. words per <i>t</i> -unit	13.8	0.78
	Avg. words per error-free <i>t</i> -unit	14.3	3.39
	% of error-free <i>t</i> -units	62.9	15.77
	Type-token ratio	0.55	0.01

Table 5. *Textual Features Measure from the First Week to the Fifth Week for Chat Groups on BBS (n = 17)*

Chat group		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1 st week	Total words	142.6	21.92
	Avg. words per <i>t</i> -unit	13.6	2.4
	Avg. words per error-free <i>t</i> -unit	11.06	2.12
	% of error-free <i>t</i> -units	52	16.83
	Type-token ratio	0.65	0.01
2 nd week	Total words	119	25.46
	Avg. words per <i>t</i> -unit	12.9	1.27
	Avg. words per error-free <i>t</i> -unit	9.83	4.24
	% of error-free <i>t</i> -units	41.6	5.87
	Type-token ratio	0.54	0.01
3 rd week	Total words	147.6	4.24
	Avg. words per <i>t</i> -unit	13.5	1.27
	Avg. words per error-free <i>t</i> -unit	12.2	0
	% of error-free <i>t</i> -units	57.5	8.84
	Type-token ratio	0.52	0.01
4 th week	Total words	169	3.54
	Avg. words per <i>t</i> -unit	12.4	0.99
	Avg. words per error-free <i>t</i> -unit	11.6	0.35
	% of error-free <i>t</i> -units	49.1	16.83
	Type-token ratio	0.51	0.04
5 th week	Total words	208	35.36
	Avg. words per <i>t</i> -unit	16.3	6.43
	Avg. words per error-free <i>t</i> -unit	16.2	6.86
	% of error-free <i>t</i> -units	58	2.05
	Type-token ratio	0.35	0.18

Table 6. Example of Chat Discussion

1	S1	Lives are important so they should be important!!	12/09-10:14:45
2	S2	If capital punishment will be abolished, leaved only	12/09-10:15:34
3		indefinite term imprisonment.	
4	S2	Capital punishment is not for priventing violent crimes.	12/09-10:16:10
5	S3	U.S do death penalty. But, U.S is the country which has	12/09-10:18:22
6		one of the highest crime rates in the world	
7	S2	Only indefinite term imprisonment, murders may come	12/09-10:18:24
8		back to our society.	
9	S1	If capital punishment is not for priventing violent crimes,	12/09-10:18:51
10		it is strange because capital punishment is also violent.	
11	S2	I think it's too terrible.	12/09-10:19:00
12	S2	I think capital punishment is a necessary evil.	12/09-10:20:02
13	S3	I think that there is the person who is afraid of life	12/09-10:21:04
14		imprisonment without parole than the death penalty.	
15	S1	Let's write BBS .Password is 1111.	12/09-10:23:29
16	S2	Yes. I'm afraid the danger of an innocent person being	12/09-10:23:39
17		executed too	
18	S2	So, if Japan introduce imprisonment, I may agree with	12/09-10:24:00
19		abolishing capital punishment.	

Table 7. Example of Face-to-Face Discussion

Excerpt 1: (Team 2)

1. S1: I think so. What do you think, Shibuya?
2. S2: I disagree with this proposition. We, we so-called YUTORI generation are
3. evidence for the failure of giving children leisure. So children should study
4. hard and experience competition.
5. S1: competition experience is important. Oh. Great. Great (.) What do you think,
6. sakurai?
7. S3: I don't agree with the proposition. This is because school programs have the
8. time for children to learn how to play, how to cook and how to wash. So,
9. children have enough chance to discover what they good at and what
10. interests them. In addition, it helps a person succeed in future to go to a
11. good university. Therefore, studying is more important than playing, in my
12. opinion.
13. S1: Very interesting. I agree with this proposition. Certainly, almost all the
14. classes at university are more difficult and high level. But on the other
15. hand some classes are easier and more boring more boring than high
16. school.
17. So, this is better to play than attending boring class. Moreover, even though
18. we study hard in high school days in order to get into a good university. It
19. doesn't always guarantee happiness or success in the future. I agree with
20. this proposition.