The Relevance of Personality and Language Proficiency on the Participation Style of ESL Learners in Face-to-Face and Online Discussions

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Abstract Recognising that active involvement with the target language is important in learning a second language, this research compared the participation style of the language learners in different discussion settings; online and face-to-face. The personality (extroversion and introversion) and language proficiency (high-intermediate and low-intermediate) of the 48 participants were looked into. Qualitative data were obtained through observation, survey and online feedback session to substantiate the main data gathered from the quasi-experiment. The findings revealed that the use of synchronous online setting helps elicit more contribution of words and balance the participation of ESL learners especially among the introverts and the less proficient learners. The findings also implied that language instructors can capitalise on this setting to elicit more participation from selected group of students and encourage more balanced participation in the language classroom. In addition, the findings of this study showed that the medium played a role in influencing the messages produced by certain group of learners more than the others.

Keywords Online discussions · Face-to-face discussions Participation style · Personality · Language proficiency · Computer-assisted language learning (CALL)

Introduction

In the context of second language teaching and learning, researchers like Oxford (2011) pointed out that technology is one of the major influencing ideas that facilitates effective language instruction. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) was thought to be able to fulfill the principles of communicative language teaching by providing more communicative practices with the use of technology (Tam et al. 2010). In line with this, many language instructors incorporate online discussions into their lesson planning, in addition to the usual face-to-face discussions. Face-to-face and online discussions are similar in terms of their pace, spontaneity, and the requirement for participants to meet at the same time (Lapadat 2002; Yates 1996). Apart from that, they are also interactive, personalised, relatively informal and constrained by time (Lapadat 2002).

Despite the similarities, different communication skills are involved in face-to-face and online discussions. In face-to-face discussions, listening and speaking skills are most evident while online discussions are mainly dominated by reading and writing skills when one communicates through a text-based platform (Fitzte 2006; Perkins and Newman 1999). In synchronous online discussions, text chat is usually used by participants when they interact. Text chat refers to “a kind of semi-speech that is between talking and writing” (Lee 2009, p. 128). It is usually brief, fast paced, and more spontaneous (Lee 2009; Toyoda and Harrison 2002). Although text chat is in written form, it is comparable to face-to-face interactions due to its conversational style and instant feedback (Sykes 2005).

In contrast to the traditional classrooms where face-to-face discussions are often held, the open-access online discussions enable every member to have the chance to