INTEGRATING COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION INTO COMMUNICATIVE BUSINESS ENGLISH TEACHING

Adriana TEODORESCU*

Abstract: *This paper aims to examine the possibility of integrating computer-mediated communication (CMC) into the communicative approach in business English teaching. Along with the wide spread of ICT, global communication and interaction have reached new levels. The extensive use of computers and the Internet has paved the way for new opportunities in all fields, and business English teaching is no exception. Thus, modern approaches to the teaching and learning of foreign languages attempted to integrate CMC into communicative business English teaching, in an effort to increase students' communicative skills, which is the main goal in communicative language teaching. The use of CMC in business English teaching has in view the acquirement of better communication competences students need in business English speaking environments. Therefore, this paper will try to emphasize the relation between CMC, the communicative approach, and the improvement of the teaching/learning process.*

Keywords*: CMC, communicative approach, business English.*

Introduction

The use of English as the main language of the business world has significantly increased over the last decades. Within the global development of technology, science and communication, Business English has emerged as an important component of worldwide business and commerce. Consequently, business English has developed as one of the most significant areas of teaching English for Specific Purposes, as each field has its own linguistic identity, its specialized terminology required in order to effectively communicate and interact in specific contexts.

Generally speaking, business English is about specific language used to communicate in specific business contexts, and for business aims. Business people need English to do business, not just to talk about business. They need to use the language effectively across a variety of different cultures and alongside a variety of different business skills, in a wide range of business contexts, and with a wide range of interlocutors. Therefore, the teaching of business English has in view all these features and the fact that language is used to achieve an end. The learner's needs and his final aims are of great importance in teaching business English.

The teaching of English as a foreign language has generated a lot of debates over the years, as researchers and linguists have tried to identify the best way of doing it, and the best way of helping learners study more efficiently. Second language acquisition issue has developed into an extensive field of inquiry, and many techniques and methods of teaching English have been offered. Therefore, current teaching practice and teaching materials are both the result of these debates concerning abstract theory and various practical techniques. Down to our days, various methods have been used, such as the grammar -translation method, the audio-lingual method, the direct method, the communicative approach, etc. Even if some of them are no longer used, various trends continue to have a major impact on how English is taught nowadays.

Given the great importance of communicative capabilities for learners of business English, we considered both necessary and useful to boost communicative

* "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University, Constanţa, ada_teodorescu@yahoo.com

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language teaching within our classes. Moreover, in our endeavour to maximize the authentic language input, we also tried to incorporate computer-mediated communication (CMC) into the teaching/learning process, and benefit from the countless opportunities this new form of communication can provide.

Our language lab was equipped with computers and a video projector that allowed the whole class to watch videos or presentations, while the internet connection was essential in our undertaking. We worked with two groups of students that studied business English for the economic field and assessed their knowledge of the target language (speaking, listening, writing, and reading) throughout the whole teaching/learning process by means of progress tests and a final achievement test. We compared their results with those of other two groups of students that did not benefit from the resources offered by CMC. Finally, we evaluated the impact and results of CMC incorporated into communicative language teaching, and decided on the best way of improving students' communication skills.

Communicative language teaching (CLT)

Communicative language teaching emerged in the 1970s as a reaction against the grammatical patterning and the rigidity of the audio-lingual method and its techniques, and can be traced back to the work of Chomsky in the 1960s, when he mentioned the two notions of 'competence' and 'performance'. On the emergence of CLT, McKay also points out: “The rise of CLT is often attributed to a discontent with audiolingualism with its behaviourist view of language learning and emphasis on linguistic form rather than meaning. In contrast, [...] the goal of CLT is to promote meaningful, appropriate language use” (McKay, 2009: 108).

As Berns contends as well, communicative language teaching is more about teaching to use language appropriately for communication than teaching about language: “[...] communicative language teaching identifies new pedagogical orientations that have grown out of the realization that knowledge of grammatical forms and structures alone does not adequately prepare learners for effective and appropriate use of the languages they are learning” (Berns, 1990:79). CLT focuses on how language is learned, namely via the negotiation of meaning in real communication. Students learn by using the language to achieve a specific outcome. An effective way to teach is to provide the right input and atmosphere, allowing learning to take place at the individual's own pace and in response to their needs (Frendo, 2008:13).

Communicative language teaching method has two main guiding principles. The first principle states that language is not just patterns of grammar and vocabulary items, but it also involves language functions such as suggesting, inviting, agreeing and disagreeing. This view is also shared by Frendo: “First of all, language is seen not just as a set of linguistic items to be learned, like words or grammar, but it also involves language in use via functions such as interrupting, or agreeing and disagreeing.” (*ibidem*, 12) Learners have to take into account the need for appropriacy when addressing people, respectively the kind of language they use, formal, informal, technical, etc., depending on the specific context. The second principle emphasizes learners’ need to get enough exposure to language, and enough opportunities to use it. “Another key aspect of CLT is that languages are learned while using them, with an emphasis on real-life situations. Meaning takes precedence over form. Fluency can take precedence over accuracy.” (Frendo, *op. cit.*: 13) As a result, CLT focuses on “students communicating real messages, and not just grammatically controlled language” (Harmer, 2007: 50). CLT also places great emphasis on the development of many

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communicative activities, which encourage students to use all their knowledge of the language to communicate and interact.

Besides great emphasis on language use, other features that characterize communicative language teaching are: focus on fluency and appropriateness in the use of the target language, low emphasis on form, structural correctness, error correction and explicit instruction on language rules or grammar; classroom tasks that encourage spontaneity and negotiation of meaning; use of authentic materials; an interactive, informal environment that promotes student autonomy; teachers act as facilitators and participants, and students are involved in interpretation, expression and negotiation of meaning (Mangubhai, Marland *et alli*, 2004: 292).

Given the characteristics of CLT, and the fact that previous research has proved that teaching/learning strategies enriched with interactive and collaborative methods ensure favourable conditions for the development of the communicative skill, we looked for new means of providing our students with plenty of authentic learning resources. Besides the wide array of printed learning materials, we also took into account the choices that the Internet and CMC offered us.

What is CMC?

With the advent of the Internet and information technologies, new means of human interactions have emerged, giving rise to innovative forms of social interactions in the electronic environment. As computers have become part and parcel of modern society, shaping all fields of activity, and new state-of-the-art devices (iPad, Smartphone, etc.) are constantly overrunning us, the communication process has reached new levels and various forms. The way people communicate in various professional, social, or educational settings varies widely, according to the context and the channel used in the communication process, which in our case is via computers or other information technologies.

The rapid spread of the Internet has paved the way for interpersonal interaction at international level, being a cornerstone for future global communication. The Internet overcomes physical and social limitations of other forms of communication and therefore allows the interaction of people who are not physically sharing the same space. The process of interpersonal communication via computers (or other hi-tech gadgets), involving people situated in different environments is generally known as computer-mediated communication (CMC).

Herring defines computer-mediated communication as ‘communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers’, and characterizes it as ‘an important new communication modality that is increasingly permeating everyday life in industrialized societies’ (Herring, 1996:1). Even if computer-mediated communication has initially referred to interpersonal interactions that occur via computer-mediated formats, such as instant messages, emails, chat rooms, etc., lately the term has also been applied to other forms of text-based interaction, or Internet-based social networking. In our approach of CMC, the term ‘computer’ has broadened its original meaning and refers to any other electronic device which can be connected to the Internet and supports software applications that allow digital interactive communication. The term ‘computer’ stands for a generic term in our collocation, as information can presently be shared through a whole gamut of devices.

On the impact of technical innovation on teaching English, Jeremy Harmer points out:

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> What has changed recently, though, is that students can do things they were unable to do before thanks to technical innovation. Thus modern podcasts (downloadable listening which can be played on individual MP3 players) give students many more listening opportunities than ever before. They can also write their own blogs (Internet diaries) and put them on the web. […] They can search for a wide range of language and information resources in a way that would have been impossible a few years ago. (Harmer, 2007: 31)

Integrating CMC into CLT

As CLT focuses on language use, authentic resources, and communicative activities, we considered that computer-mediated communication and the Internet can offer our students a myriad of authentic learning and communication opportunities. The Internet is a dynamic environment, constantly growing, changing, improving, and updating, which has brought about a new virtual learning setting. Web-based language learning resources include online dictionaries, newspapers, terminological databases, encyclopedias, pronunciation guides, etc. There are also forums and specialized web pages for business English trainers to look for information or to interact with a wide array of experts.

Therefore, we strove to integrate the virtual environment into the teaching/learning process, and exploit the wide range of multimedia tools, online resources, synchronous and asynchronous interactions (email, blogging, social networks, forums, chats) as fully as possible. In order to practise and improve all four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening), we considered the different properties that each CMC mode incorporates: synchronicity, one-way or two-way transmission, persistence of the text, anonymity, visual or audio content. Our aim was to reduce the use of traditional, bookish learning materials and techniques, and give our English classes more interaction and native-like communication opportunities. Therefore, we tried to expose learners to authentic and native English speakers and writers as much as possible.

We used audiovisual content with the purpose of developing students' listening and speaking capabilities, and providing them with plenty of native language exposure. Audiovisual materials can offer great opportunities to focus on the specific language used to discuss a certain issue. At the same time, authentic materials help learners acquire and produce the language they will need in their workplace. We used audio and video online resources for the economic field offered by Longman, Oxford, Cambridge, The Economist, as well as other multimedia resources available on the Internet. The web offers increasingly high-quality video and sound as well as software which allow the learner to record his/her utterances and compare them to a model. The websites of main broadcasters like CNN or BBC provide students with a wide variety of opportunities, ranging from audio and video to written text. Their advantage is that they bring students closer to the current world of economy and business. Besides improving listening and speaking skills, this activity boosted our learners' knowledge of specialized vocabulary and kept them informed about current issues in the economic world.

Reading and writing skills were developed through the use synchronous and asynchronous CMC. The interactive written discourse is a naturally occurring register, displaying characteristics of both oral and written language. In synchronous CMC, such as chat or Instant Messaging, students exchanged messages straight away and in real-time, and all participants were simultaneously online and reacted immediately and only with a slight delay to messages from other participants. In addition, synchronous

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interaction imposes temporal constraints on users which bring about a reduction of linguistic complexity. Synchronous interaction offers immediacy but usually lacks persistence unless the user takes care to keep a history of his/her conversations.

Asynchronous communication, such as emails, mailing lists or discussion groups, occurs with time constraints and users do not have to be online at the same time to communicate. One advantage of this mode of communication is that allows users to take their time in composing and editing messages, and that suits hesitant or less skilled students best.

Activities meant to improve students' language proficiency and used throughout the whole teaching/learning process included: reading articles on economic topics (skimming, scanning, summarizing, answering comprehension questions), business writing (correspondence, contracts, reports, CVs, agendas and minutes), writing for the internet (posting on blogs, chatting, sending and replying to emails), discussions and presentations, role-play, simulations, storytelling, web quests, and case studies.

It is common knowledge that the email has become one of the most popular forms of asynchronous communication. The email is low in synchronicity since response time varies, but high in persistence since messages are always saved and stored in the long term. This form of communication offers the learner a controlled, distant and delayed reaction, while synchronous communication involves immediacy and on the spot reaction. Each form of text-based communication, either synchronous or asynchronous, proved beneficial to students in the teaching/learning process. They got exposed to authentic language use, current topics and preoccupations, in a more active and engaging way than in the traditional learning style.

The use of emails as text-based communication developed learners' writing skill, as well as knowledge of email style and language. As research has already confirmed (Weber 2004; Burgess et al. 2005), email style and language are substantially different from other modes of communication in terms of salutations, grammar, words use, and formality. Previous research suggests that email language tends to become formal and ‘error-free’ even in informal communication, as email use becomes more popular and replaces other forms of writing. Organizational emails are definitely formal in style, with typical salutation formulas, and observance of grammar and spelling rules. In contrast, personal emails tend to lack openings and closings, politeness markers, while making great use of abbreviations and informal language. Thus, linguistic variation is conditioned by discourse topic, level of formality and communication purpose.

Other common aspects entangled in the peculiar features of the electronic environment involve privacy and security. The anonymous message in cyberspace stands for another special feature of CMC. The use of nicknames is a first step towards anonymity and privacy. This feature helps shy or less self-confident learners to communicate more freely and engage more eagerly in communication activities. Anonymity and privacy allow reluctant learners to avoid embarrassment or failure in front of their colleagues, and build up self-confidence. Throughout the teaching/learning process, we noticed that learners that used to be rather quiet at the beginning of the course became more active and assertive by the end of the academic year.

As interpersonal interaction in CMC has considerably soared with the emergence and spread of the latest genre of computer-mediated communication, that is the blog, we also took advantage of this valuable online tool. Weblogs, generally known as blogs, have become extremely popular in recent years, especially among youth. Blogs are generally described as regularly updated web pages, containing recent and

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archived text-based posts, and stand for an alternative communication channel, especially a two-way communication tool. Blogs are used as professional ends, to increase authors' public visibility and reach a larger audience. Authors tend to express their point of view on various public and social issues, and posts reflect their approval or discontent with certain topics. Students showed eagerness to involve in blog activities, to post and comment on various topics.

Although it has been often argued that CMC promotes isolation and remoteness, computer-mediated communication incorporated into the teaching/learning process has proved to enhance and sustain learners' communication skills, by increasing information exchange, developing relationships and intercultural communication, and promoting knowledge spread. Students do not just socialize online, but they develop their business English language skills, while incorporating CMC tools in their practices, as an instrument of information search in both their professional and private life.

Conclusions

Over the last few decades, a lot of attention and consideration have been given to the teaching of English for specific purposes and many efforts have been made so that the teaching process may reach its main goal. Consequently, teachers have focused their efforts on meeting the learner's needs.

Since our students need most of all communicative proficiency in their field of expertise in order to gain access to the labour market, great emphasis on the communicative feature was placed. Activities were designed such as to encourage and engage students in active roles, aiming to improve speaking skills naturally and effortlessly, by asking learners to talk freely about real-life situations. The teaching process was student-centred while the teacher's task was to stimulate, help and involve students to interact as much as possible.

Learners' progress tests and the final assessment proved that the two groups of students improved their English knowledge to a greater extent than their colleagues who lacked CMC in their training. Thus, we have come to the conclusion that a better way of teaching English for specific purposes consists of a blend of different approaches and methods, as the single use of an approach can become deficient to a certain extent. If some teaching techniques improve grammar or vocabulary knowledge, then the communicative skill is detrimental, or the other way around. Throughout the teaching/learning process, we aimed to develop all for skills (reading, speaking, listening, writing), while placing a greater emphasis on the communicative feature.

By incorporating computer-mediated communication into communicative language teaching, we intended to get greater exposure to authentic, native language. Our undertaking has proved that CMC constitutes a useful tool in the successful implementation of communicative language teaching method. Computer-mediated communication has allowed our students to benefit from authentic learning materials, by using online newspapers, magazines, etc., as well as audio and video materials. CMC has also provided plenty of opportunities to use business English with native speakers, generating real-life communication situations and giving students the chance to practise and develop their communicative skill. As a result, CMC integrated into communicative language teaching has brought about significant improvement in our students' proficiency in business English.

Our practice shows that teaching/learning strategies corroborated with unconventional and interactive teaching strategies have paved the way to an effective improvement of students' expertise in business English. Consequently, we have reached

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the conclusion that communicative competence and success in the teaching/learning process work hand in hand, and that the use of CMC has enhanced our students' communicative skills, thus offering them better chances to successfully compete for jobs into the labour market.

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