Using computer-mediated communication to reduce foreign language anxiety in L2 learners

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Computer-mediated communication (CMC), a modality involving online conversation, is becoming increasingly popular in L2 classrooms due to hypotheses (e.g., Kern, 1995) that it benefits learning and reduces foreign language anxiety (FLA), which hinders acquisition (e.g., MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Since a principal cause of FLA is speaking in front of others (e.g., Woodrow, 2006), one might expect that CMC reduces FLA since the computer creates a safe space between student peers and instructors (Bradley & Lomicka, 2000). Furthermore, CMC allows more time to process input and plan output, cognitive processes that are negatively affected by FLA (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). If CMC does reduce FLA, it may lead to increased quality and quantity of learner output, both of which are negatively influenced by FLA (e.g., MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Delaney, 2009). Surprisingly, previous studies failed to find support for the hypothesized effect of CMC on FLA (e.g., Baralt & Gurzynski-Weiss, 2011). The current study was designed to answer three questions: (1) Are beginner learners significantly less anxious in CMC or face-to-face (FTF) environments?; (2) Does either environment lead to greater quantity or quality of output?; (3) Do students prefer either CMC or FTF classrooms?

Thirty students participated in two sessions (one CMC, one FTF), consisting of a vocabulary (food/beverages) and grammar lesson (present tense of verbs boire ‘to drink’ and prendre ‘to take/order’), and a picture narration task targeting the newly learned forms. Participants rated their anxiety following each session. Results showed that FLA was significantly lower during the CMC task than during the FTF task (F(1, 28)=17.241, p < 0.0003). Thirty additional learners will participate in a second round of testing, this time reversing the session order (i.e., CMC first, then FTF), so as to avoid task order effects. Participants’ narrations will then be evaluated for quantity and accuracy.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety, computer-mediated communication, second language acquisition.