



The Impact of Interactive Discussions (S-CMC) on Essay Writing in Swahili as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

In the learning of a foreign language, for a long time it has been assumed that essay writing is an individual task, a situation which researchers like Hamdaoui (2006), Susser (1994), and Weissberg (2006) are proposing should be a social process that requires concerted efforts, just like other social undertakings. I base my contribution to this paper on interactionist and collaborative learning theories. I scientifically examine the impact of synchronous computer mediated communication on essay writing in Swahili. The participants in the study were ten second year students of Swahili language at a major university in the US Midwest who were in their fourth semester of Swahili. All participants had five fifty-minute computer mediated pair interactive sessions before writing their individual essays. I found from the results of my data analysis that synchronous computer mediated communication was relevant in boosting the ability of the students to write an essay in Swahili in that, they were able to transfer various elements of communication and infuse them into their written essays.

Introduction

Interaction and collaboration are often used in foreign language teaching including writing. However, they are applied to varying degrees for different languages. The methods have been used especially in the writing of English as a second language [Berg, 1999], but have rarely been used in Swahili. In this paper therefore, I investigate the effects of synchronous computer mediated communication as a form of interaction and collaboration that students have when they write in Swahili. I specifically try to find out (i) the nature of interaction and collaboration that students have when they use Swahili during their Facebook conversations and (ii) the type of language that students transfer from their Facebook chat to their essay writing in Swahili.

This study and the writing of this paper is guided by interactionist [Long, 1996] and collaboration theories [Vygotsky, 1978] so as to gain a better understanding of the communication of such a structure and how this impacted the essays that the students wrote.

Methodology

Participants were invited to participate in the study to do the following: (i) Fill out a simple questionnaire in English about their study of Swahili, (ii) Participate in five fifty minute Facebook chats in Swahili scheduled throughout the duration of the spring semester on a bi-weekly basis, (iii) Write for no longer than 30 minutes about the topics discussed in the preceding Facebook interactive activity. Discussions topics that I adopted for this study are listed in table 1.0 below:

Table 1.0 Topics assigned during the five S-CMC sessions

S-CMC	Task
S-CMC 1	Types of food in East Africa. <i>Vyakula vya Afrika Mashariki</i>
S-CMC 2	The presidents of countries in East Africa. <i>Marais wa nchi za Afrika Mashariki</i>
S-CMC 3	Cities of East Africa. <i>Miji mbalimbali ya Afrika Mashariki</i>
S-CMC 4	Religions of East Africa. <i>Dini za Afrika Mashariki</i>
S-CMC 5	Visiting animal parks and game reserves. <i>Ziara ya safari katika Afrika Mashariki</i>

The time that I used in this study is similar to a study that was conducted by Mali [2007], and thus may allow comparison. I assigned twenty minutes for the S-CMC chat sessions while I allocated the individual essay writing thirty minutes.

For the instructions that accompanied each topic, I crafted instructions for the S-CMC chat sessions and



the individual essay writing sessions. I wrote instructions in both English and Swahili so that they were clear to the study participants.

Accurate transcription was necessary for the data that I received from the chat sessions. There were two primary transcription conventions from Dubois's revised discourse transcriptions (DT2) that I adopted for this study [Dubois 1992]: Table 1.1 below summarizes the transcription conventions that I adopted in this study.

Table 1.1 Conventions adopted for transcription

Transcribing indication	Category
###	Sections that were unintelligible
< L2 > WORD < / L2 >	Words written in another language

There were two raters in this study, myself and an independent rater. The independent rater and I were both college-trained near-native speakers of Swahili.

Findings from the S-CMC chat transcripts

I used quantitative analysis methods in order to find out the learning that occurred in the S-CMC chat sessions. I looked at (i) how much language was produced by the participants, (ii) what their focus was when they interacted, and (iii) the degree of interaction and collaboration that the participants had. Table 2.0 presents the mean numbers across all twenty three S-CMC chat sessions.

Table 2.0 Mean overall length, mean number of turns, and mean turn length for the S-CMC chat (N=23)

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Number of words	285.17	70.82
Number of turns	25.04	9.29
Turn length	11.16	9.08

My analysis of the focus of discussion revealed that each of the predefined focus areas had a number of instances associated with it and hence I used them to find out the learning that occurred in the S-CMC chat sessions. Participants' focus was on generating ideas more than on the other activities. Participants devoted over 50% of the possible instances to generating ideas in the five S-CMC chat sessions. In all the S-CMC chat sessions that the participants had, generating ideas had the highest percentages, ranging between 52% and 90%. Besides generating ideas, the participants also had smaller percentages for the language output, concentrating on social greetings, task management, and interpreting the task prompt.

When I finished examining the focus of the discussion, I used quantitative analysis of the transcripts to examine participants' lexical and grammatical accuracy, as well as the richness of the content as reflected in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 Mean scores during the 23 S-CMC sessions across participants

	Lexical quality score	Grammatical accuracy score	Content richness score
Mean	3.7	3.5	4.2
Standard Deviation	0.136	0.188	0.160

Findings from the essays

First, I analyzed all the essays that were written in order to get a general picture of group performance. In analyzing the essays, five constructs were used: (i) lexical quality, (ii) syntactic quality, (iii) content quality, (iv) spelling accuracy and (v) length. Secondly, we did an analysis of essays that were written by each individual participant in order to find out performance at the individual level. Third, I analyzed the essays that were written for each session in order to find out if there was any change in group performance over time. Table 3.0 presents the mean scores of all 46 essays.

Table 3.0 Mean scores of all essays that participants wrote immediately after the S-CMC chat sessions. (N=46)



	NoW	SpA	LA	LR	SA	SR	CR	O	HA
Mean	236.17	96.65%	97.8%	56.87%	91.76	52.39%	71.39%	3.70	3.54
Standard Deviation	58.8	0.822	0.71	1.35	0.91	1.41	1.94	0.18	0.19

Legend: NoW- Number of Words; SpA- Spelling accuracy; LA- Lexical Accuracy; LR- Lexical Richness; SA- Syntactic Accuracy; SR- Syntactic Richness; CR- Content Richness; O- Organization; HA- Holistic Assessment.

Findings on the effects of S-CMC on essay writing

There were a number of elements that participants transferred from their interlocutors during the S-CMC chats to the essays that they wrote. Looking at the syntactical structure for example, the data reflect that participants Abdi / Bibi and Chapa / Dalili already had those structures in their S-CMC chat transcripts before the structures appeared in the essays that they wrote afterwards. Grammar structures already existed in their S-CMC before they resurfaced in their essays. For example: In essay 4, Abdi wrote “*Alisema kwamba wakati alienda nchini Kenya aliona watu waislamu wengi na waliimba sana wakati waliomba*” [She said that when they went to Kenya she saw many Muslims and they sang a lot when they prayed]. Abdi’s essay references Bibi’s statements in S-CMC transcript 4 and 12, “*Wakati nilienda Kenya, watu wengi ni Islam...Niliona watu katika Kenya, watu Baadhi walienda kanisa na watu wengine walienda mahali na kuomba*” [When I went to Kenya many people are Muslims...I saw many people in Kenya, Some of them went to church and others went to places to pray].

Discussion and Conclusion

During the S-CMC chat sessions, participants had equal environment for interacting using computers, providing them with a similar opportunity to practice in Swahili during their S-CMC chats. The language contribution of some participants appeared similar but their actual roles and interaction were not reciprocal.

In the S-CMC sessions participants spent most of their time generating ideas for their topics. Participants also used the 20 minutes allocated to them to negotiate some of the lexical items that they posed or they received from their interlocutors. Participants wrote their essays with high spelling accuracy, and with accurate lexical and syntactical items. It was, however, important to note that scores that I assigned for lexical and syntactical richness were a little lower.

I also found that participants benefited from the scaffolding that was accorded to them by their interlocutors during the S-CMC. The more capable learners provided scaffolding to their interlocutors by giving them ideas and structure for their discussion [Donato, 1994].

The other observation that participants became very aware of the audience they were writing for. I could tell from the interaction transcripts that as the semester progressed, the students felt much more at ease interacting with each other.

Regarding the relationship between S-CMC chat and the essays that participants wrote afterwards, the analysis did not reveal any significant relationship with the measure of length. I however noted a fairly high similarity in the lexical, syntactical and content measures. In terms of essay organization, participants utilized the general ideas that they got from the S-CMC chat sessions to develop their essays. The participants also transferred lexical items from their S-CMC sessions essay writing. Participants who volunteered to provide explanations of some of the lexical items that their interlocutors asked during the S-CMC chat were the ones who utilized those lexical items in their writing.

From the study it is evident that S-CMC may provide students of Swahili with linguistic resources that they need in the writing of their essays. Collaborative practice, on the other hand, provides students with social skills that they need in learning how to write their essays.

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