
Warschauer’s paper examines the difference between face-to-face and synchronous electronic discussion in an ESL classroom. The findings suggest that computer-mediated communication is likely to result in “more equal participation among students”. The students’ language in this innovative mode also proved to be more “formal and complex” syntactically and lexically.

The study was carried out on 16 advanced ESL students at a community college in Hawaii. The population includes five Filipinos, five Japanese, four Chinese and two Vietnamese students. In a 75-minute class, the students were randomly assigned to four groups. The discussion questions were assigned. A counterbalanced experiment method was used: Two groups conducted face-to-face discussion of the questions first, followed by electronic discussion, using real time communication environment Interchange, while the other two groups conducted oral discussion after using CMC. Students were given 30 minutes for each session.

Warschauer is interested in two major questions: who would benefit from the change of mode in terms of more participation, and whether the computer mode communication generates more complex student languages. To answer the first question, students were assigned an Increased Participation in Computer Mode (IPC) score depending on the difference of their participation percentage in the face-to-face and the computer mode. The score were then correlated with the students’ age, time in the U.S., and language test scores. To determine the linguistic complexity of the students’ language, Warschauer used a type-token ratio and a ratio between clause coordination against clause subordination.
The study resulted in several interesting findings. First of all, among various variables, students’ listening score correlated best with their increased participation in the computer mode. According to Warschauer, such a finding seems to contradict the popular assumption that students with less oral competence may participate more in the e-mode. Warschauer then explains that other factors such as “shyness” may have played a role. According to the students’ attitude response, however, the students’ sense of comfort/confidence in speaking English does negatively correlate with IPC score, indicating that students with less spoken competence did tend to participate more in the computer mode. In terms of linguistic complexity, both quantitative and qualitative analysis prove students’ language in the computer mode was more complex, esp. in terms of more subordination.

On the whole, the study supports the researcher’s intuition that the e-mode discussion resulted in more equal participation among students. Warschauer also notes that the three groups with Japanese students showed more salient contrast in having more equal participation in the e-mode than in the face-to-face mode. Warschauer attempts to explain this away by the Japanese “quiet” classroom culture. (However, since he did not establish a correlation between nationality and the IPC score, this argument seems rather week.)

One can see from Warschauer’s study how a well-planed small-scale project can yield interesting result. The linguistic analysis approach is especially interesting. As the researcher points out, a possible follow-up study could examine how the students’ language in the electronic mode might differ from both spoken and written language. Warschauer concludes that students who were less fluent/comfortable in using their L2 orally participated more in the electronic mode.
However, this leads us to another interesting question: How exactly would the use of CMC affect those ‘silent’ students in their regular classroom participation? Are they likely to attempt more oral interaction after expressing themselves on the computer? Or would the regular use of CMC further discourage their motivation to speak?

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