

## On the Whys and Hows of Teaching Communication on the Net

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### Abstract

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is increasingly recognised as a powerful means of learning English, since it provides authenticity of interaction, an uninhibited environment, increased motivation and autonomy of learning. Learners engaged in CMC enjoy meaningful use of the language, learn at their own pace and develop self-reliance and responsibility. Such autonomy considerably minimises the role of the teacher, which, however, can be detrimental to adequate communication if students are not introduced to the conventions of electronic discourse. This new form of the language is characterised by unique linguistic and iconographic features and presents significant deviation from the norms of the standard language. Inappropriate or abusive use of certain traits of electronic discourse can lead to significant communication problems, such as exclusion, flaming and general lack of comprehensibility. There are different ways and methods to troubleshoot the problems which EFL learners may encounter in electronic communication, without significant intrusion on their autonomy.

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### Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language has been tremendously facilitated by the spread of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Both teachers and students hail the benefits of CMC, which may be conducted in different formats, such as electronic mail, newsgroups, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and Multiple Users Domains (MUDs). Educators (Belisle, 1996; Mynard, 2006; Warschauer, 1995) contend that communication by means of computer provides an uninhibited, comfortable environment where the lack of face-to-face contact allows the communicants to conceal their real identity and to interact as equals irrespective of age, nationality, gender or social status. The students are more motivated to maintain e-mail correspondence rather than traditional pen-pal exchanges, because it is quicker, cheaper and more interactive. According to Warschauer (1995), e-mail provides students with an excellent opportunity for real communication by making it possible for them to learn independently at their own pace and to communicate their individual ideas, emotions and opinions. These benefits lead in many ways to enhancing the learner's autonomy, that is, taking responsibility for their own learning (Mynard, 2006, p.14).

Among many learning benefits of CMC, research (Little, 2000) praises the meaningful use of the target language. But the language which EFL learners encounter in many formats of CMC, such as informal e-mail, chat and SMS messaging, is quite different from the Standard English they have been exposed to in the traditional classroom setting. This new form of language, or 'electronic discourse', is instigated by the technological and communicative nature of CMC and is characterised by numerous unique linguistic and iconographic features which deviate from the standard norms. Inappropriate or abusive use of certain traits of electronic discourse, which is often the case with CMC novices, can lead to significant communicative problems, such as exclusion, general lack of comprehensibility and problems with 'code switching', when

learners resort to electronic discourse in those areas where standard written English is required (Averianova, 2007; Berman, 2006). While practitioners of autonomous learning pay sufficient attention to the ways of integrating CMC into language teaching and to the learning outcomes of this integration, the problems of electronic discourse and its role in the development of communicative competence in a self-directed learner have not yet been addressed. This paper discusses the reasons for teaching the language of electronic communication and ways to troubleshoot communication problems which autonomous EFL learners can encounter when dealing with electronic discourse.

### **The Whys of Teaching CMC Rules**

The rationale for teaching rules of computer-mediated discourse to EFL learners is based on several considerations, the most important of which are as follows.

First, electronic discourse, a specific variant of English generated and utilised by CMC, is characterised by ingenious refurbishing of traditional means of writing. The adjustment of the written mode to the spontaneous, oral nature of electronic interaction has generated a specific way of writing which significantly deviates from Standard English. One of the most noticeable characteristics of electronic language is the remarkably active and productive use of abbreviation, which, besides numerous original initialisms, acronyms and clippings (e.g., *BTW* 'by the way', *HAND* 'have a nice day', *Pic* 'digital picture'), has branched into a new type of 'homophonic' abbreviated coinages, such as letter-numeral hybrids (*2u2* 'to you, too') and letter-morpheme substitutes (*UC* 'you see'), with letters and numerals replacing words and parts of words with identical pronunciation. (A regularly updated dictionary of the most common CMC abbreviations can be found at

[http://searchcrm.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid11\\_qci211776,00.html](http://searchcrm.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid11_qci211776,00.html).)

Diverse abbreviation of electronic discourse results from 'economy of writing' (Goodman & Graddol, 1996), one of the main drives of electronic discourse. The need to write quickly and economically also entails simplified syntax and very casual grammar and spelling. These tendencies are further reinforced by a certain linguistic relaxation, which typically permeates informal electronic communication and which constitutes another characteristic of electronic discourse (Averianova, 2007). Another prominent feature of electronic writing involves irregular capitalisation and the use of 'emoticons' (innovative combinations of keyboard signs rendering various emotions), which fulfill yet another requirement of CMC discourse – to compensate in writing for the lack of prosodic and non-verbal context cues present in any naturally occurring oral interaction. The novelty of such language calls for the need to teach its discursive markers, as is done in any reading/writing program, in order to facilitate the effective use of the CMC medium by an autonomous learner.

Second, while observing the performance of EFL learners in CMC, I noticed that as soon as students understand the rules of the new language, they quickly adapt to its conventions. As members of a virtual community, non-native speakers try to follow the rules of verbal behaviour accepted in the community and present their social identities in a way that will secure their recognition and affiliation within the group. The desire to correctly respond and to be correctly engaged in a 'distinctive form of verbal sparring' (Gee, 2006, p. 24) is not a peculiarity of non-native speakers only. This is a typical behaviour within any discursive community, where each participant 'establishes cultural competency in the eyes of the other' (ibid.). Thus, in their study of students' writing behaviour in an asynchronous mainframe conference, Davis and Brewer (1997) have noticed a powerful presence of 'emulation', the term they use for repetition and imitation of discourse patterns. Emulation, in their perspective, is more complex than repetition, as it is above the lexical level and involves 'the selection and appropriation of larger patterns' (p. 26). In Davis and Brewer's study, students repeated key words, phrases, grammatical structures and discourse strategies from their reading and each

other's writing. Researchers believe that subjects' efforts to emulate each other's rhetorical and discursive strategies were an adjustment to the new medium. Fine-tuning the conventions of new discourse, which has been found typical for native speakers, is equally relevant for non-native users, for whom the imitation routines are even more important, as the latter are explicit and provide 'a high degree of scaffolding for the novice' (Ochs, 1990, quoted by Davis & Brewer, 1997, p. 155). What is more important, however, is that in their attempt to emulate correct behaviour on the Internet, novices tend to 'overdo' it, which potentially can lead to misunderstanding or, ultimately, disruption of communication. This accounts for the second *why* of my rationale. Jonsson (1998) remarks that new users of the Internet make the most mistakes in their CMC writing, such as overuse of abbreviations, which she attributes to the initial enthusiasm of neophytes, a sentiment definitely shared by non-native speakers as well. All beginners, irrespective of their language competence, are quick to appreciate the linguistic innovations characteristic of electronic discourse. But in the case of non-native speakers, this appreciation is also enhanced by their limited typing skills and lower level of overall language aptitude, for which such peculiarities of electronic discourse as economy of writing and linguistic relaxation are definitely 'blessings'.

The novelty of the CMC experience and excitement with language freedom greatly enhance the motivation of language learners (Skinner & Austin, 1999; Warschauer, 1995), but, on the other hand, too much excitement and freedom can impede effective communication. Original abbreviations not familiar to other communicants, for instance, may produce an effect of exclusion, while excessive use of emoticons can make even a serious message look rather superfluous and infantile. Linguistic relaxation, which appears as 'cool' to some users, may be considered offensive by others (*Netiquette*, 1997; *RFC: 1855. Netiquette Guidelines*, 1995). Thus, new users of CMC should be helped to realise the potential communicative effect of using electronic discourse, in order to make educated choices in their autonomous application of the medium.

One more *why* of this discussion concerns another aspect of the discursive competence of an autonomous learner: besides knowledge of the 'appropriate way' of writing with the 'appropriate props', it includes awareness of the 'appropriate times' and 'appropriate places' (Gee, 2006, p. 26) of using electronic language. Different CMC formats set different limitations on electronic discourse, while different computer-mediated communities develop different discursive, online behaviours. The norms of communication 'vary considerably from context to context; for example, flaming is proscribed in many academic discussion groups, but positively valued in the Usenet newsgroup alt.flam' (Herring, 2001, p. 10). There is, however, sufficient evidence of certain problems which CMC novices have with 'code switching', when the informal language of electronic discourse is used in situations requiring Standard English. Such instances include use of casual grammar and spelling and the use of emoticons and homophonic coinages in students' e-mail correspondence with teachers (Abdullah, 1998; Averianova, 2007) or the penetration of 'texting' into students' academic writing (Berman, 2006). While language educators are still considering how to respond to such unconventional language in their classroom, Chapelle suggests that, for the time being, 'teachers' best option might be to show examples and help students to become more aware of the effects of the linguistic choices they might make' in different registers (2003, p.17). This brings us to the question of *how* to teach electronic discourse.

### **The Hows of Teaching CMC Rules**

Currently, there is not much experience shared between educators regarding the problems of teaching the language of CMC. Nor is there much recognition of the need to develop in learners the awareness of the appropriate discursive behaviour in electronic communication. In fact, many teachers consider casual discursive behaviour as a way of creating 'a warm and secure learning environment' where instructors

encourage students 'to communicate and interact and not to worry about spelling, grammatical, punctuation and capitalisation mistakes' (Al-Jarf, 2006). However, there is no evidence that teachers address negative effects such as linguistic relaxation may have in different discursive contexts.

In contrast with this attitude, two approaches to teaching electronic discourse can be suggested – reactive and proactive. The reactive approach is used when students submit copies of their e-mail production or discussion entries to the teacher. The text is 'actually the student's work, but the teacher has also the opportunity to highlight mistakes and provide feedback on the quality of writing' (Krajka, 2001). Other feedback activities may include peer correction or group review projects, in which students evaluate the communicative effect of their electronic messages in different discursive situations. Though more focused and targeted, the reactive approach does not agree well with the privacy and authenticity of students' electronic communication, which ultimately lead to autonomy of learning, one of the major targets of implementing CMC in teaching English.

To maintain the autonomy and authenticity of CMC, it is more strongly recommended that students be proactively taught troubleshooting 'driving skills' prior to being released onto the 'lanes' of discourse on the digital 'highway'. As one project for teaching 'netiquette' (i.e., etiquette of communication on the Internet) suggests, coverage of the rules should be followed by students' evaluation of different scenarios for proper or inadequate behaviour in CMC. Students are presented with sample messages which illustrate erroneous use of electronic discourse and are asked to identify those errors, as well as to assess the communicative effect of such messages on a potential receiver. 'Netiquette instruction should begin with education', this project states, as, initially, 'we need to model proper netiquette' (*Netiquette*, 1997). An introduction to stylistic registers supported by code-switching exercises is also helpful. One of my students' favorites is encoding in texting and decoding of texted samples of various types of texts, including official documents, newspaper articles and even passages from Shakespeare. They quickly realise how inappropriate electronic language can be in certain situations. To sum up, whatever didactic approach is chosen, it will obviously be more conducive to learning meaningful communication than an unguided exposure of EFL learners to the discursive freedoms of CMC.

## Conclusion

Technology and computer-mediated communication account for a new type of language, electronic discourse and new kinds of texts which can be very challenging for autonomous language learners to mediate on their own, at least at the stage of their initiation into the new learning environment. Cognizant of the effect of instructional intervention on the autonomy and authenticity of learners' participation in CMC, teachers can still facilitate meaningful and effective communication by introducing learners into electronic discourse and its conventions. While the role of electronic discourse in foreign language acquisition still remains an underdeveloped and controversial area, the importance of the former in the development of overall communicative competence is obvious. With more self-directed learners relying on CMC in their effort in studying foreign languages, it is time for both the research and practice of independent learning to address this issue.

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