

## **On-line chat and Web based composition: a case study of combining two text based Internet activities**

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This is an explanatory study of combining asynchronous and synchronous CMC activities in foreign language teaching. Asynchronous and synchronous CMC alone may not be better than traditional paper-pencil activities. However, synchronous CMC can allow learners to simulate real face-to-face communication and interact with native speakers who live far away. Asynchronous CMC coupled with rewriting activities gives enough time for students to evaluate their language use. By combining the two modes of CMC and other traditional activities, asynchronous and synchronous CMC can be useful tools to improve linguistic, intercultural, and IT competence.

### **1. Introduction**

The purposes of this study are examining the impact of on-line chatting synchronous and asynchronous CMC (Computer Meditated Communication) on learning Japanese in explanatory ways. It has been well known that CMC (computer-meditated communication) improved learners' attitude toward learning languages and the quality and functional types of discourse generated by learners (e.g., Gonzalez-Bueno and Perez, 2000; Smith, 2003 Sotillo; 2000). However, some studies reported that CMC did not affect language produced by learners. For Example, Geonzalez-Bueno and Perez (2000) reported that e-mail exchanges did not generate significantly better dialogues over paper-pencil version in terms of lexical and grammatical accuracy. Abrams (2003) reported that there was no significant differences among synchronous CMC, asynchronous CMC and control groups in terms of the quality of language that learners produced. According to Sotillo (2000), synchronous and asynchronous CMC have different discourse and pedagogical aspects. Synchronous CMC can simulate the real face-to-face to communication while sacrificing accuracy. On the pother hand even if asynchronous CMC cannot simulate real face-to-face communication, it gives enough time for learners to monitor their language use and to produce more linguistically complex sentences. For teachers it gives enough time to give appropriate feedback to learners. Thus, it must be ideal if we could combine synchronous and asynchronous CMC activities. In October 2001, the author could have a chance to combine synchronous (on-line chat) and asynchronous (on-line sakubun) CMC in one Japanese

language class. The objects of this study are to report how learners perceive the two CMC activities and to examine the possibilities of synchronous and asynchronous CMC activities as foreign language learning tools.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Participants**

The participants were 54 (6 male 48 female mean age =21.1 SD=2.51) students who were enrolled in a 3<sup>rd</sup> year Japanese language class at Singapore National University in October 2001. The ethnic backgrounds of Singaporean students are, 50 Chinese-Singaporean, 3 Chinese-Malaysian, and 1 Chinese. All of them are bilingual in English and Chinese. The partners of on-line chat were students at Waseda University who were freshmen and taking English courses. The medium languages of on-line chat were both English and Japanese. The partners of on-line composition were Japanese and foreign students at Meiji University and Asia University in Tokyo, Japan. The medium language of on-line composition was Japanese.

#### **(a) Activities**

The two activities were conducted under on topic “freeter” (part time job seekers). The phenomenon of “freeter” has been a serious social topic in Japan in the past several years. It is thought to be a result of the slow economy and the low unemployment rate among young people. Discussing about “freeter” is a good chance for the Singaporean students to learn a current social aspect of Japan. The Singaporean students were asked to gather the first-hand information about “freeter” from on-line chatting and on-line composition and to write a report in the end of the semester. The two activities were assigned as homework and conducted besides regular classroom sessions.

On-line chatting sessions were held three times in October 2001. Each session lasted one hour. One computer was provided to each student. On-line composition activities consist of the three steps; 1) writing a composition, 2) writing a reply to other participant’s composition, 3) writing a reply to the comments from other participants. The author marked errors in each three composition. The students were asked to re-write the three compositions and to submit them at the end of the semester.

### **2.2 Apparatus**

Three computers with Windows 2000 and PC video cameras were used for on-line chatting. On-line chatting software was CUseeMe Pro. Version 4.0. CUseeMe allows users to see conversation partners and exchange text-based conversations through the Internet. That is the CUseeMe simulates face-to-face conversation.

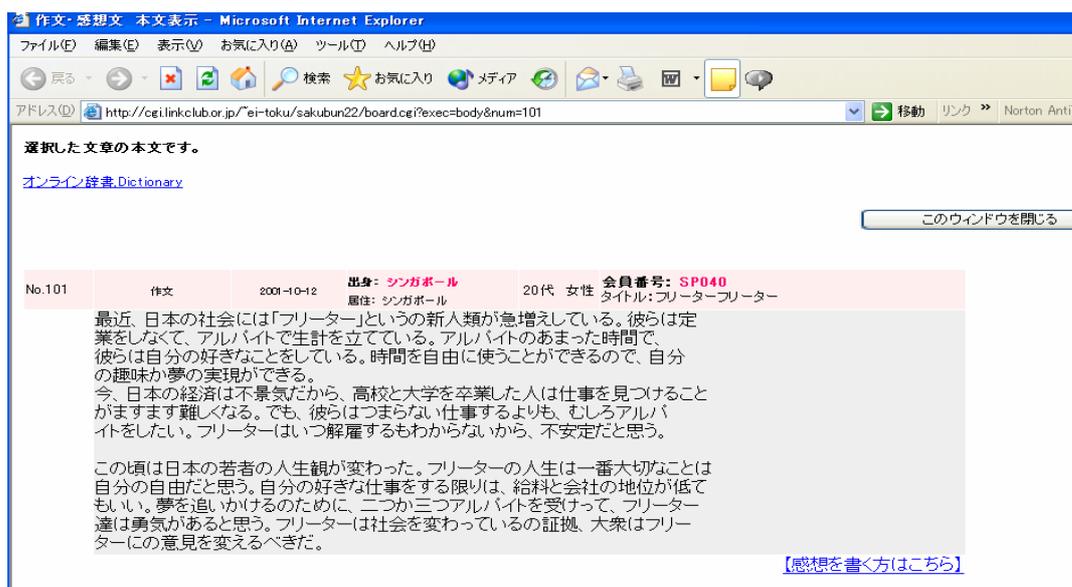
On-line composition is a web-based activity using <http://www.sakubun.org>. Two sample pages are shown in Figure 1 and 2. Figure 1 show the list of compositions and replies to them. Figure 2 shows a page of a student’s composition. Students can easily

upload and download their compositions by cutting and pasting texts from a word processing program.

Figure 1: A list page of compositions and replies



Figure 2: A sample page of a student's composition



(b) Data collection

The conversations of on-line chatting from the three sessions were saved as texts using CUseeMee. On-line composition texts were easily obtained from the web pages of on-line composition. The learners wrote reports based on printed out conversation texts. The students' reports were written in Japanese. The students also wrote a written feedback about strength and weakness of synchronous and asynchronous CMC. In this study the students' written feedback was analyzed.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The followings are main points of positive feedback from the students.

1. Overall
  - (a) The students could obtain first-hand information about "Freeter" from Japan.
  - (b) The students learned different opinions of others.
2. On-line chat
  - (a) The students could have a chance of interacting with real Japanese. They communicate with regular Japanese those are not teachers and text books.
  - (b) The exchange was personal (i.e. being able to see the partner's face).
  - (c) The students could obtain immediate response in Japanese.
  - (d) The students had to think in Japanese, because they had to response in Japanese quickly.
  - (e) The students learned sociolinguistic rules which were necessary when they talk to face-to-dace.
  - (f) The students could improve typing skill in Japanese.
3. On-line composition
  - (a) Expressing ideas in Japanese
  - (b) Sharing ideas with people from different countries
  - (c) Learn grammar from own mistakes
  - (d) Read other students' compositions and improve own

The followings are main points of negative feedback from the students.

1. Overall
  - (a) The period of the CMC activities was too short (one month).
2. On-line chat
  - (a) There were problems of scheduling with partners.
  - (b) Singaporean students cannot lead the conversation due to their poor competence in Japanese.
  - (c) Singaporean students can cut and paste texts produced by native speakers of Japanese.
3. On-line composition

- (a) There were technical problems. The server was down. Japanese fonts were collapsed.
- (b) Assignments were too many.

It appears that the most useful aspect of CMC activities is being able to provide a chance of contacting with native speakers of the target language and other students who are learning the same language from the students' home land. This point is quite important in the foreign language learning situation. Unlike second language learning environment, foreign language learners were separated from the target language and society. CMC provides chances of forming electric communities among people who share the same interests. CMC is a very useful and effective pedagogical tool to improve foreign language learners' motivation and interaction with not only native speakers but also other learners in different environments.

Difficulty in controlling lexical and syntactic accuracy is one of the negative points of on-line communication (Sotillo, 2000). However, it seems that asynchronous CMC coupled with rewriting activities make the students to go back their own mistakes. Furthermore, reading other learners' composition allow the students to evaluate their own language use by comparing their own to others. Asynchronous and synchronous CMC alone may not affect learners' language use. However, by combining with other activities, such as rewriting compositions and reading other learners' compositions, asynchronous and synchronous CMC can be a very novel tool to improve language learning process and to provide chances to interact with native speakers who live far away from the learners' homeland.

For teachers, scheduling synchronous CMC activities may be most annoyance. Students in the both parties sometimes failed to attend the activities. As a result students in one party did not have partners and lost their chances of interaction. In this on-line chatting, communication is text based. With the increased speed of Internet, real time oral chatting will become more smooth and enjoyable. If oral based on-line chatting is realized, the activity becomes more natural and attracts students.

In this reported CMC activities, we have only three synchronous CMC sessions. It is quite difficult to expect remarkable improvement in language use by the students. Therefore, the effect of asynchronous and synchronous CMC could not be measured in objective ways. It is hope to have chances to evaluate the effectiveness of asynchronous and synchronous CMC coupled with other activities in future.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Some studies report that asynchronous and synchronous CMC are not effective language teaching tools as teachers expect. Although CMC can encourage learners to interact with native speakers, it is difficult to control the quality and accuracy of language used by learners. However, synchronous CMC can allow learners to simulate real face-to-face communication and interact with native speakers who live far away.

Asynchronous CMC coupled with rewriting activities gives enough time for students to evaluate their language use. Combining asynchronous and synchronous CMC of CMC and other traditional activities is crucial to make asynchronous and synchronous CMC be useful tools to improve linguistic, intercultural, and IT competence.

### **References**

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