

Computer-mediated communication

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Introduction

The rapid development of information and communication technologies in recent years is associated with a corresponding growth in interest in computer-mediated communication (CMC). Since the late 1980s, this trend has led teachers and learners alike to engage with the possibilities and complexities of CMC for language teaching and learning.

CMC: definitions

CMC is an umbrella term which refers to human communication *via* computers. Temporally, a distinction can be made between synchronous CMC, where interaction takes place in real time, and asynchronous CMC, where participants are not necessarily online simultaneously. Synchronous CMC includes various types of text-based online chat, computer, audio, and video conferencing; asynchronous CMC encompasses email, discussion forums, and mailing lists. CMC can take place over local area networks (LANs) or over the Internet. Internet CMC, as well as allowing for global communication, also provides for the added dimension of hypertext links to sites on the www, and to email addresses.

Positioning CMC within Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

CALL is often viewed in terms of apposite metaphors. In early CALL programs the computer had the role of tutor in human–computer interactions. CMC, however, falls within a description of the ‘computer as tool’, whereby the computer’s role is: ‘To provide alternative contexts for social interaction; to facilitate access to existing discourse communities and the creation of new ones’ (Kern and Warschauer 2000: 13).

New forms of discourse

Asynchronous CMC in the form of email lists and discussion forums is an effective medium for exchanges between distant groups of students in collaborative learning projects (‘key-pal’ exchanges) and for mentoring and support in distance learning courses. When synchronous text-based CMC (‘online chat’) is used for similar purposes, certain difficulties emerge. In addition to the technological and logistical complications involved in bringing different groups of learners together online at the same time, there are also significant emergent discourse features. Teachers and learners need to be aware that in online chat the speed of turn-taking seems to be more important than careful writing, and that misspellings, abbreviated words, and unpunctuated turns are the norm, not the exception. Although written, turns in online chat have qualities

resembling those in spoken language, in that they have unique features of their own. This means that models for teaching and research that were developed for speech and writing do not necessarily map directly onto online discourse.

New ways of learning New ways of learning and teaching are enabled by CMC. Studies comparing oral classroom discussion with computer-assisted classroom discussion draw attention to salient differences between the two. Levels of learner participation and of turn-taking initiation are greater in the computer mode. It is more difficult for any one individual (including the teacher) to dominate a computer-assisted discussion. And according to whether students are engaged in synchronous CMC in a classroom, a collaborative CMC project, or a distance learning course, the teacher's role shifts from that of an authoritative disseminator of knowledge to that of a guiding 'e-moderator'.

Multimedia and multi-modal CMC A range of CMC modes can be used in combination. In teaching and learning contexts where the primary mode of delivery is face-to-face classroom interaction, CMC can provide valuable alternative spaces for collaboration, and opportunities for learner autonomy. In addition, where course provision is in distance mode, asynchronous and synchronous CMC, together with the possibilities of interactive media on the www, can offer access to a wide range of learning opportunities. The future direction of CMC includes the prospect of increased availability and the use of voice and video conferencing, assuring a continued growth in its significance for teaching and learning.

References and further reading

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