

Coniam, D. & Wong, R. (2004). Internet Relay Chat as a tool in the autonomous development of ESL learners' English language ability: an exploratory study. *System*. 32, 321-335.

This study investigates the effect of Internet Relay Chat, in this case ICQ, on EFL students' English language enhancement. The grammar area that was examined was the use of one finite verb in a main clause.

Caniam & Wong points out that previous studies of similar topics were often done in a classroom environment. Therefore their project aimed at "lowering the [students'] affective filter" (324) by letting the students use language in the ways meaningful and interesting to them. The project also differed from previous researches in focusing on one grammatical feature, and in emphasizing interaction instead of "input".

The research was carried out in a Hong Kong secondary school and 26 students in three different grades participated. Participants were asked to use ICQ to chat for at least 5 hours per week for a month long period. Chat partners and topics were not controlled and conversations were not saved in order to ensure an "unmonitored" context for the project. The data used in this study were pre-study questionnaires confirming the participants' computer familiarity, post-study questionnaires on students' motivation, and pre- and post-study written assignments to compare students' improvement on using "finiteness" clauses.

The researchers compared the number of t-units in the control and the experimental

groups' pre and post-study assignments.¹ While the production of the experimental group did not change quantitatively, the control group produced substantially more t-units on the post-test. The researchers explained the discrepancy by different assignment requirement. When the numbers of errors were compared, the control and the experimental group did not show drastic improvement in the post-test. In fact, the experimental group showed an increasing number of errors after the study.

However, after an examination of the experimental groups' errors in post-test, the researchers claim that there was a qualitative improvement in the students' writing. They claimed the experimental group was more "ready to convey more complex ideas by conjoining clauses or by embedding". However, the researchers did not cite quantitative group data to validate the comparison between the experimental and the control group. On the other hand, their analysis of three individual students' errors proved very interesting. It appeared that those students' (in the experimental group) attempted to use more auxiliaries in t-units, and it was in those more complex forms that the errors occur more frequently. In clauses where there was only one verb (e.g. "But there **have** some problems of teenagers", with block indicating error), the number of errors did decrease.

Caniam & Wong therefore conclude that the experimental group did show a qualitative improvement after the study. Results from post-study questionnaires also confirm the students found the activity interesting and motivating.

¹ The number of t-units are said to correlate with the complexity of the language. It is believed to be a more accurate measurement than a simple word count.

Caniam and Wong's study points to several interesting facts that had long been neglected. For one thing, learners' autonomous learning through computer and Internet could be a completely different process than using CMC in the classroom. Its impact, however, is not thoroughly investigated so far. Secondly, learners' development in an unmonitored, almost "affective filter" free environment could yield different results than development under pedagogical planning. It is yet uncertain which way would assist the learners better. Thirdly, learners' competence in a sole grammatical feature might imply their "global" enhancement in language, but such generalizations must be made carefully. It is from these aspects that the current study is of great value for future research. In terms of experiment methodology, however, there are several shortages in this study. For instance, the short period of experiment, the limited amount of data, the somewhat controversial result leave the readers some regret. In a word, though Caniam and Wong's study may not be of a perfect design, it directs researchers to a vast new area of study: learners' autonomous development through the computer and the network.

Reviewed by Yi Xu, 2005.