Complexity and potential of synchronous computer mediated corrective feedback: a study from Sri Lanka

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Abstract. This paper discusses a qualitative study which examines the complexity and potential of using Synchronous Computer Mediated Corrective Feedback (SCMCF) for adult learners in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms in Sri Lanka. Chat conversation was assumed as the medium through which the teacher provides corrective feedback to the students. Five ESL teachers were interviewed for the study. The data gathered were analysed qualitatively using an affinity diagram which is discussed under an inductive thematic analysis. Findings of the study suggest that there is potential for provision of SCMCF through chat conversations, for teachers believe that SCMCF will improve language skills of the students; moreover, this approach needs only a limited use of technology. However, it was revealed that there could be some complexities, mainly due to teachers' existing workloads, some ethical aspects, and the low level of technology that is available in certain universities.

Keywords: SCMCF, ESL, affinity diagram, complexity, potential.

1.   Introduction

Today, computer mediated communication has become reasonably promising because of its interactive, social nature (Leow, 2015; Satar & Ozdener, 2008). Further, when establishing the presence of 'noticing' in language learning which is comprehensively discussed by Schmidt (1990), the most productive platform for

language learning is a synchronous process which helps the learner to be exposed to and engaged in processing L2 data (e.g. Leow, 2015). In such contexts, SCMCF can be "effective in providing a lower anxiety communicative environment for students who find oral production in [the] classroom stressful" (Beauvois, 1998, p. 213).

Although SCMCF has become a topic for many scholarly discussions, it is under-researched, especially in relation to L2 classroom contexts in developing countries where technology mediated classroom activities are hardly used. Besides, in Sri Lanka, most of the ESL students find oral production in the classroom stressful because they seem to have a 'love-hate relationship' with the English language (Goonetilleke, 1983). Thus, SCMCF in Sri Lankan L2 context warrants research. This study was designed to explore the following research questions.

(1) What are university teachers' perceptions on potential for SCMCF, and is there potential for SCMCF in terms of teachers' usage of technology?

(2) Do universities in Sri Lanka have the required learning conditions to provide SCMCF?

2. Method

2.1. Participants and data collection

Five teachers of English were asked about their perceptions on the potential for provision of SCMCF to students through chat conversations and on the complexities of this process in terms of fulfilling the learning goals. Interviews were semi-structured, and the teachers represented both private and state universities in Sri Lanka. Their experience in teaching English to undergraduates varied from 1.5 to 13 years while their age ranges from 27 to 40 years old.

2.2. Data analysis

Data collected from interviews was analysed thematically using an affinity diagram (Holtzblatt & Beyer, 2017). All transcripts were printed on paper and then cut into pieces containing just one point or issue. Then these were randomly selected, pasted on the wall, and were put into groups of four or five under several categories. Every

category describes only one issue or a point. These categories were not pre-defined but emerged from data. Thus, 186 categories emerged (e.g. 'people have a love-hate relationship with English', 'students prefer technology-mediated activities', and 'we don't have enough facilities to cater to students'). These 186 categories were then put into groups which discuss the same point. For instance, all of the above categories were put into the following labels respectively: 'the socio-cultural background of the country', 'use of technology in the classroom is effective', and 'usage of technology in the classroom is not very effective'. When these groups were marshalled considering their relationship with each other, 11 main themes of analysis emerged (e.g. causes for students' negative attitudes towards learning English, potential of using technology in the language classroom, and challenges of using technology in the classroom).

3.   Results and discussion

The affinity diagram helped 11 themes to emerge through data; however, this paper will present only two themes which are central to answer the research questions of the study.

3.1.   Teachers' perspectives on potential for SCMCF in the ESL classroom

Teachers have positive attitudes towards the use of chat conversations for language education for they believe it will improve learners' language skills due to several reasons: (1) students prefer technology mediated activities, (2) though most of the students fear the language, they want to learn how to use it, (3) online chatting is popular and trendy among youngsters, (4) students like to chat with their teachers online, (5) chatting in computer game platforms has improved some students' language skills, (6) chat history could be later referred to for learning purposes, (7) the use of technology in language education should have human interaction, (8) technology is more attractive than a book, (9) chat conversations do not cause learner inhibitions, (10) it establishes learners' confidence, (11) almost all students own a mobile phone, and (12) they can even chat during the night.

Further, teachers believe that there should be some improvements in the provision of corrective feedback because the current generation is different:

> "There has to be some sort of change because… the kids nowadays are not really taking in the kind of feedback we give for the way we have

given it to them, so we have to find another way to get through to them" (Interviewee 2).

Thus, there is a potential for SCMCF since teachers are seeking new ways of providing Corrective Feedback (CF). Although most of the teachers believe the provision of CF could improve the language skills of students, they do not prefer correcting students' mistakes in front of the classroom, assuming it would cause learner inhibitions. Thus, they claim that the provision of CF through chat conversations could be effective and convenient.

The study also examined whether there is a potential for SCMCF in terms of teachers' use of technology. All teachers employed in the study use some sort of means of communicating via technology. Some teachers use social media, especially WhatsApp, to communicate with students – "it's easy for me to get in touch with them" (Interviewee 1) – and to share interesting subject related materials with the students. Some teachers allow their students to use mobile phones and laptops in the classroom.

"If I need to check something, I look at the phone, why shouldn't the student?" (Interviewee 5).

"I don't mind if they once in a while go to social media and relax and come back to the lesson" (Interviewee 3).

Thus, the findings of this study are in line with previous research findings that the provision of SCMCF is possible because it is flexible in terms of time and place, attracts students (Blake, 2013), and provides a comfort zone for the less vocal (Freiermuth, 2002).

3.2.   Complexity in using SCMCF in the ESL classroom

The study also revealed several challenges in using SCMCF in the Sri Lankan context: (1) some teachers had limited knowledge in technology, (2) there was a lack of sufficient technology at some universities (e.g. strong WiFi connection), (3) the workload of the teachers, (4) some teachers' attitudes on ethical concerns: "if we are teaching, especially me, I'm 27 years old, I used to teach kids who are 26 years old. So when you're chatting with them, so, there's a bit of an ethical concern as well, I mean if you are a girl and if it's a boy, so that problem is there" (Interviewee 3), (5) teachers' negative attitudes on the efficacy of corrective feedback, and (6) teachers' perspective that student-teacher relationship should be distant.

Findings of the study reflect that the 'digital divide', i.e. an unequal access to digital technology and information (Tate & Warschauer, 2017), is a universal issue that can be seen in a computer assisted language learning context. Further, some other issues related to teachers' attitudes appear in the Sri Lankan context.

4.   Conclusion

University teachers' perspectives are both positive and negative towards SCMCF. They believe SCMCF would be effective and convenient. They are negative about it mainly due to the issues related to facilities, workload, and ethics. Universities in Sri Lanka are not very sophisticated in terms of the usage of technology, but the study reveals that universities are equipped with the simple technology that is required for SCMCF: WiFi. The study also suggests that there can still be some difficulties because some universities do not have strong WiFi. Thus, it can be concluded that there is a potential for SCMCF in the Sri Lankan university context amidst its complexities. Further research is needed to examine learners' views on SCMCF.

5.   Acknowledgements

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