

## **Title:** Constraints in Teaching Electronic Discourse to EFL Learners

Dr Khadija B.Belfarhi

Department of English University of Annaba-LIPED

### **Introduction**

The emergence of the internet in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was much more the concern of the scientific community. Later, more than thousand million of people use the internet for diverse tasks such as shopping, studying and communicating. Within the on-line world, communication takes new shapes with features often different from the Jacobean communication.

Computer mediated communication (CMC) is a facilitating means for the rapidly acquisition of the target language as it enables EFL learners to be in real communication with users of English (natives and non-natives). Non-native English speakers become the majority of English users. In a large part this is due to online-communication wherein speakers have access to the use of English out of the constraints of academic settings. CMC provides the learner with more tolerance in spelling and grammar mistakes and linguistic relaxation and economy of writing (Chen & Cruickshank, 2009). However, digital communication is set under linguistic, social, psychological and cultural constraints which may not always allow for a successful interaction. The linguistic constraints include the lack of accuracy as it is not possible to fix the grammar of CMC (Posteguillo, 2002) since electronic discourse is a mixture of spoken and written language and as such it de-emphasizes accuracy (McWhorter, 2003). As for the psychological constrains, it concerns the learner's intimacy and individuality for it is not all the time possible to the teacher to have learners expressing themselves overly, as they do in chatting and messaging. The social factor relates to the user's distinctive social identity. Successful CMC requires users to be in the same line by sharing common points. In that, English Users (or the webies) try to identify to the on-line group which include natives and non natives of English but who all aim at using normative English and be therefore accepted in the group. This is not the case of a lot of Algerian EFL learners who persist to this integration and make the topics of discussion limited to general interests rather than to local ones. These constrains imply that teachers of EFL must be aware that electronic discourse is a new type of discourse with different conventions often acting away from the ordinary discourse, and should be realized in the sociocultural context of the learner as being a non native of English.

The present paper aims at discussing the main issues in the teaching of electronic discourse as most of teachers are not aware of the distinctive features of this new English (Crystal, 2006). It tackles the difference between native and non native electronic discourse in reference to linguistic, social, psychological and cultural dimensions.

## 1. Electronic Discourse vs. Computer-mediated Communication

Electronic discourse is language used in a different context. Electronic discourse is a language-in-use characterized by multiple facets among which is the fact of being both spoken and written. Foertsch (1995) defines it as follows:

E-discourse is neither here nor there, neither pure writing nor pure speech but somewhere in between ... Studying it as one and not the other will force us to exclude certain factors that influence its construction (304).

The concept "Electronic discourse" is often mistakenly used to mean the same as "Computer-mediated Communication". The two concepts, however, mean two different things. According to Davis & Brewer (1997), electronic discourse is both written and spoken:

Electronic discourse is supported by a delivery system that replaces face-to-face communication with writing that stands in place of voices. As a very often reads as if it were being spoken-that is, as if the sender were talking (p.2)

Being defined at both the written and spoken levels, electronic discourse lacks interactivity of real conversation because it is delayed since there is time between the sending and the reply. As such, electronic discourse cannot be analyzed as conversation and, thus, it is set under some conditions different and need to be taken into account in the EFL classroom.

The other aspect that makes electronic discourse different and special is the fact that it lacks turn-taking. The sender and the receiver are not at the same time of exchange as it may happen that the sender sends a text that it is read some time after, and can be received in a different circumstance leading to a different perception.

Both electronic discourse and computer-mediated communication lack the collaborative commitment of participants and the co-formulation of the message and the feedback which allows the social meaning of the message to be processed immediately (Mantovani, 1996). As such, the teaching of digital communication is not such an easy task as think a lot of educationalists who pretend that using technology is alone fostering learners' involvement and success.

## 2. Linguistic Constrains

The linguistic constraint relate to multimodality which is an emerging concept accompanying the internet discourse. It refers to the multiplicity of modality and acts as polysemous in the sense that "*it might make reference either to the grammatical system of existential stances or simply to the presence or use of modes of communication*" (LeVine & Scollon, 2004, p.1-2). From the grammatical point of view, multimodality refers to an existential state of a representation. However, semiotically speaking, it is a mode of communication. Being a new form of discourse,

CMC is a multimodal communication necessitating investigation as it presents to the user an easy medium of communication yet subject to grammatical deviances that academic learners may make less advantage from. CMC is a mode of communication featured by the physical distance between the interlocutors and the absence of pragmatic aspects of real communication which are substituted by the mediation of the computer.

The multimodal internet is a source of an instable and unfixed use of English. Despite the existence of guidebooks published to direct the correct English usage, the high expanding interaction of the CMC made the books unauthentic ones. That is why analytical research in fixing the internet language is necessary:

Even though research on the use of English in Internet is increasing exceptionally, there is still the major lack of an appropriate analytical framework that may guide both linguists and internet professionals in a better use of English across the net (Posteguillo, 2002, p. 36).

Two types of CMC are distinguished on the basis of users' needs and interests. CMC between native and non-native users. The former may not deteriorate the users' written language as they already know about the correct grammar and spelling, and use the simplification as a means to save time. The second, however, do devitalize the language from its grammatical properties as the users do not master the grammatical rules and establish therefore simplifications based on non-grammatical usage. It is, thus, the second type that spreads fast in our context since university students, be they studying English or others subjects, may lack the basic grammatical knowledge of English and have instead the facility to communicate with counterparts, i.e. non-native users. The CMC facilitates the learning of English as the message is more or less at easy reach while the written form of the language, including most importantly grammar, is the deteriorated side. It is to say that grammaticality of sentences is less worried about by non-native users because in both synchronic CMC (instant messages) and asynchronic CMC (emails), grammatical mistakes dominate.

### **3. Psychological Constraints**

The psychological constraints have to do with the extent to which the learner is able to interact with electronic discourse or not. In other words, do all learners perform in the same way with electronic discourse? The answer to this question is that electronic conference discourse is set under the constraint of capability and accessibility. A subsequent question is that can learners succeed in a digital communication without a pre-existing aptitude?

Since individuality dominates as users are more decentralized, users can express themselves freely especially that they keep unknown to their communicators. However, when it comes to the teaching-learning context, the matter becomes rather different because intimacy becomes over. At this respect, two types of learners are identified. Those who can express themselves freely and without constraint and others who are introvert and cannot act freely in front of the teacher and the classmates. For

these reasons, EFL learners need to have a pre-existing knowledge and positive attitude towards the use of digital communication.

#### **4. Social Constraints**

The social dimension of electronic discourse in the EFL context concerns mainly the learner's involvement in the electronic conference discourse. When being involved in the latter, EFL learners construct an identity despite the fact that communication lacks immediacy. A necessarily raised question here is do EFL learners communicate using their own identity or they create a virtual one?

Sokół (2011) identifies the concept of virtual identity by raising two interrelated notions. That of imagined virtual community and the virtual community as a social network. With the lack of immediacy and interactivity, a community is imagined one and enabled by Media. Electronic discourse occurs thus in an imagined virtual community. The social network approach is tried to be applied on the electronic conference discourse. In studying this, Paolillo (2005) found that there are linguistic variables, conditioning electronic discourse and act as markers of social position which cannot be obtained through other means.

EFL learners, like others using digital communication, construct virtual identities to interact successfully in the exchange. Moreover, it is not only one constructed identity but a lot, depending on the contextual constraints of the exchange. At this level, Cortese & Duszak (2005) said :

Identity is a site of struggle where values, positions, frictions of a social affiliation and moral nature constantly contend with and explode pre-existing boundaries: boundaries guarded by institutionalized discourses and canvassing genres –conventionalized forms of social actions in language (p.24).

Identity negotiation is a complex process in digital communication as it has to do with social, cultural and psychological factors often confronted to boundaries.

#### **5. Cultural Constraints**

Culture is defined as a dynamic process of revising practices and, as such, it calls for revising those ritual practices that dominated education in stereotypes. Culture is more implied in education than any time before because culture comes to language learners due to the intensive use of digital communication. The latter resulted in two levels of interaction: the first one concerns the positive impacts of intercultural communication; and the second relates to the constraints that the present paper aims to disclose.

Intercultural communication is the actual interaction of people from various cultures. Language and culture form a combination which the EFL learner needs to have to be in the global workforce. Intercultural interaction, therefore, results in what Williamson describes as:

- (1) Civic engagement,
- (2) Building bridges, and
- (3) Knowledge-sharing

Intercultural competence allows the learner to be a successful citizen because his interaction with people different from him/her will enable him/her to cope with other behaviors. The second factor relates to the ability to build relations and succeed in social interactions. The two result in the capability of sharing knowledge at different levels.

The above seem very advantageous to the EFL context but it must not be forgotten that when Electronic discourse comes to play, language, itself, becomes context-based. Language becomes conditioned by its occurrence because electronic discourse is not yet set to conventional usage. It results that several constraint come from intercultural communication within the use of technology.

Pres-existing sociocultural knowledge conditions the success of e-learning and the maintenance of electronic discourse as EFL learners are in need to be knowledgeable not only with the culture of English speaking world but also the interactional norms of communication. There must be a degree of collaboration and shared knowledge among the participants (Torres-Coronas, 2012). The noticed in the EFL context in the Algerian universities is the lack of sociocultural knowledge of English since the language has the status of a foreign language slightly present in the society.

Another intercultural constraint relates to the multiplicity of on-line participants. Not only are they virtual but also several, which may create lack of confidence especially that in non-western tradition, interaction is culturally related to the “known”. In this respect, Walter, Buz & Bazarova (2005) studied cultural differences and rule-making in groups, and found that virtual teams lead to greater level of trust and liking.

Another constrain relates to the controversy between low-context cultures and high-context cultures (Lewin, 1984). The former employ function-based classification of social relationships while the second tend to have a steep categorization based on intimacy levels. The exchange will be thus restricted if the participants are from the high-context cultures.

A last constraint is about the conflicts between cultures due to differences between global culture and local culture. Western countries belong to the global culture having people interacting out of the sociocultural constraints of local values, which is the opposite of the non-western tradition which is still bound to tradition. EFL learners, in the Algerian context, may confront the constraints of cultures’ shock and communicate less with the diverse on-line participants. Teachers should be aware of these situations to avoid fluctuations.

## **Conclusion**

Digital communication is a complex process which is essentially realized with a type of interaction peculiar to the context of occurrence, and typifies a linguistic usage bound to sociocultural constraints. Teacher of EFL should adopt mediation in the application of e-learning as e-discourse varies constantly throughout the different usages of English.

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