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Computer conferencing—does it motivate EFL students?

Barbara Skinner and Roger Austin

This paper explores the results obtained from using a computer network for real-time synchronous discussion in a course for students of English as a Foreign Language. The authors found that computer conferencing (CC) had noticeable effects on their students' motivation for language learning. Three reasons for motivation emerged from the students' responses to a survey: that CC provides an opportunity for 'real' communication and community, that it improves personal confidence, and that it encourages students to overcome writing apprehension. The article also reflects on the relationship these motives have with the intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation distinction in education generally, and with the traditional instrumental vs integrative classification of motivation in second language learning. It suggests that these motives may be able to contribute towards the support of newer classifications that have recently been proposed.

Introduction

Imagine a class full of mixed-nationality intermediate-level EFL students having a discussion in the target language, with the only sound the steady click-click of fingers on keys. Imagine, too, that all the students are involved in meaningful communication in English for the whole session. Although this may seem unlikely to many EFL teachers, even students who are very reluctant participants in discussions in traditional classroom settings seem willing to take part in computer conferencing. This is a method of carrying out group discussions over a computer network using a CC software programme (in this case First Class) which allows 'real-time', synchronous discussion (as with the scenario described above) or 'non-real' time, when comments can be added 'asynchronously'.

The software programme makes use of the organizing power of a host computer that stores the input of the conference members and allows any member to read and add to the conversation at any time.

Why use CC?

First Class had previously been used at the University of Ulster as a context for asynchronous discussion about teaching practice among trainee teachers and their tutors. It was noticed that the students were motivated by this medium, and that the messages sent were a mixture of both spoken and written register. DiMatteo's research (1990:75) explains how 'real-time' writing 'reveals processes of language that

merge speech and writing' and 'allows speech and writing to appear as a single activity'. Previous experience of the Pre-sessional English course had shown that there was a degree of reluctance on the part of students to contribute fully and continually to the main components of the course—oral discussion and written argument skills—so it was decided to use the CC component as an add-on module. This was not seen as a replacement for written and spoken skills work in the EFL classroom, or as a definite pedagogical context for bringing the two together, but as a possible additional method of motivating the students by giving them an experience of a different type of English which seemed to form a bridge between spoken and written texts.

Previous research

The distinction between intrinsic motivation (derived from the personal interests and inner needs of the learner) and extrinsic motivation (derived from external sources such as material rewards) plays an important part in the literature on motivation in learning in general. Until recently, on the other hand, the main body of work on motivation in second language learning has been that associated with the categorization of motives as being instrumental (for practical benefit) rather than integrative (arising from a desire to integrate into the target culture). The wider category of extrinsic motivation encompasses that of the second language integrative/instrumental distinction.

Although accepting these latter categories as the basis of L2 motivation research, further studies have shown them to be too general and ill-defined (Skehan 1989: 54–60) and others have since been identified. Dörnyei (1994: 280) outlined a motivational framework which comprised three broad levels. At the first of these, the 'Language level', the focus is on motives related to various aspects of the L2, such as the culture it conveys, the community in which it is spoken, and the usefulness of knowing it. The second, or 'Learner level', includes the need for achievement and self-confidence. Dörnyei proposes 'Learning situation' as the third level, which involves motivation for the course, the teacher, and the learning group. Oxford and Shearin (1994: 12) found further orientations. Their American students learning Japanese had a number of other reasons for learning the language, ranging from 'enjoying the elitism of taking a difficult language' to 'having a private code that parents would not know'. Warschauer (1996a) is one of the few studies which has examined the motivating aspects of CC on language learning. His students had a positive attitude towards using CC for writing and he proposed (*ibid.*: 39) that the three reasons for their motivation were communication, empowerment, and learning.

Other studies have reflected on CC in L2 contexts in other ways, but all give some insights into students' motivation. Colomb and Simutis (1996: 217) say that CC helped their students to focus on the higher levels of text construction, Warschauer (1996b: 14) shows that there is more equal participation among students using CC than in face-to-face discussion, and Kern (1995: 465) shows that students produce a large amount of writing, and several turns per session.

**The background
to our work**

Twenty-two intermediate to upper-intermediate level learners, mainly from East Asia, attended an intensive six-week Pre-session English language course, which included the weekly three-hour CC session. The students responded to a variety of discussion topics which were sequential in difficulty, starting with a descriptive task in Week 1 and progressing through different types of analytical/argumentative tasks later in the course. The tasks were often culture-related, or based upon problems which students could relate to on a personal level. (See Appendix 1.)

An anonymous survey (see Appendix 2) was administered on-line as part of the last CC session. The questionnaire asked the students 15 questions in order to reflect on their work.

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learn?**

The responses from the survey support an overall position that students have a positive attitude towards CC. Seven out of the 12 five-point scale questions had a higher than neutral score (i.e. three) from every one of the 22 students. (See Appendix 3.) Our students' responses revealed three main factors of motivation: 'real' communication and community, enhancement of personal confidence, and overcoming writing apprehension. These three factors go beyond the view of the extrinsic and intrinsic distinction, and beyond the traditional view of second-language learning motivation as either instrumental or integrative, to build on more recent developments in clarifying motivation orientations in L2 contexts.

**'Real'
communication—
'real' community**

A sense of having a 'real' audience when writing was a common reason given to explain why the students enjoyed the CC sessions. Hohiu explains:

. . . other students comments always give me some new ideas and nurture my competitive spirit.

whilst Sakura notes:

What I learnt from taking part in the conferencing course was so many man, so many minds. I enjoyed very much to read other students' comments and give mine.

Results from the survey show how important this sense of authenticity of audience was to the students. Sixteen out of 22 agreed strongly with the statement that computer conferencing should be open so that students from all over the world could take part. To support this, 14 out of the 22 students strongly agreed that they enjoyed using CC to communicate with their classmates—all of whom are non-native speakers. Metin explains:

Everything was wonderful. I had a chance to learn other people's thoughts, lifestyles, own countries and recent developments in the world and explain about mine also.

This can be seen, then, as a type of intrinsic motivation, in this instance derived from the personal interests of the students, communicating with

other non-native speakers.

MacNamara (1973: 252) supports this, and argues that ‘the really important part of motivation lies in the act of communication and that this is an important way in which intrinsic interest in second language learning may be achieved’. Reflecting this, Dörnyei, (1994: 279) defines his categorization of motivation at Language level as ‘the individual’s L2-related predispositions, including social, cultural, and ethnolinguistic, as well as a general interest in foreigners and foreign languages’.

Students also mentioned feeling part of a ‘real’ community, and of being aware of the group as one particular social unit. 19 out of the 22 students said they strongly agreed with the statement that CC helps people to learn from each other. Jin Ren commented:

I love to speak to other students to use conferences and we knew better each other than in the classroom. I feel they want to hear me because they know me.

Akiko reinforces this:

No matter if I make error because I have feeling that everyone is the same.

It seems that this sense of community may have begun to form for various reasons—it obviously helped that the students understood how to perform the tasks they were set, and that they quickly developed a body of shared knowledge for each of the tasks; most of all, they realized they had an important part to play in participating in those tasks.

In this context students appreciate being part of a particular social unit in which all the participants are learners of the same foreign language—English. It seems, then, that a learner can be motivated to integrate into a type of culture, but that it does not have to be the target language culture of native speakers, as suggested by the integrative motivation category. Any group which provides a sense of belonging to a community, and therefore fulfills the personal needs of the learner, is providing an intrinsic motivation to the student. Dörnyei (1994: 278) names ‘group cohesion’ as one of the main components in his third level of L2 motivation—the ‘Learning situation’ level. He suggests that the group’s aims have an important influence over the individual.

The benefits of the communication and community being viewed as ‘real’ by the students are many: interaction with different people and cultures, developing thoughts and ideas, feeling part of a supportive social group, learning from each other, and stretching linguistic resources to meet the demands of ‘real’ communication.

Enhancement of personal confidence

Students mentioned that once they were used to the computer conferencing technology they felt less stressed and more confident than in other language learning situations.

During our work the importance of the pace at which the sessions took place became clear. Compared to an ordinary classroom discussion, responses came in minutes rather than seconds, so students had time to consider each response as it arrived, and had just enough time to think about their own response, which made them more comfortable about participating. Eleven students out of 22 strongly agreed when asked if they found it easier to express their views in a conference than in an oral discussion. Mikio comments:

I think it is easier for me to write down opinions than speak it out. When writing I can express my opinions logically. I think this system benefits me a lot.

Fifteen students out of 22 disagreed, but not one agreed totally with the statement that 'they did not like to express their views in case they made a mistake'. Laurent says:

It is much easier to use computer system because you can repair your error before speaking.

Although the pace of First Class sessions was slower than oral conversation, CC does have a certain level of immediacy. The pace was quick enough for students to sustain conversational threads, but there was also enough time for them to absorb incoming messages, and to reflect them in outgoing responses. This mix of distance and immediacy seemed to play an important part in giving the students confidence and making the sessions a success.

When asked what they thought they had learnt in the computer conference, over half of the 22 responses remarked on the idea of individuality. Their comments suggested that this factor added to their sense of personal confidence in using the language. Hohiu remarked:

I feel more confident to express my own opinions in English and see if other listen and return a message.

The notion of enhancing personal confidence was particularly noticeable with students who were generally 'weak' in traditional classroom oral discussions. Throughout the six-week course the Japanese students were hesitant to express individual opinion in classroom situations, but added numerous controversial comments to various conferences. Significantly, when asked what they thought they had learnt in the CC sessions, ten out of the 12 Japanese students remarked on the idea of expressing their own individuality:

Akiko: I feel more confident to express my own opinions.

Sakura: I enjoyed very much to give my comments. They represent my character.

Increased use of the foreign language because of enhancement of personal confidence defies a traditional instrumental or integrative classification of motivation. It involves issues such as improving self-

respect, and overcoming feelings of being cut off in the second language, and therefore fulfills an inner need of the students, reflecting an intrinsic motivating factor. In addition, this motivating factor more readily fits into Dornyei's (277) classification of motivation at 'Learner level'; self-efficacy. This refers to how an individual judges his or her ability to perform a specific action, and Dornyei (ibid.) suggests that once a strong sense of efficacy is developed, a failure may have a reduced impact. Oxford and Shearin (1994: 21) believe that many learners 'do not have an initial belief in their own self-efficacy' and 'feel lost in the language class', so it is important that they create a sense of effectiveness within themselves.

Enhancing personal confidence is directly linked to the third motivational factor: overcoming writing apprehension.

Sixteen out of the 22 students said they felt able to produce a relatively large volume of messages compared with their writing output in class, and 17 out of 22 students either agreed or agreed strongly with the statement that 'communicating by CC is a good way to improve writing in English'. Ayako commented as follows:

I think in conferences writing is not the same, we can ask questions and give opinions and do not have to stop and change everything always.

While the group made lots of entries, averaging seven per student per one hour block, the length of the messages varied considerably—from being relatively short—typically one or two sentences—to paragraph-length responses.

What was significant was that these students felt they were overcoming their anxiety about writing in English because they were sending messages relatively quickly, and this gave the impression that they were getting lots of practice.

DiMatteo (1990: 82) offers 'letting go' as a metaphor to describe '... the deconstructive, positive impact that computer networks can have on the experience of writing' for his students of basic English. The use of CC seemed to shock many of our students into thinking about writing again. They began to see the creativity and fluidity writing enables rather than the prescribed strictness they were used to. In academic writing classes many of the students thought of themselves as non-writers, and were apprehensive about being able to produce coherent texts. In the CC sessions, by contrast, the students seemed to have found a written forum in which they could use the language without too much anxiety about surface errors, and instead focus their attention on higher levels of text structure, such as creating and developing ideas.

This motive revolves around the issue of being able to change negative ideas about their language learning to positive, that is, from 'I am not a good writer and never will be', to 'I can write and am improving'. It is neither instrumental nor integrative, but reflects the wider category of

intrinsic motivation, in that it is linked to the inner needs of the learner to believe in their own ability to succeed. Oxford and Shearin (1994: 21) suggest that an implication of this type of negativity is that 'the student is unlikely to use higher-order thinking strategies or any other kind of useful learning strategies, because progress in learning the language does not seem possible'.

Unfortunately, however, the CC sessions' positive effects on our learners' feelings about their writing ability did not carry over to the classroom. This was also the case with the other two motivating factors—'real' communication and community, and enhancement of personal confidence. On reflection, it was felt that the CC sessions should be integrated into the on-going structure of students' assignments and classroom interaction in order to provide a positive motivating effect across the whole course. Using CC once a week or three to four times a semester, rather than as an add-on module, may prove to be more pedagogically useful.

Conclusion This is our first attempt at using CC with EFL learners, and as such we can only offer an impressionistic description. We found that CC can be a useful English language teaching tool that raises students' motivation by increasing their confidence, encouraging them to become part of a group, and broadening their range of writing skills. These three factors support an intrinsic category of motivation, and also lend weight to newer developing second language motivation classifications such as those proposed by Dörnyei (1994). We envisage that CC, like other information technology systems, will be shaped by its uses. It should not be seen as an all-purpose tool for language teaching, but more studies on how and why the technology can help students should be carried out.

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Appendix 1

Computer conferencing tasks

- Week One: Description of themselves
First impressions of Northern Ireland
- Week Two: Problem page—teenage drug taking
- Week Three: Problem page—babies and abortion
- Week Four: Pictures from the internet—choosing a picture and commenting on it
- Week Five: Shipwreck—negotiation in order to survive on a desert island
- Week Six: Hijack—animal rights fighters—discussion
On-line survey

Appendix 2

Dear All,

We hope you have found the Tuesday morning sessions interesting, and want to give you a chance to tell us what you think you have learned by answering a number of questions, or responding to some statements.

In the first section we want you to say if you agree with a statement by putting a number for 1 to 5, where 1 means that you agree strongly, 5 means you disagree strongly, and 3 means you are not sure. You can also add a comment to explain your answer.

1. 'The computer conferencing sessions made me want to use my knowledge of English to express my ideas'
1 2 3 4 5
Comment
2. 'I found the sessions difficult because I did not know enough English'
1 2 3 4 5
Comment
3. 'I found the First Class system was easy to use'
1 2 3 4 5
Comment
4. 'I did not like to express my views in case I made a mistake'
1 2 3 4 5
Comment
5. 'I found it easier to express my views in a conference than in oral discussion'
1 2 3 4 5
Comment

6. 'I thought there were too many in the group, and it was difficult to read all the comments'

1 2 3 4 5

Comment

7. 'It would have been better if students from other places in the world had joined in the discussion'

1 2 3 4 5

Comment

8. 'I would have liked the tutors to have made more responses to the views I expressed'

1 2 3 4 5

Comment

9. 'I enjoyed using the conferencing sessions to communicate with my classmates'

1 2 3 4 5

Comment

10. 'Communicating by conferencing is a good way to improve my writing in English'

1 2 3 4 5

Comment

11. 'I want to continue using computer conferencing in my English classes'

1 2 3 4 5

Comment

12. 'Communicating by conferencing helps people learn from each other'

1 2 3 4 5

Comment

In this section we would like you to answer the questions as fully as possible.

13. Which conference did you enjoy most and why?

14. Overall, what I think I learned from taking part in the computer conferences was . . .

15. Finally, can you think of any ways to improve the conferencing sessions?

Appendix 3

Table: number of responses to survey questions

Scoring Key: 1 = AGREE STRONGLY
 2 = AGREE
 3 = NOT SURE
 4 = DISAGREE
 5 = DISAGREE STRONGLY

	1	2	3	4	5
1. The computer conferencing sessions made me want to use my knowledge of English to express my ideas.	18	4			
2. I found the sessions difficult because I did not know enough English.				16	6
3. I found the First Class system was easy to use.	19	3			
4. I did not like to express my views in case I made a mistake.		2	5	15	
5. I found it easier to express my views in a conference than in oral discussion.	11	5	4	2	
6. I thought there were too many in the group and it was difficult to read all the comments.			14	2	6
7. It would have been better if students from other places in the world had joined in the discussion.	16	6			
8. I would have liked the tutors to have made more responses to the views I expressed.	3	6	10	3	
9. I enjoyed using the conferencing sessions to communicate with my classmates.	14	8			
10. Communicating by conference is a good way to improve my writing in English.	15	2	3	2	
11. I want to continue using computer conferencing in my English classes.	17	5			
12. Communicating by conferencing helps people learn from each other.	19	3			