
Kern’s (1995) paper studies the effect of language students’ synchronous interaction via a local computer network. The research confirms previous findings in the advantage of using similar applications, and indicates that students and teachers hold a generally positive view towards this technology integration into the classroom.

The network application in question is *Interchange*. Before presenting the current study, Kern first gives an overview of the research history in using *Interchange* in foreign language educations. He summarizes several beneficial effect of *Interchange* including “more frequent” input from the students, better “precision and sophistication of expression”, encouragement of collaboration, “enhanced motivation”, an “reduction of anxiety” (Kern, 461). Kern’s (1995) own study is concerned with the qualitative and quantitatively difference between discussion via *Interchange* and oral class discussion, and the students and teachers’ attitude towards using networked computers in the classroom.

Two sections of French class at University of California at Berkeley participated in the study. Every two weeks these two sections used *Interchange* in regular class time for discussion on a chosen topic. An oral discussion on the same topic would follow in the next class period. The researcher analyzed the data (i.e. transcripts of the students’ input in *Interchange* and in oral discussion) collected in a week in the middle of the semester.

The study found the *Interchange* session showed more balanced student participation,
more turns among participants, more sentences and words from the students. In the InterChange Sessions, students produced 85% and 88% of the total number of sentences, while in oral discussion they produced only 37% and 60%. (The rest was input from the instructors.)

The students’ language in InterChange also shows more discourse functions, including more greetings, assertions, and questions. (In oral sessions, questions were often asked by teachers only.) When morphosyntactic features were analyzed, the Interchange languages were found to be less complex than the students’ language in oral discussion.¹ Kern(1995) explains that simple messages tended to elicit more responses and were therefore preferred in InterChange. A qualitative examination together with the above mentioned data also confirmed that the teachers had far less control in Interchange than in oral discussion.

The questionnaire data showed that the students’ attitude towards InterChange was overwhelmingly positive. They reported the benefit of the urgency to write, and the encouragement of rhetorical thinking in the network-based discussion. Teachers’ responses were also positive, though with some complaints that some students chatted away from the topic.

The study confirms the benefit of InterChange in increasing the frequency and variety of the students’ input, and in creating a student-centered environment as well as

¹ This finding runs contrary to the claim of Warschauer (1996), who finds in his study that ESL students’ languages had more complex syntax and lexicon in Interchange than in oral production. However, one might notice Warschauer’s (1996) study did not include ‘number of simple sentences’ as a criteria for evaluating ‘complexity’. Instead, he examined type-token ratio and subordinate-coordinate ratio.
motivating the learners. Kern (1995) also points out possible concerns of using synchronous CMC, including the loss of teacher control, less grammatical accuracy, and less cohesion/coherence strategies in students’ production. Kern (1995)’s categorization and coding methods for “discourse functions” is valuable for future research. The paper also asks future researchers to consider the difference between spoken, written language and language in the electronic mode, and warns us that the choice between traditional and technology-enhanced practices should be made according to teaching purposes.

Reference


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