



## Students' Perspectives on Synchronous Oral Computer-mediated Communication (SOCMC)

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### 1. Introduction

In this paper, we look at second language acquisition (SLA) courses taught web-based. Our research draws upon experiences and data from two courses offered at a university college in Norway. One is a Spanish course in grammar and communication at intermediate level and the other is an in-service English course offering formal qualifications for teachers of English at primary and lower secondary level. Both groups participate in synchronous oral computer-mediated communication (SOCMC), in dialogue-based lessons involving voice, webcam and chat tools. The lessons contain both peer interaction in groups, teacher-student interaction, and plenary sessions. In addition, there are asynchronous components such as material posted on the LMS, as preparation before lessons, and follow-up material posted after lessons, as well as the opportunity offered to participate in informal forums either on Fronter or on Facebook. In the first part of the paper, we describe the background of the courses and the online lessons as experienced from the teachers' perspective. The second part is a presentation of preliminary results of a pilot project, where the students' perspectives on SOCMC are surveyed. They have answered a questionnaire and future steps involve qualitative in-depth interviews informed by an analysis of this questionnaire.

Although the composition of students differ in some respects in the two courses – e.g. the English students having full-time positions in Norwegian schools and taking lessons in the evenings, and some of the Spanish students being full-time students – there are still certain curricular communication skills and SLA aims that apply to both courses and which are the point of departure for our research:

- understand and use relevant scientific and academic terms and concepts
- increase one's oral proficiency and communicative skills

With this project, we aim to document which factors the students find contribute to their learning outcome in SOCMC and what the implications might be for future course designs.

### 2. Background

In Norway, digital learning and instruction have been areas of priority for decades, and are, along with communicative aims, stated in the national curriculum [1]. The result has been that institutions are now receiving students who have great knowledge of different media, who have digital skills and who expect state-of-the-art tools. To meet these demands, it is tempting to opt for the technically most advanced solutions. In our situation, where we are in the process of establishing guidelines for future teaching and courses, we found that we had to try to make a local contribution to see whether it is possible to increase our knowledge of the students' unique needs and demands.

Interestingly, at the beginning of the courses, when they were asked to write about their expectations for their own language development and oral communication skills, the students' answers indicate that they seem to be less preoccupied with the second curriculum focus area of communication and do not appear to consider how computer-mediated communication might impact on their own oral output in the target language.

As students are sometimes afraid to contribute in discussions with peers and teachers they do not meet with regularly on campus, it may be difficult to engage them and make them participate fully in

SOCMC. Without getting into the debate on the possible technical challenges of this type of instruction and how it may have a negative influence on the students' learning, we, as teachers, choose to focus on the fact that such social obstacles are soon overcome for most of our students and that they seem to develop and use various communicative strategies. There appears to be an agreement in the groups that the listeners practice supportive behavior and in that way maintain an "open, non-evaluative environment interaction" [2]. Hence, we find that both teachers and students work together to create a supporting listening environment that facilitate effective communication. So far, we have inferred that this can only be because the students feel that they benefit academically, as well as socially, from this form of instruction and interaction. We already know, from extensive research in SLA that the students acquire both greater understanding of language and develop better communicative skills when cooperating [3]; [4]; [5] [6]; [7].

### 3. The Sociocultural Approach

Vygotsky claims that higher mental functioning is mediated by tools (technical tools) and signs (psychological tools) [8]; [9]. In our online lessons, both verbal mediation and mediation by technical tools occur (via computer, camera, microphone and chat). According to Vygotsky, concept development occurs on two planes. First, on the social plane (interpsychological) and then on the psychological plane (intrapsychological). In this process, the most important mediating tool is *language* and he makes a distinction between "everyday" concepts and scientific and academic concepts [10]. Since our main focus is on the social plane, we asked the students how their social interaction during online lessons contributes to their development of both "everyday" and academic concepts in the target language.

In our lessons, the technical tools allow us to create a virtual social learning community that resembles real face-to-face communicative and learning situations [11]. An important aspect of SLA is developing oral communicative skills and we believe that an important aspect of language learning is the students' interaction and co-creation of meaning. Also Swain points out that not only input but also output is important [12]. In our lessons, we focus on dialogical activities and sense making and rely on Bakhtin and his concept of *dialogism*, particularly the interrelation between the speaker and "the other" and that their verbal interaction involves both listening and responding: "[M]eaning can come into existence only when two or more voices come into contact: when the voice of a listener responds to the voice of the speaker" [13]. Similarly, Linell stresses that "the other often comes with a perspective on things talked about that is different from oneself's own" [14]. Thus, dialogue becomes an integrated element of the learning process, where listening and responding are mediating tools [15]; [16].

In our project we rely on listening and response theories presented in Brownell [17], the five listening categories introduced by Wolwin & Coakley [18]; discriminative listening, comprehensive listening, therapeutic listening, critical listening, and appreciative listening, and on Adelman's categories of response types and the importance of response in dialogues [19]. The questionnaire focuses mainly on three of Wolwin & Coakley's listening categories and corresponding response types.

### 4. Preliminary results

Discriminative listening: The subjects report that they to a great extent give attention to comments on the chat that elaborate on what the teachers say (71, 42 % say they *somewhat* or *fully agree*). To see the face and facial expression also makes an impact on apprehension, to a lesser extent than the chat. The students' awareness of colloquial words and phrases is high (92, 31 % *somewhat* or *fully agree*). They also have high awareness of grammatical/pedagogical terms they had no prior knowledge of, but not as high as the attention given to colloquial words and phrases. The students' stress on colloquial words and phrases is a bit surprising given that grammatical/pedagogical terms are emphasized in the courses. This might have to do with the students' competence in the target language, in that they do not yet fully master colloquial language. This interpretation of the data needs further studies to be validated.



**Comprehensive listening:** More than half of the subjects prefer asking clarifying questions orally when they have difficulties understanding what the teacher says (61.54 % *somewhat* or *fully agree*). They also prefer asking questions in the chat, but to a somewhat lesser extent (58.54 % *somewhat* or *fully agree*). Most of the subjects use written sources (dictionaries, textbooks, etc.) to increase their understanding while the teacher speaks (92.31 % *somewhat* or *fully agree*), somewhat fewer do the same when fellow students speak (66.66 % *somewhat* or *fully agree*). Over half of the subjects use written sources after SOCMC to check on words they did not understand (66.66 % & *somewhat* or *fully agree*). Almost all of the subjects find that SOCMC to a great extent contributes to language understanding. However, there is variation on whether they feel they can practice communication skills (100 % *fully agree* that SOCMC increases academic understanding, 92.3 % *fully agree* that SOCMC increases language understanding, only 25 % *fully agree* that SOCMC enables them to practice communication, 41.67 % *somewhat disagree*, 25 % *neither/nor*).

**Appreciative listening and social relations:** Most of the subjects feel that good social relations during SOCMC are important for their oral contribution (84, 16 % *somewhat* or *fully agree*). All of the subjects agree that it should be possible to ask questions or comment both orally and in the chat – to both teacher and fellow students. These results clearly show that the students use the possibilities that multivoicedness in classroom discourse provide. They benefit both on academic and language levels from this interactive approach.

**Open question: What is it like to be an online student?** The subjects emphasize that they during SOCMC are given the opportunity to work in groups of three or four to solve tasks. They say that plenary lecture groups should be no larger than 15-20 students. The subjects appreciate questions and comments on the chat, but if the lecturer is writing too many explanations/comments on the chat it may slow down the session. Some answers also emphasize that interaction in SOCMC to a great extent is dependent on which lecturer is responsible for the session.

Based on these results, a tentative conclusion is that SOCMC course design should take into consideration how the use of different tools (technical tools and signs) can facilitate dialogism, and consequently the students` language learning processes.

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