

# Face-to-face talk and synchronous chat as learning tools in tutorial classes

**A B S T R A C T** The purpose of this article is to present an explorative study on the role of synchronous electronic discussions in the context of tutorial lectures on literature. More specifically, synchronous electronic interaction is compared with small-group discussions. A single session of each instructional method was recorded and analysed qualitatively, from a conversation analytic approach. The findings suggest that although synchronous chat and small-group discussion share certain characteristics, they are also distinct in several significant ways. The implications that these differences hold for language instruction are then discussed.

**Keywords:** synchronous CMC, tutorials, CLT, group work, blended learning, CALL

## 1. Introduction

In a rapidly developing world, technological innovations are having a profound effect on the procedures of language education. Simultaneously, student autonomy is becoming an increasingly important issue (Savignon, 2007). This article presents an explorative investigation into the use of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) and face-to-face discussions in the context of a learner-centred intervention programme – the New Academic Tutorial Programme (NATP).

The findings suggest that although SCMC and face-to-face discussions share a variety of characteristics, they should be viewed as separate yet complementary learning tools (in the context of the NATP).

## 2. Aims of the article

This article aims to report on an explorative study into the differences and similarities of face-to-face interaction and synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) as learning

tools in the context of the NATP. The study aims to provide suggestions for future investigations into the use of these two methods in programmes like the NATP.

### **3. Contextual and theoretical framework**

According to Savignon (2007) contemporary approaches to ESL and EFL instruction are influenced by three, interrelated factors: (i) the status of English as the world's "global language", (ii) the increased emphasis on student autonomy, and (iii) rapid technological developments (2007:207). In this context Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is viewed as the latest approach to language education (Savignon, 2007). Computer-mediated communication (CMC), in turn, is currently under the microscope for its potential contributions to CLT procedures.

For the purpose of language instruction, CMC may be presented in one of two modes: asynchronous (delayed) or synchronous (instantaneous) interaction. Both methods are viewed as advantageous for ESL and EFL instruction (henceforth L2 instruction) – albeit in different ways (Johnson, 2006 and 2008, and Sullivan, 2002). This paper concentrates on the synchronous mode.

The following sections will review the instructional approach of the NATP, as well as the benefits and limitations of SCMC.

#### *3.1 The New Academic Tutorial Programme*

This programme was launched at a South African university, in order to provide students with an environment in which they can express personal concerns, and master specific skills. Tutor classes are subdivided into groups of fifteen to twenty-five, and assigned to one 'tutor'.

Tutors are trained to design exercises and to guide class discussions in a flexible manner that still allows for the achievement of specific academic outcomes. As such, the programme aims to implement recommendations for a flexible form of instruction, as proposed by Mehan (1985), and White and Lightbown (1984). For this reason, I-R-E (initiation-response-evaluation, cf. Mehan, 1985) sequences are employed in a flexible manner (see Candela, 1999 and 2005). Practically, this is achieved as follows:

The teacher [tutor in this case] usually affirms, or at least gives recognition to, all answers that do not contradict any group consensus and are responsive to her/[his] questions – not just the one answer that is presupposed by her initial question. Thus, instead of specifically directing interaction step by step, the students respond within a set of logically related alternatives and take the initiative for doing so (Mehan, 1985:125).

The NATP attempts to pursue this goal by implementing the principles of three, interrelated perspectives on language learning.

#### *3.2 Communicative approach in the NATP*

The NATP programme is influenced by the communicative approach in the following ways. Class discussions are structured in a manner that mimics natural conversations (as recommended by Belchamber, 2007, Qing-xue & Jin-fang, 2007 and Brokensha, 2007). More specifically, the students are encouraged to select the topic of discussion (albeit sometimes from a demarcated

set of alternatives), as well as the next speaker. However, when appropriate, the tutor is also able to guide interactions more directly – especially for assessment purposes (in which case I-R-Es are sometimes useful – Macbeth, 2003, and Candela 1999). Students are also encouraged to foster a sense of community, by interacting in small groups.

### *3.3 Constructivism in the NATP*

The NATP is also influenced by constructivism – (based on the works of Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey, Bruner & Neisser, cited in Huitt & Hummel, 2003). This approach provides practical guidelines for the development of students' ability to achieve learning outcomes through knowledge construction, by using social interaction as a pedagogic tool in flexible and friendly environments (Castle & Rogers, 1993). However, in order to apply constructivism, its underlying principles must be clarified (Brokensha, 2007). The principles employed in the NATP are succinctly summarised by Smith & Ragan (1999:15):

Knowledge is constructed from experience

Learning results from personal interpretation of knowledge

Learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience

Learning is collaborative with meaning negotiated from multiple perspectives

### *3.4 Outcomes-based education in the NATP*

Finally, the goals and procedures of the NATP are also influenced by Outcomes-based education (OBE). Practically, therefore, it aims to be “student-centred” (Van der Horst & McDonald, 1997:13). For this reason, language exercises aim to involve the student as an active participant (supported by Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001).

However, since tutors are encouraged to respond to the unique characteristics/needs of each class, this paper can only report on the procedures used by this researcher/tutor. Therefore, the following section will focus on the ways in which this researcher/tutor's procedures may be compatible with SCMC.

### *3.5 Instructional approach*

The learning activities designed by the researcher/tutor were aimed at employing the techniques prescribed by the communicative, constructivist and OBE approaches in the sense that they aimed to use: (i) social interaction, (ii) in a flexible and friendly environment, with opportunities for students to play a variety of interactional roles. More specifically, the activities involved: 1) open class discussions, 2) individual and group homework, 3) and discussions in small groups. These activities were designed to scaffold the skills required to analyse and report analyses of poetry (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976).

This study concentrates on comparing the nature of small-group face-to-face and small-group SCMC discussions. Small-group discussions were selected because the advantages and disadvantages of this method may be similar to those of SCMC. The advantages of this method include: 1) the development of communication skills, 2) the creation of a friendly environment in which students can express and develop their understandings by incorporating a variety of perspectives, and 3) the promotion of learner autonomy (Killen, 2000:75). The disadvantages of

this method include the following: 1) students may be unfamiliar with this method, 2) conflict between group members may impede learning (Killen, 2000:76, and supported by Smith, 2006), and 3) formal assessment may prove problematic (for more information on the pros and cons of using small groups, see Killen, 2000:74-77).

Clearly this approach shares many characteristics with Community Language Learning – most notably the assumption that: 1) friendly environments, 2) student autonomy and 3) social interactions are essential variables in language learning (Cook, 1991:149; supported in an empirical study by Hellermann, 2005).

In summary, therefore, small group discussions are frequently used in the NATP programme, according to the principles of the constructivist, communicative and OBE approaches. This paper reports on an explorative study of the differences and similarities between this method and SCMC. Therefore, with regards to the appropriateness of SCMC for the context of the NATP, this study is limited in the sense that it does not report on other methods (such as class discussions or homework). Nevertheless, this paper aims to indicate areas for future investigation into the use of SCMC as a tool in the NATP. The following sections will review the advantages and limitations of SCMC.

### *3.6 The advantages of SCMC*

Firstly, according to Sotillo (2000) SCMC emulates face-to-face interactions to the extent that students gain experience in expressing a variety of speech acts – experience which is considered fundamental to communicative L2 instruction. As such, synchronous interaction is considered to have the same learning advantages as spontaneous/authentic conversations. One of these advantages concerns the development of fluency (Roberts, 1987). More specifically, when using SCMC as a medium, students have demonstrated the ability to use communicative strategies, such as informal and culture-specific expressions, to achieve desired goals (Kung, 2004).

Secondly, SCMC creates a setting in which education becomes student- instead of teacher-oriented (Sotillo, 2000, Warschauer, 1997, and Chun, 1994).

Thirdly, it provides students with the opportunity to 1) negotiate the meaning of input, and subsequently 2) to produce meaningful utterances, or output (Sotillo, 2000). Moreover, SCMC may enhance the negotiation of meaning, by encouraging group collaboration (Park & Bonk, 2007, Kung, 2004, and Warschauer, 1996).

And finally – like other CMC modes – SCMC may allow all students to participate equally – regardless of race or gender (Kung, 2004, and Sotillo, 2000).

In summary, therefore, SCMC is widely viewed as a pedagogic tool that creates an interactive and collaborative setting for language learning. As discussed earlier, these characteristics are in line with constructivist, communicative and OBE perspectives on learning. It is, therefore, plausible that SCMC may share some of the pedagogic advantages of small-group discussions. In this vein, Short (2006) comments that, at the very least, students perform as well in on-line courses as in traditional ones, although they prefer a blended mode.

### 3.7 Limitations of SCMC

Wolfe (1999:153) states that “electronic communication does not automatically equalize the proportion of discourse spoken by men and women”. This notion draws into question one of the most fundamental advantages of CMC.

In addition, Brokensha (2008) argues that SCMC not only differs significantly from face-to-face interactions, but that students often fail to collaborate effectively. Instead, problem-solving efforts are often conducted “in isolation” so that students are “essentially talking past one another” (Brokensha, 2008:9). If so, this notion nullifies another primary advantage of SCMC. Conrad and Donaldson (2004:7) support this by stating that CMC can only be effective if students act as “active knowledge-generators” who are able to collaborate effectively.

Finally, as noted by Kung (2004), grammatical accuracy declines sharply during SCMC.

Clearly, therefore, although SCMC has many potential advantages for a constructivist and communicative classroom, these advantages are not automatically manifested simply because the medium of instruction (networked computers) allows for spontaneous interaction. Thus, careful guidance is essential when employing this pedagogic tool.

It should be reiterated that the goal of this paper is not to argue for or against one of these methods, but simply to conduct an explorative study into the use of small-group and SCMC discussions in the context of the NATP.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 The sample

Respondents for the study were selected as follows: First-year students from an English poetry course were chosen because they had already been exposed to the NATP programme in the previous semester. Therefore, they were familiar with the NATP’s procedures for face-to-face discussions. The students were asked to form groups for a discussion of specific poems. One group was randomly selected and asked to participate in the study. Their discussion of a specific poem was then recorded with audio-recording equipment. This same group was then asked to conduct a similar discussion of a different poem via SCMC. The group consisted of four students who are indicated by the letters J, T, S and B.

### 4.2 The exercises

The data for the SCMC and face-to-face interactions were obtained from students’ responses to the following two exercises.

#### **Exercise one:**

Poetry exercise for ENG 142 on Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 (face-to-face exercise):

Instructions: in groups of three to five, carefully and critically read William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18. Then read the essay question below, and complete the following instructions.

Essay question: In a carefully worded response, of no more than 1 500 words, discuss the main theme of William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18. Your essay should pay specific attention to the poem’s 1) structure and the use of 2) imagery as literary devices used to communicate the main theme.

Instruction 1: in your group, discuss the main theme of the poem

Instruction 2: in bullet-form, summarise the way in which the poem’s structure is used to communicate the theme of the poem

Instruction 3: in bullet-form, summarise the way in which images are used to communicate the theme of the poem

Instruction 4: in your group, discuss the following question: is the poet's final conclusion about death and immortality a celebration of his subject's beauty or his own poetic skill?

**Exercise two:**

Poetry exercise for ENG 142 on Sylvia Plath's "Words" (SCMC exercise):

Instructions: in groups of three to five, carefully and critically read the poem "Words" by Sylvia Plath. Then read the essay question below, and complete the following instructions.

Essay question: In a carefully worded response, of no more than 1 500 words, discuss the main theme of "Words". Your essay should pay specific attention to the 1) use of imagery and 2) structure as literary devices used to communicate the main theme.

Instruction 1: in your group, discuss the main theme of the poem

Instruction 2: identify the images which are used to communicate the theme of the poem

Instruction 3: identify the elements of the structure which are used to reinforce the theme of the poem

Instruction 4: in your group, discuss the following questions: is there any indication in the poem that the speaker has overcome the injuries of the past?

Both exercises were specifically designed to develop communicative fluency and grammatical accuracy – in a manner that encourages the co-construction of meaning between peers. Furthermore, in accordance with the assessment procedures of OBE, both exercises were aligned with the learning outcomes of the course (Greyling, Brokensha & Brooks 2008:60-63).

Specific objectives: to acquaint students with the prescribed poems and texts to improve ability in reading critically and with comprehension to improve ability in writing clearly and methodically

General objectives: to broaden students' awareness of the role of language to foster awareness of social and cultural issues (taken from Brooks & Lovisa, 2008:3)

These design principles were followed in order to ensure that the exercises represent an authentic sample of the activities and assessment procedures that students in the NATP will be exposed to.

### *4.3 Framework of analysis*

A conversation analytic (CA) approach was used to analyse both forms of interaction. More specifically, the investigation concentrated on the way in which learning took place, by investigating conversation as a spontaneous, yet organised, social event (Psathas, 1995). Therefore, attention was paid to the manner in which participants interpreted and responded to each other's utterances – as evidence of the way in which they were oriented to meaning and the achievement of specific social goals (in this case the instructions of the exercises).

Clearly, therefore, classroom discourse is studied as "naturally occurring discourse" or NOD (Macbeth, 2003:246). As formulated by Macbeth (2003:247), NOD "[takes] interest in the discourse – the conversations – of ordinary lives, settings, and occasions for the way in which order, meaning, and structure are assembled and achieved from *within* them, and in real time."

The application of CA in this study is, however, limited in one regard. Although CA is concerned with generating valid and reliable findings for each instance analysed, it is less concerned with

the degree to which the characteristics of these cases can be generalised to other interactions. It is, therefore, important to stress that this study is explorative in nature. As such, future analyses may focus on confirming or rejecting its findings.

#### 4.4 Procedure

After a cursory overview of the face-to-face interaction, specific attention was devoted to the identification of characteristic patterns. These findings were then compared with the advantages and disadvantages of small-group interactions, as discussed by Killen (2000). Finally, a preliminary list of expectations was compiled – which would be compared with the SCMC interaction, in order to investigate differences/similarities.

Before this comparison was conducted, however, the SCMC interaction was reviewed and investigated for characteristic patterns – in the same manner as the face-to-face interaction.

### 5. Results

The following section will begin by discussing the patterns found in the face-to-face interaction. Thereafter, the comparison with SCMC will be discussed.

#### 5.1 Face-to-face interaction

##### 5.1.1 Task direction

The respondents in this study demonstrated the ability to focus on the activity's instructions in a manner that was flexible enough to address individual concerns, without digressing for so long that some instructions could not be completed owing to time constraints. More specifically, although – at times – students digressed by discussing other elements of the poem, two group members refocused their attention on the instructions, thus directing the interaction. These 'task-organising turns' were most frequently initiated by T, who also produced the first turn:

Turn 1. T: Ok you gu::ys re:ady?

((Shuffling sounds, made by students moving closer together in their seats.))

Turn 2. T: So what do yo:u? think the theme of the poem is

Turn 3. J: I think its eternal ↑↑beauty

This opening sequence represents what Hellermann (2005:26) calls "turn allocation". Instead of using a "direct launch" (Hellermann, 2005:26), T initiates the interaction by offering a speaking turn to other group members. In this regard, T has performed a task normally reserved for educators (Smith, 2006). Other instances of 'task-organising turns' are illustrated below. Note that the turns are also frequently used to summarise information discussed in previous turns. Thus, they may also be called 'summative turns'.

Turn 36. T: So:: if we can no::w summarise what's the the:me?

Turn 52. S: Then now we ask ourselves how is the message conveyed through the structure =

Turn 83. S: And then on the third [3] so basically on the first quatrain the message is about [3] the briefness of su::mmer compa:red to something eternal

Turn 195. T: So the structure we can sum up he use the quatrains [3] ((student T records the group's answer)) in the first one? he what? he compares them?

### 5.1.2 Humour

Hellermann (2005) states that humour promotes a sense of community among students. In addition, it is characteristic of students who are already comfortable with peer interactions (Hellermann, 2005). The respondents in this study demonstrated the ability to use humour. This generated an important expectation for the SCMC interaction: will humour still be used to foster a sense of community?

Turn 46. S: Why do you say it's an English sonnet?

Turn 47. J: It's a Shakespearean sonnet it's all there

((Students laugh possibly about the fact that the instructions say "Shakespeare's Sonnet 18"))

### 5.1.3 Encouragement

Students J, T and S frequently encouraged one another to participate. This was frequently accomplished by using the "acknowledgement token" (Lehtinen, 2006:396) "yes", and paralinguistic devices such as "uhmm". For example, during turns 4 to 9, student S commands the floor. J, however, frequently interjects with "yes". These utterances do not represent attempts to take the floor from S.

Turn: 4. S: Ja, the poem is about I think ja also I also think the poem is basically about beauty that is eternal =

5. J: = yes

6. S: Uhm I think one way or the other it is compared to nature =

7. J: = yes

8. S: Uhm nature changes things do change there are differences BUT your beauty will never change =

9. J: = yes

Encouragement was also provided with evaluative statements such as turn 155: "T: = That's very good it can't claim you =" and 168: "J: = ja ↑ja that makes better sense as well".

It should be noted that since J, T and S offered their contributions freely and without reservation, none of them required explicit invitations, or turn allocations. Nevertheless, at times, all three explicitly solicited the assistance or opinions of their peers.

Student B, unfortunately, was only encouraged to participate once (in turn 423). This marginalisation is observable in turn 395 where J only names three participants.

Turn 395. J: This can go on forever ((laughter from T and sounds of approval/agreement from S)) cause you know YOU think one thing, I think one thing, YOU think one thing, so:::

This generated the following expectation: would student B participate more frequently in the SCMC interaction?

#### 5.1.4 Co-construction of meaning and collective scaffolding

Students J, T and S effectively built on each other's contributions by 1) expressing different opinions, 2) questioning each other's reasoning and 3) negotiating these differences effectively (thus avoiding conflict). By expressing and negotiating different opinions, students demonstrated the ability to apply theoretical knowledge as well as critical/analytic thinking. With regards to the latter, students correctly interpreted the use of literary devices, and also cited evidence from the poem to support their views. Most importantly, the students' contributions enabled them to function effectively in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) – thus optimising their collective and individual learning. The ZPD refers to Vygotsky's conceptualisation of the difference between unaided learning, and support from an expert (1987:86). In this case, students functioned as both novices and experts, at different times, by providing and requesting aid. Thus, each student expressed an "initiation [...] reply [and] evaluation act" (Mehan, 1985:121), at different times.

These features are poignantly illustrated in the systematic progression of the topic under discussion in turns 1 to 41. The discussion moves from the overall theme of the poem, to the importance of beauty, as well as the nature of beauty (internal vs. external and specific vs. generic).

Finally, when assisting each other's learning, students demonstrated the ability to use "collective scaffolding" (Donato, 1994). For example, in turn 42 T breaks the task into manageable steps: "T: ok our next question in bullet form summarise the way in which the poem's structure is used to communicate the theme of the poem [2.7] the structure OH ↑first uhm what kind of poem is this [1.1] it's a so:nnet?". Later on, other students follow her example by providing 'summative turns'.

Scaffolding is also illustrated in certain questions by T. Although these questions seem to be implicit calls for aid, T may also have asked them in an effort to elicit responses from her peers – thus facilitating their learning (a role normally reserved for educators).

62. J: ↑I think it's an introduction I think shall I compare thee to a summer's day and then he explains why he thinks he should do that.

63. T: But wh::y summer?

#### 5.1.5 Verbal jostling

It should be noted, however, that the interaction was characterised by a considerable amount of verbal jostling. In turns 151-154, for example, S interrupts both J and B.

151. J: You know I thi:nk-

152. S: ↑THE WAY I see you now is the way I will see you tomorrow now he's he's speaking directly to her now he's no longer comparing- I mean he's he's no longer indirectly speaking about her but he's just directly [1.8] nor shall death nor shall death brag thou wanderest in his shade

153. B: even death won't take away-

154. S: ↑Now it's an image becomes an image now [6.7] even death it itself even death itself can't claim you ((unsuccessful attempts by B to latch)) it can't take you away ((encouraging sounds from T)) =

155. T: = That's very good it can't claim you =

S' interruption might be accounted for by the fact that he did not perceive any "transition point[s]" in his turns (Mehan, 1985:126). Consequently, S probably thought that the floor was still under his control. Nevertheless, although B's contributions have been scarce and far between, up until this point, it seems possible that S' interruption only inhibited him more. Interruptions, therefore, present a challenge to collaborative learning in small group discussions. In many other cases, however, verbal jostling did not seem to impede communication significantly.

### 5.2 SCMC interaction

Based on recommendations by Brokensha (2008) the SCMC exercise was only conducted after students had been allowed to familiarise themselves with the software and mechanisms of the chat room. During this orientation period, students were alerted to various aspects of SCMC chat. Student B, for example, immediately participated with a creative array of "mixit lingo". Student T, however, requested that the chat should be conducted in standardised English: "i do not like the lingo cause i have no clue what it means" (student's errors have been retained). Furthermore, in order to minimise confusion, the group decided that utterances which are directed at individual students, rather than the group, should be ended with a hyphen and the first letter of the addressee's name (based on a recommendation by student B).

Unfortunately, B did not attend the next SCMC session, on which this paper is based. However, based on the enthusiasm demonstrated in the orientation session, as well as the statement "B: yes me too i cn express myself better in writting than verbally" it seems possible that B may have participated more freely in the SCMC interaction.

### 5.3 Comparison

With regards to task direction, humour, encouragement and the co-construction of meaning the comparison between face-to-face and SCMC interaction demonstrated similar patterns. Two major differences, however, were found. Task direction and the co-construction of meaning were impeded by the lack of coherence in turn-taking procedures. According to Negretti (1999:80) incoherence is caused by the fact that turns which would have been uttered in close succession, are not posted in close succession during SCMC (supported in empirical research by Brokensha, 2008).

According to the respondents in this study, this is caused by the fact that some students type faster than others, as well as the fact that one cannot use verbal cues to opt for a turn. As a result, students became confused:

71. S: are we still in stanza two???

72. T: no 3

In these two turns, task direction is impeded by the loss of coherence in previous turns. This impediment, however, was largely overcome during the later stages of the SCMC chat – but at the cost of grammatical accuracy. When questioned about their grammar and spelling, the respondents said that it was an unavoidable product of the speed with which they typed. Speedy

typing was absolutely necessary in order to post one's replies beneath the turn to which they were aimed. These findings are illustrated in the following example:

101. S: if don't get over those words(insults) they will govern yourlife

102. J: i think in the last stanza she says that no matter how people hurt you with words  
yor spirit is stronger and has the will to keep going

103. T: it does not say that words govern your life!!

104. T: i think j is correct!!!

105. J: although you can never forget the insults your spirit has the strength to look past  
those insults and move on

106. J: that's just what i think

107. S: we are also made alert that we must be carefull of what words we recieve from  
people because those words do have capability of governing ourlives

Turn 103 by T was addressed to S (turn 101), but was only posted after J's turn 102. Nevertheless, the students were still able to co-construct meaning – albeit at the cost of grammatical accuracy, caused by the speed of the interaction (these turns were produced in only three seconds).

The second difference identified in this analysis regards the use of humour. Humour played a smaller role in the SCMC interaction. However, it must be noted that humour is harder to detect without non-verbal clues. Despite the lack of humorous comments, students employed other, non-verbal methods in order to communicate effectively. Emoticons, (“☺”) were frequently used for this purpose, a finding which is consistent with Kung (2004).

## **6. Implications of the findings**

The findings of this study support the conclusion that students are able to enhance each other's learning through collaborative interaction (in both face-to-face and electronic mediums). Students in this study have demonstrated the ability to 1) remain focused on the assignment (Kung, 2004), 2) encourage each other (Smith, 2006), and 3) to co-construct meaning (Smith, 2006, Killen, 2000 and White & Lightbown, 1984). Therefore, the findings support Smith's (2006) conclusion about group-collaboration: language students can negotiate the zone of proximal development by supporting each other as both experts and novices.

Face-to-face discussions may, however, be limited in their ability to allow for equal participation. Students should be made aware of the importance of encouraging every member to participate. SCMC may be useful in this regard. Unfortunately, owing to the absence of student B, this study can make only limited comments on this subject. However, it seems at least possible that SCMC may support equal participation.

On the other hand, SCMC presents the educator and students with unique challenges. These include: the impersonal nature of electronic communication, typing speed (of different students), lack of nonverbal/paralinguistic cues and a sharp decline in grammar.

Future research may, therefore, focus on developing strategies to obviate these limitations – perhaps by employing a blended method (Short, 2006, and Park & Bonk, 2007).

In summary, with regards to the main objective of this study, face-to-face and SCMC discussions share certain pedagogic advantages. Most notably, students are able to scaffold tasks and negotiate the zone of proximal development by expressing and negotiating different opinions. However, it seems plausible that these similarities are mainly caused by the nature of peer interactions, and not the medium of communication. Educators should, therefore, structure peer interactions in a manner that encourages the collaborative negotiation of different views/opinions (supported by Maor, 2005, who notes that social interaction is limited if it does not encourage knowledge construction).

At the same time, when deciding on the most appropriate learning tool, educators should consider those characteristics which appear to be unique to each medium. In this vein, SCMC and face-to-face discussions differ on the following aspects: Although face-to-face discussions allow for effective communication – with all the benefits of non-verbal/paralinguistic cues – equal participation might prove problematic. SCMC, on the other hand, might allow for equal participation, but is hindered by the lack of communicative cues.

## 7. Conclusion

Based on these findings, this paper suggests that face-to-face and SCMC discussions should be viewed as separate, yet complementary pedagogic tools – in the context of tutorial lectures. Therefore, without denying the potential advantages of technological developments such as CMC, one should perhaps not look to replace one technique with the other – but as strategies for incorporating the advantages of both, in a manner that concentrates on the learning environment and language students' needs.

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## Transcription conventions

The conventions used in this study are based on Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), Psathas (1979), Goodwin (1981), Atkinson and Heritage (1984), and Psathas and Anderson (1990) – as discussed in Psathas (1995:70-78).

Utterances which begin simultaneously are indicated with [, and ] indicates the end of the overlap:

A: [[I thought that]

B: [[It means that] yes it means that

Utterances which overlap are indicated with [, while ] indicates the end of the overlap:

A: I thought [that] the meaning is

B: [yes I]

Latching is indicated with =

A: That is what it means =

B: = yes it means this

Note that when A latches onto B's last utterances it is indicated as follows:

A: That is what it means =

B: = yes it means this =

A: = exactly

Pauses are indicated by noting the seconds and tenths of a second as follows: [1] indicates one second

Sound stretches are indicated as follows: A: I rea:::ly think you should look again

Cut-offs are indicated with –

A: Read the line-

B: It reads as follows

Note that cut-offs may also occur in a single speaker's turn:

A: I thought that- I think if you read carefully

A stopping fall in tone is indicated with a period:

A: It is true. [1.2] Let's go on

When a syllable is stressed, it is underlined:

A: I think that

When an entire word is emphasised it is underlined and recorded in upper-case:

A: Its all about THIS

Marked rising and falling intonation is indicated with ↓ and ↑ respectively

Rising intonation is indicated with ?

A: What do you: thi:nk?

A continuing intonation, predominantly used when uttering a list, is indicated with commas:

A: You say this, I say that, you say that,

Verbal descriptions were also added where necessary, for example ((laughter from all students)). Other descriptions include ((sounds of comprehension)), ((sounds of approval/agreement)) and ((encouraging sounds)). All three may be phonetically represented by “uhm”. Differences in tone, however, indicates their differences functions: 1) to indicate comprehension of an argumentative point, 2) to express non-verbal agreement, and 3) to encourage another speaker to continue/complete his/her turn. In this study they are indicated in brackets if they are not isolated to individual “uhm” sounds, but overlap with the current speaker’s turn for some time.