Exploring EFL Students’ CMC Discourse Practice in a College-level Classroom

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This study reports the findings of a semester-long investigation into the practices of EFL college-level students involved in the construction of CMC texts. The purpose of the study was to examine the characteristics of computer-mediated communication (CMC) discourse that was embedded in an EFL classroom and gain an insight into how students experience CMC in the classroom. Data were collected from multiple sources including classroom observations, CMC discourse texts, interviews, and students’ reflective essays. As part of the regular course activities, students participated in CMC discussions on a weekly basis, which became a focal point for our investigation. The analysis of CMC discourse revealed socio-affective, linguistic, and cultural dimensions of language use. Major themes regarding the students’ perception of CMC include reflective learning, increased participation, collaborative learning, cultural awareness, and the concept of learning communities. In light of the findings of the study, pedagogical implications are presented in an effort to offer guidelines to EFL teachers who wish to implement CMC in their classrooms.

I. INTRODUCTION

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) marked a major paradigm shift within second or foreign language teaching in the latter part of the twentieth century. At the outset, it aimed to broadly apply the theoretical perspective of the communicative approach to teaching by making communicative competence the goal of language teaching. Within such a CLT framework, a great deal of attention was given to the pragmatic features of language beyond grammatical and formal discourse elements in communication (Mitchell

* The first author is Hye-Seong Cho and the second authors are Byung-Kyoo Ahn and Yoon-Hee Na
& Myles, 2004). More recently, however, some researchers have reevaluated communicative competence as a major goal in educational contexts and broadened its definition. Schulz (2006), for example, includes some goals such as enhancing critical thinking skills, acquiring knowledge of the world at large, developing cross-cultural awareness, and shaping attitudes essential for living in and contributing to a democratic society. These constructs can be viewed as an expansion of the existing classroom communicative goals which primarily focused on grammatical, discourse, functional, sociolinguistic, and strategic components of the target language.

How can such expanded goals for language learning be pursued, let alone successfully accomplished? There would naturally be various limitations in doing so, particularly considering the socio-cultural context of average Korean foreign language learners. In Korea, learners of English have, by circumstance, few opportunities to practice English in their daily lives because English is taught as a foreign language and recognized only as a requisite. As a result, the vast majority of language learners have neither sufficient time nor meaningful contexts in which they can interact with native speakers of the target language (Jong-im Han, 2005).

As Brown (2001) argues, however, engaging language learners in meaningful communication activities using English is one of the best routes to fluency in the target language. Many teachers in Korea also believe that promoting communicative competence is at the heart of language learning. However, most of the teachers are uncertain how to go about it in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. One solution to overcoming this problem is to apply computer-mediated communication (CMC) to the EFL learning environment. CMC can be defined as “communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers” (Herring, 2006, p.1). This open-ended definition covers a wide range of functions that CMC has for language learning and teaching. While communication in the typical classroom is constrained by factors such as location, time, audience, and interactivity, CMC allows the creation of learning environments in which “communication can occur in the same geographical and physical places at different times, in different geographical and physical places at the same time, or in different geographical and physical places at different times” (Kamhi-Stein, 2000, p. 425).

CMC tools have the potential to extend the learning experience of foreign languages, precisely because they can provide language learners with opportunities to use the target language beyond the limits of class time and the realms of the classroom (Kern & Warschauer, 2000; Warschauer, 1996). Lending weight to the positive impact of CMC application in terms of overcoming learning constraints in the EFL context, recent CMC literature in the field of second language learning and teaching lists the benefits of CMC as follows: (1) CMC increases student participation (Chun, 1994); (2) it reduces anxiety
and enhances student motivation (Beauvois, 1995); (3) it provides opportunities for negotiation of meaning (Blake, 2000); (4) it facilitates collaborative learning (Kroonenberg, 1995); and (5) it enhances cross-cultural awareness (Kern, 1995).

These advantages of CMC seem to correspond with the recently broadened definition of communicative competence. In fact, CMC has drawn a considerable amount of interest in the field of second or foreign language learning. However, most of the studies have concentrated on quantitative aspects of CMC. These quantitative studies are insufficient in describing which features of discourse in CMC facilitate language learning and how they are perceived by learners. In this respect, qualitative research has a tremendous potential to explore discourse practices behind texts and investigate the underlying meaning of discourse in complex social contexts (Yoon-Hee Na, 2005). To understand the impact of new forms of interaction on students’ learning processes in the classroom and analyze discourse features of CMC associated with a particular social context, more qualitative research is warranted.

The purpose of this study is to explore EFL students’ discourse practices embedded in a particular college-level English course and examine how the students experience CMC in the course. This article begins by reviewing CMC-related literature within the contexts of language learning, culture learning, and collaborative learning. In what follows, we will discuss what research questions were addressed, who participated in the course, and how data were collected and analyzed. We will then examine the research findings, focusing on CMC discourse analysis and the students’ experiences with CMC. Finally, we will conclude this paper by presenting some implications for teaching as well as discussing the limitations of the study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. CMC and Collaborative Learning

Several researchers have proposed that CMC can realize the ideals of collaborative learning: active construction of knowledge in an environment where opportunities for authentic language use are provided, and careful deliberation over course content is encouraged, which in turn promotes greater student reflection on their learning (Kroonenberg, 1995; Sotillo, 2000). Sotillo (2000), for example, reports that asking students to respond to challenging academic readings in asynchronous discussion encourages students to think critically and post carefully prepared responses to teacher and student queries. Nunan (1999) also notes that students in CMC classes made constant connections between the things they were learning on the course and their real-life
situations and that they developed a sense of belonging to a community of learners while interacting in CMC. Through this collaborative scaffolding, learners refine their linguistic and cognitive skills and engage in problem-solving situations.

Collaborative learning tasks also build teamwork, alter the role of teachers and students, and promote critical thinking (Bonk & King, 1998). When done through writing instead of speaking, as is the case in CMC, the writing process changes from an independently performed task to one that promotes the reflection of other students (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998). Interlocutors provide prompts, explanations, questions, and suggestions to assist each other in solving problems at hand. Therefore, collaboration among learners can help each other generate a deeper level of knowledge.

2. CMC and Language Learning

In another vein, many researchers have examined the effects of CMC use on language learning. Skinner and Austin (1999), for example, based on survey responses from 22 EFL learners, reports on the following positive effects of CMC on students’ language learning processes: (1) CMC provides students opportunities for real communication; (2) it improves personal confidence; and (3) it encourages them to overcome their apprehension to write. Other researchers have focused on participation and language use in CMC. For example, Payne and Whitney (2002) identified three primary themes that have emerged from their research findings: 1) students tend to produce more complex language in chat rooms than in face-to-face settings; 2) participation increases online, with reticent students participating as much as or even more than those who normally dominate classroom discussion; and 3) learners demonstrate more positive attitudes toward the target language. Additionally, because CMC has reduced immediacy compared to that in face-to-face communication, this modality allows more time for processing input and thus improving their interlanguage.

3. CMC and Culture Learning

In addition to promoting collaborative learning and language learning, CMC has a tremendous potential to aid culture learning. In accordance with the general pedagogical trend in teaching culture, CMC has been brought into the foreign language classroom to provide virtual cross-cultural contact. In a content-based course designed to promote French writing skills by discussing culturally-relevant topics, Sanaoui and Lapkin (1992) connected high-school students of French in Toronto with native French speakers in Montreal. They reported that the Anglophone students not only improved their French but also broadened their cultural awareness. In another content-based course on contemporary
issues in Italian culture, Cononelos and Oliva (1993) reported that by discussing cultural issues with native Italian speakers using Usenet and e-mail, Italian language learners improved composition skills as well as deepening their understanding of the target culture. The use of CMC has certainly brought together students of different languages and cultures to interact with one another in ways that were not possible before. It seems clear that although there is no substitute for actual experiences of immersing into the target culture, cross-cultural CMC projects help sensitize L2 learners to cultural differences.

Drawing on such perspectives of CMC as facilitating collaborative learning, language learning, and culture learning, the present study attempts to illuminate which discourse features of CMC help promote the extended goals of communicative competence which we discussed in the previous section and how students perceive and experience CMC activities in the classroom.

III. METHODOLOGY

Early CMC research tended to focus on those aspects of online communication that were easily measured and quantifiable such as the number of postings, the length of entries, and patterns of turn taking. But these quantitative indicators provide an incomplete picture, since they do not account for content of messages or their underlying meanings (Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004). To overcome this flaw, there has been a shift in recent years to focus on the qualitative aspects of CMC discourse. Such studies have included descriptive accounts of the discussions (Kamhi-Stein, 2000) or relied on content analysis frameworks based on current trends in education such as critical thinking, collaborative learning, and co-construction of knowledge (Meyer, 2004; Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003). In line with these qualitative studies on CMC discourse, the present study chose a particular college-level EFL classroom, in which CMC-based activities were employed. The CMC discourse practice that the learners engaged in throughout a semester was investigated. This study attempted to address the following research questions: 1) What are the characteristics of CMC discourse that are embedded in this particular EFL course?; and 2) How do students perceive CMC activities?

1. The Participants and the Research Site

This study was conducted in the fall of 2005, in a content-based course, Language and Culture. It was an undergraduate 3-hour credit course offered in the department of English Education. A total of eighteen students enrolled in the course and they all participated in online discussions as well as in other classroom activities. They came from the English
Education Department, English Language and Literature Department, and other general education departments. This was an elective course for English Education majors, the majority of whom wanted to eventually become English teachers. The age of the participants was heterogeneous, ranging from early 20s to late 30s. Unlike other classes, the number of married students reached 4, all of whom being transfer students.

This course aimed to raise students’ awareness of the target language and culture, and then offered exercises and experiences to help them enrich their cultural understanding as well as improve their speaking and writing skills. All class sessions were conducted in English. During the semester, on a weekly basis, students participated in CMC discussions as part of class activities held outside the classroom. The CMC activity was introduced as a partial replacement of face-to-face sessions, with the teacher’s conviction that the alternative format of discussion would serve as a venue in which the students’ voices could be better heard.

The content of the course revolved around (1) the “what” of facts and figures, anecdotes and descriptions; (2) the “why” of cultural phenomena, using knowledge of the particular historical development of the target culture; and (3) the “how” of appropriate behavior in particular situations and rules of conduct. In terms of the weekly cycle of learning activities, students were first asked to watch three episodes of a family sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond* and study a list of key vocabulary and cultural references. Students were then required to post their thoughts and reflections about the materials and interact online with other students and the teacher. After the online interaction, the students came to the class, performed role-plays based on the sitcom, and engaged in face-to-face discussions about some important issues addressed in the online discussion. As the main material for the class, the sitcom played a primary role in connecting online discussions with in-class activities. In other words, the online postings were often brought to class sessions and formed the basis for further discussion beyond what had already occurred in cyber space. A native speaker of English joined the online discussions as a cultural informant. Most of the class time was spent discussing the materials and performing role-plays, simulations and presentations based on the materials. The online bulletin board consists of several columns including the following three main columns:

*Housekeeping Matters:* This column is for posting any housekeeping matters to share with other classmates such as their busy school life, recent break-ups with boyfriends, social events coming up the following week, favorite TV programs, good and bad things that happened to them last week, etc. It served as a kind of free-speech column which encouraged students to access and participate in CMC communication.

*Linguistically Wondering and Pondering:* When students have any particular language problems in understanding the episodes at the level of vocabulary, idioms, syntax,
semantics, and pragmatics, they can post their questions, and answer the questions of other students. That is, they help each other solve linguistic puzzles in this column.

**Dear Cultural Informant:** When a student has a problem or dilemma that they need advice with, the cultural informant helps them and offer an insider’s view on the North American cultural phenomena. In this column, by writing a letter to a native speaker of English, students would explain a particularly difficult matter encountered in the process of exploring North American culture. They can bring up any cultural matters that have puzzled them, surprised them, or fascinated them and/or any that they want to share with others.

### 2. Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedures

Data was collected from the following sources: 1) classroom observations which were conducted throughout the semester supplemented by audio-taped recordings of every class session, 2) CMC discourse texts, 3) interviews with the students conducted at the end of the semester, and 4) students’ reflective essays.

First, by observing the class, we were able to examine how the classroom context influenced students’ engagement in CMC activities. Several written materials embedded in the course, such as handouts and readings, enabled us to perceive how classroom activities were performed, and what the professor of the course expected of the activities. After each CMC activity, the transcript of the CMC discussion was collected. In examining the CMC transcript, we identified places where the student might be responding to the interests, needs, questions, or concerns expressed by the teacher and classmates. We also identified phrases that appeared potentially useful in gaining insights into what the students had learned through the CMC activities. Following our initial analysis of the weekly transcript, semi-structured interviews with the students were conducted at the end of the semester. Through the interviews with the students, we obtained information regarding the personal thoughts and opinions of each student. The main purpose of the interview was to ascertain the students’ reactions to the CMC activities in terms of the most valuable, interesting, and difficult aspects of their learning processes. Several open-ended questions related to students’ feelings about their CMC experience were used for the interview. Finally, as part of the assignments for the course, the students submitted self-reflective essays on written discussion. In these self-reflective essays, the students were asked to describe the kind of learning they experienced during the written discussion. The self-reflective essays proved to be extremely helpful in providing information not mentioned in the interview as well as in allowing us to take a glimpse into the students’ crystallized after-thoughts about their experiences of the CMC discussion.
In all, data from each source in this study complemented each other and helped us obtain a holistic picture of discourse practices in CMC activities. We revised and further developed our ongoing analysis of the transcripts during the semester as we continued to collect data. However, more analysis still took place following data collection, as we transcribed all the interviews, coded them, and then developed and revised our analysis of the transcript. The purpose of our enquiry about the whole process of data analysis was to develop and refine categories of the phenomenon under investigation to allow a comprehensive description and interpretation of CMC activities. Throughout the whole process of collecting and analyzing the data, we discussed our ongoing investigation with one another as collaborators to ensure credibility of the research findings.

IV. FINDINGS

1. Discourse Features of CMC Discussion

In this section, we will discuss characteristics of CMC texts shown in the following three columns: 1) Housekeeping Matters, 2) Linguistically Wondering and Pondering, and 3) Dear Cultural Informant. By analyzing the three columns, we attempt to examine discourse features of socio-affective, linguistic, and cultural dimensions of language use represented in each column. Note that throughout the analysis section, original wording, spelling, and punctuations have been preserved in presenting the data from the transcript of CMC texts, interviews with the students, and the students’ reflective essays. Also note that to maintain the anonymity of all participants in this study, the teacher and the students have been given pseudonyms.

1) Socio-affective Dimension: Housekeeping Matters

Before starting the content-based online discussion directly related to learning material of each week, the students were encouraged to post messages about their daily lives in the Housekeeping Matters column. This column was full of “conversations” made for social exchanges. In order to illustrate how students engaged in social exchanges, we will present two excerpts.

Excerpt 1
Author: Hana Date: 2005/09/09
Topic: What a wonderful life!
Hi ~ everybody! My name is Hana. It’s really great to have this kind of class and
meet all of you. I can see that many of you have already posted some messages. Yeah! I have to try more!!! I’ve been taking a computer class at night since the first day of this semester like Ji-hye. I get back home around 9 pm exhausted. Because the computer things are totally new to me, I spend a lot of energy on learning it. But I’m enjoying learning something new. As you may know, I’m married and have a son who is a middle school student. I feel really sorry for him ‘cause I don’t have enough time for him. But just a few minutes ago I thought what a beautiful life I have. Even though I’ve been so busy and under a lot of stress, I’m getting know so many good people like all of you and at least have a chance to change my life. What a wonderful life!!!

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Author: So-yeon Date: 2005/09/09
Topic: [Re]What a wonderful life!
I really respect you! I always complain that I don’t have enough time to study -0-;; Maybe, you are the super~~ busy student, but you always smile and look kind >_< I am happy to meet such a nice people like you in the class gg*__*

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Author: Shin-ji Date: 2005/09/09
Topic: [Re]What a wonderful life!
Wow~ What a beautiful Woman~^^*

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Author: Eun-yeong Date: 2005/09/09
Topic: [Re]What a wonderful life!
Wow, I admire you~ I am also a married woman, but not having kids yet. So I can imagine how much you are busy...Since I got married, I respect all mothers all the earth. I sometimes feel guilty and sorry for my husband. I am not a good cook at all and not good at any house works.. T_T One day, I found my husband wearing my socks, because I haven’t done the laundry~ The situation made us laugh but.. What a shame.....Anyway, I give an applause for your brave new start!

The topic thread entitled “What a wonderful life!” was initiated by Hana. Delighted to be participating in this class, Hana described her current life and circumstances. As a married woman with a son at middle-school, she was very busy with a heavy schedule. Nevertheless, Hana expressed her satisfaction with a new opportunity to learn. After reading Hana’s posting, So-yeon reflected on Hana’s attitude toward life and felt ashamed of herself, because she had always been complaining. Shin-ji also expressed acclamation by using the same sentence structure (“What a beautiful woman”) as the original title
“What a wonderful life!” Eun-young, as another married woman, felt sympathy for Hana’s busy life. At the same time, she admired her enthusiasm for learning and applauded her new start. Hana’s positive attitude toward life, revealed in her message, seemed to have a potent and positive effect on other students in this class.

This column, however, was not always filled with happy memories and good feelings. Sometimes it became an avenue for the students to share sorrow and tragedy that existed in their everyday lives. These are illustrated in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 2
Author: Su-jin      Date: 2005/09/30
Topic: My Dog has died...
It happened in this early morning when my mom took a walk with our dog, Cocoa. (Its family is Beagle whose face is brown color like cocoa...) No one could imagine how such a disaster could happen. “Su-jin, wake up... Cocoa was dead...” I heard Mom’s voice faintly... I thought it was just a dream at first, but when I got up, I couldn’t find Cocoa anywhere and finally know it was true. Mom said he had been run over by car...He seemed to have no physical injuries, but suddenly he vomited blood from his mouth little by little. He gazed Mom for a moment and finally, he closed his eyes with a smile... Now, we cannot see Cocoa anywhere in the world... I don’t know how to endure this suffering...

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Author: Hyo-jun     Date: 2005/09/30
[Re]I’m so sorry to hear that.
I know how you feel, because there were several dogs which had died in my house. Cheer up, and take its death as the fate. There is unexpected death sometimes in the world, you must accept it. He’ll be happy in the heaven.

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Author: Hana       Date: 2005/10/01
[Re]My Dog has died...
Hi~ Su-jin I’m so sorry to hear that. I deeply understand how you feel.
I got a kitten about 2 years ago. I named him “Teunteun,” which means being healthy because I wanted him to be healthy and to live with me for a long time. I loved Teunteun but he got sick and died despite all the effort I made. I cried a lot.
After Teunteun died, I thought of him and was on the verge of tears whenever I saw a cat or even a picture of cat, I still think of him sometimes. I know it’ll take time to get over with, but your dog would be in peace now and want you to be happy because he was such a good puppy. Take care.
In the message entitled “My dog had died…” Su-jin expressed a great deal of grief at the loss of her dog. She was describing the death of her dog, her feeling when she heard the sad news, and how special the dog was to her. The last utterance (“I don’t know how to endure this suffering.”) revealed her sad feelings and many classmates participated in sharing her sorrow. With her words of comfort, Hyo-jun recommended that Su-jin accept the death of her dog. For Hana, Su-jin’s grief was understandable because she had a similar experience of losing her kitten. Although the expressions of comfort took different forms, the students seemed to relate to the feelings and reciprocate the sentiment.

As Warschauer (1996) claims, CMC creates an affective scaffolding for learners to exchange information through social interaction. Through the Housekeeping Matters column, the students had the opportunity to express their own feelings, receive socio-affective support from others. By opening their own heart in such an online space, they could gradually feel better and build a rapport with their classmates. In this way, this kind of personal talk or informal exchange served as an excellent warm-up exercise for the content-based discussion that followed.

2) Linguistic Dimension: *Linguistically Wondering and Pondering*

In addition to building a community of learners through social interaction in CMC, the opportunity to learn from and build on each other’s ideas can result in the co-construction of knowledge. This *Linguistically Wondering and Pondering* column shows the process of knowledge construction. In what follows, we present two excerpts to illustrate mutual scaffolding processes that the teacher and the students were actively engaged in throughout the CMC discussion.

**Excerpt 3**

Author: Shin-ji    Date: 2005/09/07
Topic: “You do the math~”
In Everybody Loves Raymond Episode#3: I wish I were Gus, when Ray was writing an eulogy, Ray’s father came to Ray’s house. And before Ray’s father sent Ray to his mother, he said something like this (I can’t remember exactly):
“You know how she is when she’s got angry. She doesn’t cook. Then, I don’t eat. You do the math.” In this statement, I don’t know the meaning of the sentence “You do the math.” So I can’t understand why the audience laughs.

Author: Seo-jin    Date: 2005/09/08
Topic: [Re] “You do the math~”
Shin-ji, what a great question! Anybody who’s got an intuition about this
particular expression? I will hold back the temptation to spill my words on it for now. It would be unfair if I were the first person who answers this “tantalizing” question. I’ll let everybody think about Shin-ji’s inquiry and come back with your own search results. Shin-ji, can you wait?

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Author: Shin-ji    Date: 2005/09/08
Topic: [Re][Re]You do the math~”
Ok.. I will~^-^*

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Author: Hye-jin    Date: 2005/09/08
Topic: [Re][Re][Re] “You do the math~”
Hi! Shin-ji.^-^* I guess in that expression like a simple math formula(e.g. 1+1= 2), Ray’s father wants to say, “Your mom is upset( 1 ) so she doesn’t cook( 1 ). What does that mean? What comes next? I can’t eat !!( 2 ) It is added up like this. Think about the situation and calculate the outcome! (You do the math!)” He doesn’t seem worried about his wife’s being upset. What actually concerns him most is the fact that he can’t eat, so he is persuading Ray to go talk to his mom. It is just what I thought watching the scene. Anybody has a better idea?

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Author: Hana    Date: 2005/09/09
Topic: [Re] “You do the math~”
Hi Shin-ji! I think the father wants to say that “You know the mathematical (logical) result.” When his wife gets upset, she doesn’t cook. As a result, he can’t eat. It means it’s so obvious that you know the consequence like simple math.

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Author: Seo-jin    Date: 2005/09/09
[Re][Re][Re][Re] “You do the math~”
Hye-jin, you explained this better than I can ever do!! Bravo to you and Hana! I just want to present some of the authentic texts in which the expression “You do the math” was used. I did my googling and here’s my search result: 1) You do the math! For only $34.95 per month, you will get all that you need to maximize your online experience. 2) The next time someone tells you there are sound reasons for abolishing government, you should listen. If you start from the assumptions of the disutility of labor, you will realize that government cannot work, and the market cannot help but work. You do the math. 3) Two men, one bed, you do the math!!
As can be seen in example 1, the math can literally involve the numbers and figures. But as in examples 2 & 3, the math can broadly mean anything involved
in logical thinking, or some figuring-out stuff. Did you get a better understanding of the appropriate contexts in which that particular expression can be used?

This topic thread posted in the Linguistically Wondering and Pondering column was initiated by Shin-ji who brought up a new question related to the expression “You do the math.” She was curious why the audience laughed in that particular scene because she did not understand the connotation of the expression. There was no response the next day. The teacher joined the topic thread and let Shin-ji know her question was a great one, and encouraged others to think about the question. As the teacher said, it would be unfair if she was the first person who answered the tantalizing question. After reading the teacher’s comment, Shin-ji felt much better and waited for her peers’ responses with a relaxed state of mind.

Hye-jin was the first one to come up with an idea. By exemplifying a simple numerical equation (1+1=2), she explained the expression “You do the math” as representing a logical process. Her desire to invite other students to further explore the topic was manifested in her last sentence (“Anybody has a better idea?”). Instead of making a statement, she put a question to make her explanation tentative, as well as to appeal to other members to join in the discussion. Another participant, Hana, explained it as a causal relationship. One cause (his wife gets upset) was followed by the result (she doesn’t cook) and this result became another cause accompanied with the final result (he can’t eat).

After observing a round of negotiation among students, the teacher seemed to be satisfied with the student-initiated solutions. Since at least two students explained the meaning of the expression, the teacher suggested some authentic texts in which the expression “You do the math” was used. By showing real contexts, she encouraged the students to try to understand in which contexts the expression had been appropriately used.

The fact that the teacher, as exemplified in the above excerpt, participated in the discussion and continuously monitored the students’ interactions in this CMC activity does not necessarily suggest that the teacher should always be an active participant in every topic thread. It is also important for the teacher to yield the floor to the students if necessary so that they can co-construct meaning and become more autonomous by taking responsibility for their own learning. In this project, there were several topic threads that show the students’ collaborative efforts to reach a solution without the teacher’s scaffolding. The following excerpt among them highlights one student’s effort to provide scaffolding to other students by relying on the native language as a mediational learning tool.

**Excerpt 4**
Author: Shin-ji    Date: 2005/09/23
Topic: “Giblets in blood”
In Episode #10, Debra decided to make fish dish instead of turkey for
thanksgiving. But Ray tried to persuade her to make turkey. While arguing, Debra heard that Emma and Mel would come to Debra’s for thanksgiving. She thought that it was Marie’s trap. In this situation Ray kept persuading her to make turkey and Debra said that “I can’t compete with your mother’s turkey. The woman has giblets in her blood.” Tell me what the expression “The woman has giblets in her blood” means.

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Author: Tae-ho    Date: 2005/09/24
Topic: [Re] “Giblets in blood”
Giblet is used in plural form normally and means: giblet [diblit] n. 《보통 ∼ s》 (닭의) 내장
Then I guess Deb is complaining Marie’s superb skill in cooking turkey saying she’s got kinda innate skill about chicken(or turkey) cooking within her. We have similar sayings I think: “너 참 잘 뛴다, 누가 말띠 아니랄까봐”, “그 사람은 걸어다니는 사전 그 자체야, 언제 머리 속을 한번 보고 싶어. 사전이 한 3~4권은 있을 걸?”, “그 식당 주방장은 전생에 물고기였을 거야. 어째 그렇게 물고기에 대해 잘 아는지...”

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Author: Su-jin    Date: 2005/09/25
[Re][Re] “Giblets in blood”
I was also curious about the expression, “Giblets in blood”, and now I can understand the meaning easily comparing with our Korean expressions. Thank you for your aid. ^^

In response to Shin-ji’s question about the meaning of “giblets in blood,” Tae-ho began to describe the denotation of the core word first. After giving a brief definition of the word itself, he showed similar examples in Korean. Su-jin, who had the same question as Shin-ji, with her curiosity satisfied, expressed her gratitude to Tae-ho. As she mentioned, she understood the meaning of the expression more easily by referring to Korean examples. The students used Korean words or expressions only when they felt they were needed. This excerpt shows that it can be very effective to use Korean when explaining some expressions that are difficult to understand through English.

In sum, by initiating topics related to their own linguistic problems in understanding the material, contributing ideas, explaining oneself clearly, and encouraging others to respond, and sometimes resorting to their first language to better explain difficult expressions, students ultimately move toward goals that have personal significance for them. In terms of cognitive benefits, reading others’ comments, ideas, and experiences also exposes students to multiple perspectives and helps to broaden students’ knowledge and deepen their understanding.
3) Cultural Dimension: *Dear Cultural Informant*

In watching the authentic video *Everybody Loves Raymond*, the students experienced a difficulty in understanding cultural issues embedded in a particular language use. To tackle this problem, the professor of the course invited a native speaker of English to answer students’ questions about a certain cultural event or perspective in the *Dear Cultural Informant* column. In what follows, we will present two excerpts that illustrate (1) how students modify cultural stereotypes in interaction with a cultural informant and (2) how a particular culture-embedded expression elicits multiple perspectives from the participants.

**Excerpt 5**

Author: Tae-ho    Date: 2005/10/28  
Topic: Ep22, Garlic hung in the kitchen  
In Ep22, Ray & Debra go back to the past and we can see them in 3 years earlier context. I found garlic hung near the kitchen and so amazed. Similar to Korean style. But then wondered. Don’t western people hate the smell of garlic? How do they do with garlic when they cook? Won’t it be hard to stand the smell of garlic if they are hung in the kitchen always? Could you help me?

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Author: Cathy    Date: 2005/10/28  
Topic: [Re]Ep22, Garlic hung in the kitchen  
I’m glad you asked that question...  
This is one of the GREAT myths that I have continually heard over and over since I’ve been in Korea. Contrary to the popular Korean belief that Westerners hate garlic and can’t stand the smell of it, THAT IS SIMPLY NOT TRUE. Many, and I would go so far as to say MOST, Western people regularly cook with garlic and enjoy the taste very much. We don’t like the smell on our breath, which is why we always chew gum or use breath mints after a particularly garlicky meal, but we DO certainly eat it, and enjoy it very much. Garlic hanging in the doorway would be decorative, and most likely not actually used for cooking. Therefore it wouldn’t smell anyway.  
Thanks for your question!

The question about Garlic hanging in the kitchen showed culturally biased views Korean people commonly have. As Tae-ho said, Koreans think that westerners hate garlic and can’t stand the smell of it. But Cathy pointed out that such a popular Korean belief is simply not true (“Western people regularly cook with garlic and enjoy the taste very
much”). Furthermore, she added that they used garlic for decoration by hanging it in the doorway. The information exchanges with a native speaker of the target language enabled the learners to modify existing stereotypes formed on the basis of sources such as the media or from their fellow learners. Contact with a native speaker via the online bulletin also encourages the learners to become more aware of the problems of cultural stereotypes and to reconsider the validity of their previous assumptions.

**Excerpt 6**

*Author: Tae-ho    Date: 2005/10/07*

**Topic: It’s a big 10-4**

In ep15, Ray’s having a good time with his girlfriend in the car. After brief kissing, she asks Ray “Are you warm enough now?” and Ray answers “That’s a big 10-4” and it’s translated into Korean subtitle as “Sure, I’m warm enough.” I tried to find the meaning but only got the 4th day of October as a hint. Could you help me why this expression meant “I feel good” or “I’m hot”?

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

*Author: Ju-hee    Date: 2005/10/09*

**Topic: [Re] It’s a big 10-4**

Hello. I’m not Cathy. I’m Ju-hee. ^-^ Before our Cathy explain the right answer, let me guess the meaning of the expression. In my opinion, What Ray was trying to say is this one. “That(the kiss) was a big temperature.” In brief, he just said as 10-4.( He played the word by a sound) :) Well, Cathy, now it’s your turn. What do you think about this?

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

*Author: Cathy    Date: 2005/10/10*

**Topic: [Re][Re]It’s a big 10-4**

Hi there!

I loved your question…it’s very funny! Ahhh...good guess Ju-hee. You’re close, but not quite right on...Let me try to explain this one. 10-4 is a kind of pilot’s or trucker’s or police officer’s language...it’s the kind of language that is used by anyone speaking into a CB radio. Maybe you’ve seen this in movies before...like when two pilots are communicating over the radio and they end everything with ‘over’, or they say things like, ‘come in’, or ‘roger that’ etc. ‘10-4’ is an affirmation. It means ‘yes’ or ‘okay’. So, for example, if I was a trucker and I told my supervisor over the radio that I would stop at the next gas station to fill up, he may respond, ‘10-4 Cathy, take a good rest’. In this situation,
Ray would feel hot because of the kissing. Even if it were 20 degrees below 0 outside, he may still feel warm inside the car with his girlfriend, right? So he answers her question in an enthusiastic way. ‘That’s a big 10-4!’ It means, ‘of course I’m warm enough!’ Does that make sense now?

Author: Mun-jeong     Date: 2005/10/10
Topic: [Re][Re][Re]It’s a big 10-4
Now, it’s very clear to me! Thank u Thank u Cathy~^^

In excerpt 6, Tae-hoe asked a very tough question to Cathy. According to Cathy’s answer, “10-4” refers to the kind of language that is used by anyone speaking into a CB radio. It is an affirmation expression meaning “yes” or “okay.” The meaning of this particular expression, familiar to Cathy, didn’t seem to be grasped easily without cultural understanding. Although every student knew every word in the sentence, they did not understand the exact meaning. They could not even obtain any information by searching the web or dictionaries. Ju-hee’s tryout was, however, very encouraging. Although Ju-hee was not very convinced of her answer, she took a guess. After giving her opinion, she shifted the turn to Cathy. In her words, “Cathy, now it’s your turn.” In the end, the students were able to understand the exact meaning from their cultural informant with the cultural background. The participation of the native informant was instrumental in promoting more implicit and complex views of the target culture. As one of the students commented, “Many class members tried to find the meaning of ‘10-4’ linguistically, but most of us failed, then some guessed the proper meaning from the context. We all realized that it was not only a linguistic but also a cultural topic” (So-yeon, Reflective essay).

As can be seen from the six excerpts illustrated thus far, the students constructed the online community, negotiated meanings among themselves, and raised their awareness of cultural components of the target language with help from a native speaker of English in a CMC environment. Exchanging opinions with others provides the means for the students to encounter new ideas, think critically about them and reflect on their own lives in relation to the course content.

2. Students’ Perception of CMC

Arising from the analysis of students’ perception in relation to the use of CMC in the classroom were five broad themes including reflective learning, increased participation, collaborative learning, cultural awareness, and a concept of learning communities.
1) Theme 1. I Could Become a Reflective Learner.

One of the advantages that the students perceived with the use of CMC in their learning was that they had enough time to write their messages, read others’ messages and post replies. Such a time lag gave students the opportunity to think about the contents more deeply and reflect on their peers’ messages, as well as on their own writing.

There was no time constraint in the online classroom, so every student could ask their questions freely without caring about the number and volume of their questions. As the communication was produced through writing, all participants could read the questions carefully and express their thought well after thinking them over. In this process, I could look up a dictionary and search the Internet site, and my linguistic and expressing ability were getting better. (Su-jin, Reflective essay)

The fact that there was no rigid time limitation made me feel free to express my thoughts at any time. I could write my questions or opinions whenever they popped up into my mind and I was able to get fruitful answers from my classmates, the professor and Cathy. (Mun-jeong, Interview)

As Su-jin said, students had sufficient time to read each other’s postings and respond to them, and raise their own questions in cyber space. In this process, students made every effort to convey their thoughts, elaborate on them, and try to find the necessary information for discussion by searching or checking up other materials. As a result, students could produce more output than in the regular classroom discussion, and the quality of discussion also improved by writing carefully-crafted messages. Mun-jeong also mentioned that the time flexibility enabled her to address any doubts without regard to time, and obtain beneficial feedback from peers. It seems that CMC can be very effective in heightening learners’ metalinguistic awareness more than in oral conversations, since they can view the written records produced by CMC tools and thus they are more likely to monitor their language output (Blake, 2000; Kitade, 2000).

2) Theme 2. I Could Have Another Place to Express Myself Better.

Affectively, some students, especially the reserved or shy learners, often felt silly at their linguistic shortcomings in face-to-face communication. In fact, there were several students who rarely took risks in attempting to speak in English because they were accustomed to the instructional context, which only encourages accuracy and right answers. For such students, the space for online discussion opened another avenue for
expressing their thoughts.

In my case, I’m afraid of speaking in class. Before saying something my heart beats fast and there is no time to express my words. So I usually regret not having spoken and upload what I wanted to say to the website. (Ji-hye, Interview)

Frankly speaking, sometimes I felt that I became an observer in the face-to-face class (on Monday and Wednesday). Sometimes I missed the words what people said and some words were difficult to understand. What is more, there wasn’t enough time to check words and grammar. To say in the class needs courage. On the other hand, in on-line discussion, I became a full participant. I could find and check the meaning of the difficult words. I also could read the sentence again and again. (Ji-su, Reflective essay)

For Ji-hye, speaking English instantly became a tough thing, so she often felt guilty about her passive participation in offline class activities. However, she was able to alleviate her guilt by writing her opinions on the online board. Ji-su further revealed her feelings when participating in the face-to-face discussion (“I felt that I became an observer”). In the offline class, it was difficult for her to grasp the meanings from others’ messages and express her opinions without having enough time to check their grammaticality. However, she could express her opinions more confidently in cyber space, where she became a “participant” at her own learning pace rather than just being an observer.

3) Theme 3. Two Heads Work Better than One.

All the students watched the same sitcom in this class. At first, the students had only a single perspective, but after reading others’ postings, they began to negotiate meanings by questioning and responding via the online discussion. Namely, they re-examined their own set ideas, modified them, and/or added new ones to them; ultimately, they managed to gain various perspectives in this process. Thus, online discussions, based on collaborative learning, can add different dimensions to texts.

It was marvelous and wonderful that everyone asked different questions after watching the same sitcom. And sharing my curiosities with others was a useful experience. (Minsun, Interview)

I could share all of my classmates’ opinion and knowledge. They had some
sensitive and outstanding information or high class knowledge and thinking that I
didn’t have. Through on-line discussion, I was able to read them and learned lots of
things bit by bit. Sharing information from one’s daily life story to Ray’s audio files
and transcripts was really beneficial to me. (Mun-jeong, Reflective essay)

As can be seen from the students’ responses, the students moved between their private
world for reflection and the socially shared space of inquiry on the discussion board
throughout the semester. Significantly, students worked together to search for necessary
information and construct knowledge and the vast majority reported that their discussion
partners’ contributions introduced them to new perspectives that they would not have
considered on their own. As a result, they broadened their view and understanding of
various issues.

4) Theme 4. I’m Not a Big Frog in a Small Pond Any More!

The professor of the course invited one native cultural informant to develop her students’
tercultural competence. Below are the students’ opinions about the participation of the
cultural informant.

There are striking differences in the boundary of information between native and
non-native. In that respect, the vivid information on target culture Cathy gave us
was very beneficial. And above all, meeting with both language and culture at once
was realized by reading her postings. (Hana, Reflective essay)

Cathy was a valuable resource as mentor in this class. It was very exciting that a
native speaker could respond to my questions all the time. The fact that there is a
cultural informant who informs us of the target culture is just like the actual
experience of immersing us into the target culture. (Tae-ho, Interview)

Many students reported that the participation of the native cultural informant was a very
valuable experience. Cathy seemed to be an appropriate lingo-cultural informant for them. In
addition to gaining cultural information, the students came across elaborated linguistic input
from her polished messages. At the same time, this experience helped the learners to develop
open attitudes toward the target culture input and constructive ways of viewing their own
culture and that of the target culture. As Ji-hye mentioned in her interview, “I was very
surprised with an enormous amount of her cultural knowledge. So I thought that I should know
my native culture much more.” Like Ji-hye, the students began to become more aware of their
own culture and developed a better understanding of it in respect to other cultures.
5) Theme 5. I Could Know Your Secrets.

Affective factors had an enormous effect on the students’ motivation and the degree of participation in the class. The students in the class could get to know one another very well via online discussions, and pay much more attention to others’ comments with a keen interest during the offline class.

When we didn’t know each other very well, the conversation would be stuff. However, after an on-line discussion – Housekeeping Matters, we could know each other gradually and became more familiar. In my opinion, on-line discussion is more comfortable to say about personal things. If there wasn’t the place like Housekeeping Matters, we couldn’t be close like this. (Ji-su, Reflective essay)

I loved the Housekeeping Matters section. All of the classmates posted their trivial everyday life and read others’ posting then answered them enthusiastically. I was so happy that we made a new community like a family in the cyber world. This kind of feeling made me autonomous to enter the cyber board and participate in it. (So-yeon, Interview)

As can be seen from the students’ words, CMC exchanges that aimed at social interaction seemed to foster the building of a learning community, where participants offer one another support, praise, and sympathy.

6) Disadvantages and Difficulties: Students’ Perceptions Revisited

Despite overall positive responses to CMC, there were some disadvantages and difficulties which students experienced. First, because messages in CMC were conveyed in a written form, some students found themselves worrying about whether sentences in their messages were grammatically correct or not. Besides, they felt frustrated when reading others’ well-crafted and thoughtful postings.

I felt depressed when comparing mine with others’ postings. So I almost always tried to write my postings before reading others’ messages. I envied some classmates their skills to convey meaning with easy words. (Min-sun, Interview)

Second, the lack of immediate responses in the asynchronous CMC led students to doubt whether they had correctly interpreted the postings. Third, reading and writing many messages required a lot of time. Many participants reported that they spent so much
time writing or responding to messages that they often spent several hours, even up to a
day in cyber space. In such cases, students sometimes felt overwhelmed.

Despite the difficulties and resistance the students occasionally experienced, the
asynchronous CMC nevertheless affected the students greatly on an emotional and social
level as well as a cognitive level. In an interview, Tae-ho commented, “I spent about seven
or eight hours preparing for online discussion every week.” But he also added that the
more time he spent preparing for the discussion, the deeper his understanding of the
content became.

V. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

In this paper, we attempted to offer an analysis of discourse practice involved in CMC
activities, drawing on one college-level EFL classroom in Korea. Most of the participants
in the study felt that they could benefit from their first CMC experience linguistically,
cognitively, affectively, socially, and culturally. In online learning communities, the
students were able to produce a greater quantity of their thoughts than in an oral classroom.
Peer learning in an online environment encouraged meaning negotiation and developed
students’ critical thinking and critical reflection on their learning as well as their
communication skills and content knowledge. Furthermore, the participation of the native
cultural informant contributed to cultivating the students’ cross-cultural awareness as well
as facilitating their target language proficiency.

Although the findings of this study may appear to be somewhat positive, there are
several limitations of the study in generalizing the findings to other contexts. One of the
key limitations of the study relates to the nature of qualitative inquiry. In this type of
analysis, one often tends to highlight some data and devalue other data. This may, in turn,
lead to misrepresentation of some aspects of the data. Like other qualitative researchers,
we faced the difficult task of reducing what we saw in the data into clearly marked
findings. That is why it is important to remind the reader that there could be “other”
realities that we might have missed and that some of the realities we reported might have
been misrepresented even though we endeavored to enhance credibility by triangulating
the findings from various data sources.

Another limitation relates to the research particulars. While we made every effort to
ensure the “transferability” of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), it is important to note
several possible limitations in the research design. This study was conducted in a
particular college-level EFL classroom in Korea. Although the findings of the study may
appear to cast the students’ experiences in CMC in a somewhat positive light, it cannot be
emphasized too strongly that the students in general were highly motivated students who
came to the class with interests in language and culture. Because the focus was on a single classroom, many specific results cannot be generalized and inferred as true in other cases. The interpretive nature of just one rather unique class experience with the asynchronous CMC prevents us from generalizing these results to other educational settings or other mediums of computer communications. This study has involved only a small group of college-level students; therefore, it does not provide enough information to predict how other teachers would use CMC or how other groups of students would react to it. Despite the special nature of this course, however, we believe that the issues raised in this study concerning the CMC discourse practice would be appropriate in other contexts as we move further along the path of virtual learning in different settings.

We would like to conclude this paper by suggesting some of the teacher’s roles in designing and managing CMC activities. Our suggestion is based on the results of interviews conducted at the end of this semester with all of the students in the course. The teacher’s roles that the students perceived as important are as follows:

- I loved the feeling that the teacher seemed to be always with us. (Ji-su, Interview)
- Before every discussion, the teacher provided a prompt as a starting point of the discussion. It was very great. I think teachers should deal with the problems students couldn’t solve by their own efforts and inspire students to further efforts. (So-yeon, Interview)
- At first, the teacher should reply to every message individually in order to let every student feel that the teacher cares for them in the cyber space. (Ji-hye, Interview)
- Too much teacher participation in CMC can make students’ participation wither by degrees. It should be an open space where students can come in and out. (Hana, Interview)
- I think the teacher is a coordinator in online discussion. Teachers had better intervene only in case of the messages which don’t get any response. (Shin-ji, Interview)
- As a facilitator, teachers should wait until students’ self-generated responses, and play a role to induce the discussions about on the topics or messages which every participant showed interest. (Eun-young, Interview)
- Online is the field everyone is sharing with, therefore teacher should became a moderator in the same position. (Hyo-jun, Interview)
- The teacher should exist at a short distance from the “field” indicating the direction. (Su-jin, Interview)

Some students looked upon the teacher as a caretaker. As in an offline class, they wanted to be under the care of their teacher and valued the feeling of connection between a teacher and themselves. Others considered the teacher as a facilitator, moderator or
The student responses all indicate that the instructor participation is important. The teacher needs to engage in constructive interventions that scaffold CMC learning activities. On the one hand, the teacher can actively participate in the discussion by encouraging new topics, sharing new material, and redirecting the conversation patterns. Thus, the teacher’s role can become more active as she provides guidance and support by directly joining student discussions, thereby modeling and promoting the students’ use of various learning and thinking strategies. On the other hand, it appears to be quite useful for a teacher to step back from the active role at times and enlist students to help in moderating discussions in order to foster a sense of student ownership and relieve the teachers of some of the work managing the discussion.

As Warschauer, Turbee, and Roberts (1996) point out, “the appropriate and effective use of computer networks…is partly a technical issue, but primarily a pedagogical one (p. 9).” This suggests that the decisions teachers make about how to use CMC play an important role in determining the outcomes of such activities. In other words, the extent to which teachers design tasks and activities, manage classroom discussion, provide feedback, and reframe their intervention will affect the learning outcomes and effectiveness of the students’ EFL learning experiences.

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