ESL STUDENTS' COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION PRACTICES: CONTEXT CONFIGURATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how context is configured in ESL students' language learning practices through computer-mediated communication (CMC). Specifically, I focus on how a group of ESL students jointly constructed the context of their CMC activities through interactional patterns and norms, and how configured affordances within the CMC environment mediated their learning experiences. After a brief review of relevant studies of CMC in the literature, I discuss ecological perspectives of language learning as a core construct of this study, to explain contextual fluidity in relation to learners' agency in their learning. Next, I present an ethnographic study of how members of an ESL class constructed a community of social practices through synchronous CMC. The findings indicate that (a) the constructed interactional patterns and norms of the students' CMC activities represented group dynamics among the participants, (b) the participants' roles in joint construction of the activities reflected their language socialization experiences, and (c) the activities provided a way for spousal participants to assume academic identities, while becoming a social space for academic gatherings. This study highlights the fluidity of CMC language learning contexts; fluid contexts entail learners' agency in dialogic engagements with the contextual elements of the learning environment as language socialization processes.

INTRODUCTION

Research studies of computer-mediated communication (CMC) use in language education have addressed overall aspects of context in language learning and teaching, including technologies, linguistic features, pedagogy, curriculum, social materials, and social discourses on CMC (Belz, 2002, 2003; Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Chun, 1994; Kern, 1995, 2000; Kinginger, Gourves-Hayward, & Simpson, 1999; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Meskill & Anthony, 2005; Meskill & Ranglova, 2000; Thorne, 2003; Ware, 2005). These layers of context show that the occurrence of social interactions in language learning needs to be understood in relation not only to immediate situational contexts, but also to the broad cultural and social contexts shaping immediate situations. The conceptual complexity of context in language and literacy education can be captured by a definition that considers context as a relationship between a focal event and the field of action within which that event is embedded (Rex, Green, Dixon, & the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1998). As such, the conceptual complexity of context has been concerned with micro and macro dimensions of context since the beginning of CMC use in language learning and teaching practices (see Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Gebhard, 2004; Holliday, 1994; Kramsch, 1993 for the concept of context in language education).

The CMC literature illustrates shifts of focus to different layers of context. Early on, research into uses of CMC in language learning and teaching looked at the linguistic context of CMC text to examine how language learners could improve certain communication functions and learn linguistic features through CMC activities (Blake, 2000; Chun, 1994; Kern, 1995; Ortega, 1997; Pellettieri, 2000; Smith, 2003; Sotillo, 2000; Toyoda & Harrison, 2002; Tudini, 2003; Warschauer, 1996). Later, the focus shifted to

contextual elements outside the CMC text, demonstrated by studies of intercultural telecollaborative projects that addressed issues at the institutional and societal levels of two different countries (Lee, 2004). Researchers studied how long-distance collaborative CMC activities support language development and intercultural understanding, providing access to speakers of the target language (Belz, 2002; Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Kern, 2000; Kinginger, et al., 1999; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Meskill & Anthony, 2005; Meskill & Ranglova, 2000; Thorne, 2003). The aforementioned studies examined how online interactions shape or are shaped by contextual elements such as pedagogical, social, and logistical factors at two different institutions, and how social discourses of CMC in each university shaped their CMC activities. Specifically, they demonstrated how global, sociocultural aspects of long-distance collaborative CMC contexts—e.g., power relationships, history, and social discourses of CMC—shape intercultural CMC activities.

Recently, studies of telecollaborative projects have examined how language learners jointly construct the contexts of their CMC activities, as part of their focus on tensions among intercultural communication partners (Belz, 2002, 2003; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; O'Dowd, 2003; Ware, 2005; Ware & Kramsch, 2005). The tensions result from social and institutional dimensions (Belz, 2002, 2003; Ware, 2005), different social discourses surrounding CMC genres and tools (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Ware, 2005), and sociocultural values regarding foreign language learning (Ware, 2005). This kind of jointly constructed interaction by learners can also be examined in the CMC practices of a single, locally situated classroom; this will contribute to addressing a need to bring current uses of CMC into various situations beyond the long-distance telecommunication projects of university-based language programs and encourage more language teachers to draw on CMC in their teaching practices. Studying CMC use in various settings helps to bring about an understanding of the complexity of its contexts in language learning and teaching. By exploring language learners' construction of learning context in online interactions, one can see how participants jointly construct interactional patterns and norms through active dialogues with contextual elements that surround their learning at both micro and macro levels, and how their identities/subjectivities are impacted by the co-constructed interactional patterns and norms in their language socialization processes. Furthermore, this kind of study can also illustrate multiple dimensions of language learning, which highlights the fact that language learning is not only an issue of acquiring linguistic forms and functions, but also of developing a new self (Kramsch, 1993, 2000).

In this study, informed by Ware's (2005) examination of a telecollaborative communication project between American college students and German students, I look into how a group of ESL students co-constructed online interactions of synchronous CMC practices within the dynamics of their group, while engaging with contextual elements of their CMC activities. In particular, I examine how the students construed and configured the context of their online interactions by constructing online discourses. Through ecological perspectives of language learning (Kramsch, 2002; Leather & van Dam, 2003; van Lier, 2000, 2002), I explore the following questions:

- What kinds of interactional patterns are a group of ESL students jointly constructing?
- What kinds of interactional norms are the ESL students establishing within computer-mediated social interactions?
- How do the ESL students utilize CMC activities for their linguistic, social, and academic goals?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ecological Perspectives of Second Language Learning

The theoretical frameworks I use to explore the contexts of language learning practices are based on ecological perspectives. Social and educational ecology researchers (Bateson, 2000; Gibson, 1979)

maintain that human learning occurs in an integrated entity involving cognitive, social, and environmental elements, and it is only through an integrative perspective that the full picture of human activity can be captured. In the field of second language acquisition, this integrative approach to language learning has been noted in recent studies (Kramsch, 2002; Leather & van Dam, 2003; van Lier, 2000, 2002) that explain the notion of unfixed context in language learning by focusing on the learner's active role in configuring a "semiotic budget" from the learning situation.

Regarding the concept of unfixed learning context, ecological perspectives of language learning emphasize learners' diachronic and synchronic engagement with the contextual elements of a specific setting; this feature is associated with sociocultural theories, which argue that language learning is a situated social practice that occurs through social interactions at a specific time and place (Bakhtin, 1981; Lantolf, 2000a, 2000b; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). The social practice of learning is tool-mediated and involves the use of cultural semiotic artifacts, based on the cultural and social norms of a discourse community. Uses of cultural artifacts influence or mediate individuals' perceptual and conceptual boundaries, interests, worldviews, and patterns of thought. Thus, tool-mediated social practices of learning influence ways in which learners configure contextual elements of the learning environment. The configured "semiotic budgets" for learning tasks are representations of how learners engage with the learning environment diachronically and synchronically.

Looking into learners' agency in the construction of learning contexts, van Lier (2000) uses ecological metaphors such as *affordances* (Gibson, 1979) and *emergence* in language learning in lieu of input and output, to represent the relationship that learners make with the learning environment. The affordances consist of "demands and requirements, opportunities and limitations, rejections and invitations, and enablements and constraints" (van Lier, 2000, p. 253). Within the ecological perspectives of language learning, the learning environment is composed of "semiotic budgets" that are figured into affordances for learning. Learners create opportunities and constraints for learning through active dialogues with the learning environment reflective of learning and life experiences.

Learners' construction of their learning context is based on the affordances they make regarding learning activities that are intertwined with language socialization (Ochs, 1990; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Willett, 1995). Configuring affordances is a culturally and socially grounded meaning making process, which leads learners to explicitly and implicitly learn uses of language that are aligned with the norms, values, beliefs, and hierarchies of a social group—discourses of a shared social community—through interactions with people who have expertise in or mastery of the discourses. While constructing affordances for language learning tasks in socialization practices, language learners configure contextual elements dialogically, reflecting and appropriating social voices in meaning-making processes that draw on semiotic tools (Bakhtin, 1981). The practice of configuring affordances is a social practice in which the perspectives of self and other are exchanged in the roles that learners take on as private, public, and social selves. Through this kind of social practice, language learners identify themselves as members of a social group while simultaneously performing as individuals (Kramsch, 1985, 2000).

The way language learners configure contexts occurs in joint construction among their communication partners. Joint construction occurs within group dynamics reflective of participants' subject positions in their learning contexts. In jointly constructing learning contexts, not every learner participating in a computer-mediated communication activity is engaged in the same process of configuring contextual elements in the learning environment, in that each learner's ways of interacting with the environment involve social and cultural practices that are developed in their own discourse communities. Ways of configuring context are varied among ESL learners who have not only different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, but also different ways of using the tools acquired in their primary discourse communities. The learners do not act upon the same activity system that the teacher has prepared for the learning task and, therefore, cannot achieve the same outcome planned before the activity. As such, in this study, the learners' perceptions of and actions within the environment of synchronous chatting afford different

learning experiences for individual learners because each student brings unique schooling, language learning, social, professional, and computer experiences from his or her own life trajectory into specific learning situations and reconfigures the contextual elements accordingly. The different affordances that each person obtains from the dynamic interplay of the cultural, environmental, historical, perceptual, and social dimensions of their learning processes lead to the emergence of various levels of goal achievement. The concept of affordances (van Lier, 2000, 2002) is connected to the notion that context is fluid and explains how learners as social agents configure contextual elements and construct the context of learning.

RESEARCH METHOD

Context

This ethnographic case study was conducted in an intermediate adult ESL class with 16 students at a university in the northeastern United States. The class was affiliated with a university language program[1] serving primarily international graduate students, visiting scholars, and their spouses. This program was designed to help international students and scholars adjust to American life and to develop English proficiency by focusing on oral communication. The teacher (who was not the researcher) explained that the students, newcomers in the local university town, wanted more opportunities to socialize, opportunities not only to know one another better but also to help one another settle in the area[2]. The teacher also expressed his belief that informal social gatherings would allow students to "break the ice" in a large class and to strengthen social bonds among the students.

However, the class faced problems in securing a place to meet comfortably and conveniently for an entire semester. While trying to find such a place, the teacher found that most of the students were comfortable communicating with family members and friends in their countries via e-mail, and that many of them had had online chatting experiences. He suggested that online chatting through a free instant messaging tool would help solve the problem of arranging a physical space for extracurricular social gatherings. The students liked the idea of getting together in a virtual space[3]. For CMC meetings, the participants used MSN Instant Messenger[TM], a free CMC tool for those who subscribe to MSN or Hotmail. Figure 1 shows the design of the interface.
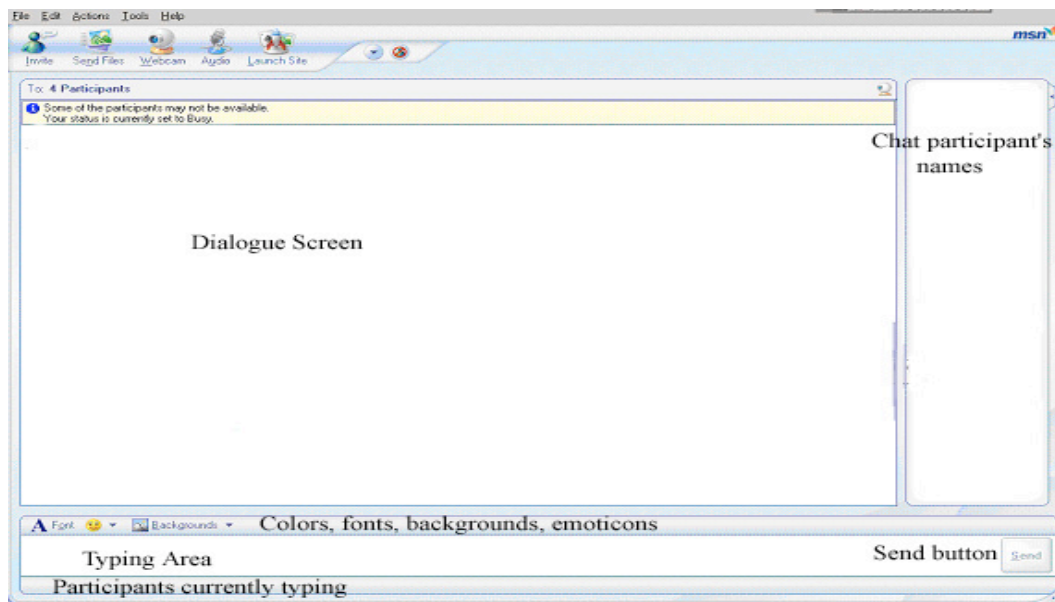

Figure 1. MSN Instant Messenger interface

The Participants

All of the participants in the study were ESL students from northeast Asia, with the exception of a single student from Peru. All of them had received at least a bachelor's degree in their home countries and were affiliated with the local university as graduate students or visiting scholars, or were spouses who had accompanied their husbands. The teacher, Tom, was also a graduate student in the local university. Table 1 shows relevant personal information about the participants.

Table 1. Participants

Name[4]	Age	Computer skill	English typing skill	Gender	Length of Stay	Nationality	Occupation
Adam	30s	Adv.	Int.	M	3 Mon.	Japan	Visiting scholar
Amy	20s	Int.	Low	F	3 Mon.	China	Spouse
Ana	30s	Low	Low	F	1 Y.	Peru	Spouse
Chang	40s	Int.	Low	M	6 Mon.	China	Visiting scholar
Chuck	30s	Adv.	Int.	M	1Mon.	Korea	Visiting scholar
Jen	20s	Int.	Low	F	4 Mon.	China	Spouse
Jenny	20s	Int.	Int.	F	2 Mon.	Korea	Spouse
Julianne	20s	Int.	Low	F	4 Mon.	China	Spouse
Jun	20s	Adv.	Adv.	M	4 Mon.	Japan	Graduate student
Lee	40s	Adv.	Int.	M	3 Mon.	Korea	Visiting scholar
Lin	40s	Low	Low	F	6 Mon.	China	Spouse
Maria	30s	Int.	Low	F	1Y.	Korea	Spouse
Steven	20s	Adv.	Adv.	M	3 Mon.	China	Graduate student
Sue	30 s	Low	Low	F	6 Mon.	Korea	Spouse
Sun	20s	Adv.	Int.	M	1Mon.	Korea	Visiting scholar
Tom	30s	Adv.	Adv.	M	30Y.	U.S.A.	Class teacher
Vincent	20s	Adv.	Adv.	M	4 Mon.	China	Graduate student

This information is based on their responses to the survey (see Appendix) I conducted before their first chat meeting at the beginning of the semester[5]. In regards to Table 1, *computer skill* refers to how comfortable and confident the participants were in browsing the Web, e-mailing, and using software for creating documents. I distinguished computer skills from *English typing skills*, because the teacher informed me that there was a discrepancy between these two skills among the participants.

All the visiting scholars majored in engineering or natural sciences and had come to the United States for a year of research. All the graduate student and visiting scholar participants were men, and all the spousal participants were women. The ESL student participants had close relationships with the teacher. He majored in Chinese, had a good command of the language, and taught EFL in Taiwan for three years.

Procedure

As an observer, I attended both CMC and face-to-face (FtF) class meetings without being involved in any of their activities. The participants held Web-based chat meetings once a week for about one and a half hours every Sunday night, logging on from their homes. In CMC meetings, I observed the teacher managing chat sessions without logging onto the chat program myself. The FtF meetings happened twice a week on Monday and Wednesday nights in a university classroom, with each class lasting two and a half hours. The setting was a university classroom with desks, a blackboard at the front, and a whiteboard on the side. The participants were seated in a circle, and I sat outside the circle observing and taking notes of their FtF class activities. Drawing on my role as an observer, I gathered data from both FtF meetings

and Web-based chat meetings for a semester from September to December of 2003. The collected data include electronically saved chat meeting transcripts, field notes, recorded class interactions from the FtF class meetings, formal and informal interviews with participants, e-mail exchanges between the teacher and the ESL participants, and survey information that included the participants' personal profiles. Even though the study focuses on the participants' online CMC activities, I also collected data from their offline FtF class meetings, since the participants' class conversations could not be easily divided into online and offline realms.

I identified recursive patterns through triangulation of field notes, transcripts of recorded FtF class meetings, interview data, and electronically saved chat data. The analytical categories I used include constructed interactional patterns and norms, configured affordances regarding the CMC environment, and utilizations of CMC activities for linguistic, academic, and social goals. These analytical categories are based on interactional sociolinguistics (Goffman, 1959; Gumperz, 1982; Scollon & Scollon, 2001), and ecological perspectives of language learning and language socialization (Kramsch, 2002; Leather & van Dam, 2003; van Lier, 2000).

FINDINGS

Reconstruction of Interactional Patterns

In the FtF meeting after their first chat meeting, the participants discussed the benefits and drawbacks of the chat session. They reported such constraints as fast turn formation, written text as a main mode of communication, and discontinuous communication with disrupted interactions (see also Negretti, 1999). The participants also reported opportunities/benefits such as being free from the need to go to a physical space, no need to worry about pronunciation, and the ability to review ways of speaking with the saved chat dialogues for their language learning. The student participants expressed their confusion and frustration (see also Werry, 1996), calling the discontinuity of interactions and the disruption of adjacent pairs in the large group chat interactions "crazy people's talk." They mentioned that even though they had some experience using Web chat tools before their chat meeting, most of them were not familiar with the interactional features that a large group of participants generated. The class discussed ways to reduce confusion and frustration by focusing on the nature of synchronous CMC, in particular multiple strands of dialogue being generated too quickly and the tendency of strands to disrupt other strands; in the end, the class agreed to follow a pre-selected topic for each chat session. They decided to have a person who opens a chat room and manages entrance to the room to avoid the problem of multiple chat windows.[6] The students asked Tom to resume his teacher's position and control entrance to the chat room. Before the CMC meetings began in September, the participants planned to meet informally without consideration of their roles as teacher and student. The affordances that they configured from the first CMC meeting led them to reframe their CMC activities. With all these changes, however, the students still wanted to have a whole class meeting, even after having faced the difficulties of CMC meetings in big groups. They did not like the idea of dividing the class into groups.

The changes put Tom back into a "traditional" teacher role and reshaped the interactional structure of the CMC meetings, as can be seen in the following chat extract[7] (October 5, 2003):

1) Tom: So I thought a useful question for this topic would be the university ENVIRONMENT.

2) Tom: Let me hear from everybody.

3) Tom: What do you think about the people, the culture, the facilities here?

4) Steven: cultrue is very different from ours

5) Adam: Could you give me examples for the difference of way of thinking?

6) Tom: Steven, could you help Adam with this?

7)   Tom: Chang, do you face cultural differences?

8)   Chang: Yes.

In turn 1, the teacher initiated the chat session with a question related to American university culture that he had e-mailed the class as their pre-selected topic before the chat session. After his comments, there was a long pause on the part of the students. Eventually, the teacher invited them back to the discussion by saying that he wanted to hear from every participant in turn 2. Once again, there was no response from the student participants—graduate students, visiting scholars, or spouses—and the teacher started to rephrase what he meant by the word *environment* in turn 3. In turn 4, Steven responded to Tom's question by drawing on one of the words Tom provided. The teacher allocated turns to specific students. For instance, Tom asked Steven to give an answer to Adam's question in turn 6. But Steven could not answer Adam's question quickly enough. To fill in the waiting time after turn 6, Tom invited Chang, one of the less active participants, to the chat discussion while asking him a display question reflective of his consideration of Chang's English proficiency and typing skill in turn 7. Chang was one of the participants who showed a discrepancy between typing and computer skills.

As seen above, the new chat format changed the dynamics of interactions among the participants, from casual gathering to formal teacher-centered class. When the participants planned their CMC activities, the affordances they had built were based on their previous experiences with synchronous CMC, leading them to think of informal social gatherings that resembled "a tea party" with multiple small conversations. Their informal chat changed into a formal class meeting within the dynamics of their group based on the reconfigured affordances of their CMC activities. That is, the participants discussed possible ways of reducing frustration and problems stemming from a lack of structure, and as teacher and students, took responsibility for changing their CMC activities. In doing so, the teacher's role changed more than the students', taking on responsibilities that included sending out a pre-selected topic for each meeting, and opening and managing chat rooms. As a continuation of the teacher's responsibility, Tom made an effort to help all the members to participate by inviting them to the discussion, and his control of turns-at-talk was strongest with the participants who could not participate in the chat sessions as actively as others because of their lack of typing skills and inexperience with written English. In addition, the teacher filled long waiting periods between turns-at-talk that resulted primarily from the participants' slow typing skills and limited English proficiency in order to continue the chat discussion. The way the participants co-constructed their online chat interactions was based on social roles that they played in the community of CMC practices.

Interactional Norms

In the same way that participants jointly built the context of their CMC interactional patterns, they also constructed their interactional norms within group dynamics. The most salient interactional norm in the ESL participants' chat meetings was helping each other to save face in communication (see Belz & Kinginger, 2002, 2003; Kinginger, 2000; O'Dowd, 2003; Thorne, 2003; Ware, 2005 for the issue of face in CMC). In a process known as "face-work," speakers in conversations vacillate between positive face (e.g., politeness, respect) and negative face (e.g., pride, self-sufficiency) in order to maintain both independence and politeness. The concept of *frame* in face-work refers to schema (Goffman, 1959; Kramsch, 2000) that a speaker in communication events has regarding face. Communication participants do not develop their frame as individual idiosyncratic behaviors, but as enactments of their membership in a social group. *Footing* represents the participants' stances regarding their frame in face-work (Goffman, 1959; Kramsch, 2000). Face-work often occurs in collaboration among members of a certain social group and is aligned with the group's discourse styles. Participants in communication keep negotiating frames and footings to save each other's face. The negotiation of frames and footings is projected to face-saving strategies that the participants have learned and acquired as members of a social group. The strategies that the speakers use in the negotiating process distinguish insiders of a discourse community from outsiders,

informing different cultural backgrounds and discourse styles that are brought to the conversation (Goffman, 1959; Gumperz, 1982; Kramsch, 1985, 2000; Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

In the online chat interactions of the ESL class, a couple of face-saving strategies occurred as collaborative work orchestrated by the teacher and the students together. One of the strategies identified was commiseration through sharing identical or similar experiences. One example of this kind of strategy was found in the teacher's effort to save his students' face. The teacher reported that the students were concerned with making mistakes in FtF discussions due to their lack of English skills and inexperience with speaking in English. He mentioned that he was also careful about allowing his adult ESL students to feel "embarrassed" in front of other classmates. The teacher's efforts to support the students in saving face regularly guided their chat interactions, as seen in the following extract (October 5, 2003):

1) LEE: I think it is very systematic and have lack of tolerence

2) Chuck: i don't know much about here, because i am just here about 4 weeks.

3) Lee: I dont find the proper adjective for TOLERENCE ...

4) Tom: Only 4 weeks?

5) LEE: Do you know what I mean ?

6) Chuck: yes. i arrived in here four weeks ago

7) Tom: It's a shame when Americans in a UNIVERSITY setting aren't tolerant (there's the adjective).

8) LEE: YES , thanks. I'm a idiot..^^

9) LEE: an

10) LEE: I mean it's just about some rules of CAMPUS life.

11) Tom: No, don't say that. My wife scolds me all the time when I say I'm an idiot about Chinese. It's not good for learning.

Before this chat excerpt, the participants were talking about the university "environment." In turn 1, Lee was telling the class that the university campus rules were "very systematic" and had a "lack of tolerance." He wanted to use the word "tolerant" in his utterance, but he could not use the adjective form of the word in as timely a way as his productive vocabulary in turn 3. As a response to Lee's asking for the word, the instructor gave him an example sentence with the use of the word "tolerant" in turn 7. By saying that he was "an idiot" and by showing his embarrassment with "raised eyebrows (^^)" in turn 8, Lee acted to save his own face. Tom immediately helped Lee to do so by claiming to call himself "an idiot" while learning Chinese, in turn 11. Tom reported that he was implying that everybody experiences that kind of forgetful moment as part of the language learning process and, to help Lee keep his positive face, told him that there was no reason to feel like an idiot. On the other hand, Tom's efforts to protect Lee's face also allowed him to maintain his own positive face with his students, in that his comments in turn 11 helped him to be regarded as a considerate person.

Another identified strategy for saving face was avoiding disagreements or confrontations in which communication partners could lose face. This strategy was found in interactions among the students. Face-work among the students influenced their discussions in such a way that the participants did not develop differences or disagreements further, in order to avoid possible confrontations and maintain harmonious relationships among themselves. The following chat extract[8] (October 12, 2003) represents this:

1) Steven: people here is very nice

2) LEE: For me, they are very exclusive.

3) Tom: Wow, very different opinions!

4) Tom: Sun, are most of the people in your department helpful, or less than helpful?

5) Sun: helpful

6) Steven: It is a little difficult for me to be familiar with here.

7) Sun: i have no problem except english and driving....

8) Jenny: ^^

9) Sun: 😃

10) Jenny: me too

11) LEE: Even between members in the same LAB, they hardly talking each other.

12) Tom: Ana, does your husband ever say anything about his colleagues?

Before this interaction, the participants were talking about their graduate school experiences. Steven mentioned that people were "nice" in turn 1. When Lee said, "For me, they are very exclusive" in turn 2, the instructor stated in turn 3 his surprise in hearing two significantly different opinions and kept asking the other participants to share their experiences in the graduate school with each other (turns 4 and 12). In turn 5, when Sun revealed experiences similar to what Steven had mentioned, Steven (turn 6) commented on experiences that were different from what he had just commented on. He was saying that it was a little difficult for him to adjust to the States. According to him, he wanted to help Lee to not feel uncomfortable by being the only person among the chat participants having difficulties in an American graduate school. Following Steven's remarks, Sun and Jenny expressed their difficulties speaking in English and driving in the States. They expressed their desire to provide Lee with emotional support and to make him feel less detached from the other participants. Nobody asked Lee further questions about his comments on marginalized experiences in graduate school. Lee voluntarily explained why he felt excluded in his lab in turn 11. Rather than trying to challenge or encourage Lee to reflect on his contributions to the "exclusive" relations that he had with the people in his department, Tom, the teacher, focused on experiences brought up by other participants, and then asked Ana to share her husband's experiences with other participants in turn 12.

The teacher also worked to avoid possible confrontations. The following week, when the participants had one more meeting about American graduate schools, Tom mentioned that having good relationships with other people in graduate school depended on "one's personality." In an interview with Tom regarding why he had not asked Lee further questions about relationships with colleagues in his lab and why he had mentioned the importance of one's personality in having good relationships with other people, he explained his reasoning:

> I tried to get them to look at things from a different angle, but I didn't want to force them.
> I don't want to make them uncomfortable or embarrassed during the discussion. You
> know, I'm in charge of the chat meetings as an instructor, and I'm concerned about how
> the students feel about the class discussion. (Interview, March, 6, 2004)

As Tom mentioned, he primarily focused on the teacher's role, concerned with his students' sense of face while managing the chat discussions in a smooth way that kept the participants from feeling "embarrassed." His comments show how he suggested that the student participants reflect on their contributions to the relationships that they had built with others, in an effort to avoid direct challenge or disagreement and to help them save face.

Utilization of the CMC Activity

In sociocultural theory, learning is a process that entails not only internalization of the knowledge of the learning task, but also transforming and using the internalized knowledge for other purposes while in the process of development (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). This learning process emphasizes the learner's active role in social practices that involve socially formulated, tool-mediated, goal-oriented actions. The ways in which the ESL students reconstructed and utilized the social practices of their CMC activities represented sociocultural perspectives of learning in that they used CMC practices for different purposes that reflected needs emanating from roles in their lives. In particular, their professional roles indicated how the participants drew on the CMC meetings.

First, graduate students participated in CMC sessions to look for opportunities to practice their spoken English. Their main motivation came from the ability to practice English with other people without considering issues of standard or non-standard English. The graduate students were new to the university, and they expressed the need to improve their spoken English. For instance, when the participants had a chat meeting about their social lives, Steven explained aspects of his social life with other Chinese friends in relation to learning English, as seen in the following chat excerpt (October 12, 2003):

> [T]here are a lot of chinese in this university, it helps a lot to my life, but it is not good to my spoken English. i usually stay with chinese friends in my free time, we speak chinese all the time.

As Steven commented on his non-academic life in the university town in relation to learning English, he wanted more chances to practice English. Like Steven, the other graduate student participants also mentioned the need to improve their spoken English. All of them attended the virtual meetings more than the FtF class meetings. In the interviews I conducted after the semester about how their CMC activities helped their social, linguistic, and academic lives and why they had attended more chat meetings than FtF meetings, they mentioned their busy graduate school schedules and the convenience of chat meetings in learning English. The following excerpt from an interview with Vincent represents the graduate students' attitudes toward their CMC activities:

> I have to read and do assignment. I am busy. ... I can't go to English class often …
> Chatting is easy. I just stay home and speak English with other people. (Interview,
> February 22, 2004)

Vincent highlighted the use of CMC activities in providing him with opportunities for practicing English in a timely, convenient manner, one of the merits of chatting for busy graduate students. They used their CMC meetings as a place to improve their spoken English.

Second, all the visiting scholars were from engineering and natural sciences programs and had received all of their schooling in their home countries before coming to the United States. They participated in the chat activities to improve their English and to know about American university culture. All the visiting scholars had to write and make presentations in English, which was a significant challenge to them, coming from linguistically and academically different discourse communities. They talked about presentation experiences in academic conferences and department seminars with other participants in CMC meetings. They also shared information about the cities they would visit for their conferences.

After the semester, I held interviews with the visiting scholars and asked them in what ways their CMC activities were helpful to their lives in the US. The visiting scholar participants reported that the CMC activities helped them toward their academic and linguistic needs as explained above. The following excerpt from an interview with Lee illustrates how visiting scholars drew on the CMC meetings to adjust to a new environment, linguistically, socially, and academically:

> I need to improve my English to prepare myself better for the conferences I had to attend
> in the States. The chat meetings were helpful. I like to talk with the graduate students. …
> I look at the chat transcript and review my English and try to improve my weak points of
> English. (Interview, February 20, 2004[9])

Lee, a visiting scholar participant, made a deliberate effort to improve his English for his professional goals through CMC activities.

Third, spousal participants joining in the chat activities showed two dissimilar trends in their use of CMC. Many of them stopped attending CMC meetings before the middle of the semester. In formal interviews and informal conversations I had with them, the spousal participants expressed difficulties participating in the chat meetings because they did not have much experience in reading and producing written English texts with computers. They also mentioned that they could not follow the speed of the graduate participants' chatting, even though they were receiving support from the teacher by being invited to the chat dialogue. All the participants were given an oral test, were judged to be at the same level of English proficiency, and initially reported similar CMC experiences. But writing through the CMC tool revealed the issue of different levels of *written* English proficiency. Even though the participants were enthusiastic about the idea of joining the CMC activity, the activity was not appropriate for the spousal participants, whose ability to produce written English on a computer was not good enough for synchronous CMC. Around the middle of the semester, Sue, a member of a local social group[10] that aimed to help international women in the town to build friendships and to learn about other cultures and foods, introduced the club to other spousal participants. Many of the spousal participants tried to participate in the chat meeting a few times and then turned their attention to the local social group. They started to find their niche for social gatherings, while hoping not only to make friends but also to improve their English.

However, three of the spousal participants, who were planning to apply for the university graduate school, regularly participated in the class CMC activities for social gatherings until the end of the semester and showed progress in reading and typing in English. The three spousal participants—Julianne, Maria, and Jenny—drew on CMC meetings to support their plans for graduate school. For example, when the participants had a meeting about the topic of American graduate schools, they were actively engaged in the discussion, asking about the university's graduate program application requirements and about graduate life; they showed increased vocabulary, more complicated sentence structure, and improved typing skill, as seen in the following chat extract[11] (November, 16, 2003):

1) Julianne says: I studied for managment as an ungraduate and worked as an accountant in a company forsome years in my country.So I plan to study for Master of Accountant

2) Tom says: I think in Maria's case, experience with ceramics—giving samples of your work—would be very important and beneficial!

3) Tom says: I think with international business, your accounting experience will be very valuable here.

4) Julianne says: Can anybody give me some suggestions?

5) Jun says: Based on my experience, you have to write an essay about yourself.

6) Jenny says: My husband said the same thing

7) Maria says: Portpolio is very important for me to enter

8) Maria says: not essay

Before this excerpt, the participants were talking about important features of American graduate studies and application requirements. Julianne stated her plan to study for a master's degree while talking about her previous working experiences in turn 1. Tom stated his opinions in turns 2 and 3 about what could be

important in Maria's and Julianne's graduate school applications. Julianne sought more information about the application requirements in turn 4. Jun told Julianne that she had to write a personal essay to apply to the graduate school in turn 5. Jenny agreed with Jun's comments in turn 6, but Maria said that her portfolio would be more important in her application to the graduate school than her personal statement, letting the other participants know that application requirements are varied based on the areas of study (turns 7 and 8). The spousal participants were not only getting help from the other participants but were also helping each other to get specific information about their graduate school applications. In my interviews, all three of them mentioned that they would apply to the graduate school and needed to know about American graduate programs and application processes, and that they needed to learn how to type and read well in English. When I interviewed Julianne about how the CMC activity was helpful to her life in the United States, and how she could overcome the barriers of written English and stay to the end of the semester, she stated the following:

> I have to type English for chatting. ... It's good to my master study. I know I have to read and type English for my master study. (February 25, 2004)

The three spousal participants considered requirements for CMC meetings such as typing and reading written English texts on computers as preparation for their graduate studies. They also perceived the CMC activities as a venue for addressing linguistic, social, and academic needs. The three spouse participants utilized CMC meetings in support of their plans for graduate school.

DISCUSSION

The way the participants restructured and utilized their CMC activities for their life goals demonstrates the complexity of understanding CMC uses in language education in relation to social, cultural, linguistic, material, and discursive contexts. Also, the findings show how the participants construed contextual elements and constructed the context of their learning based on active perceptions of and engagement with the environment of the learning activity. Their perceptions of contextual elements and actions in the learning task represent core tenets of ecological perspectives, which argue against static, essentialized views of learning (Kramsch & Lam, 2003; van Lier, 2000, 2002). Regarding language learners' co-construction of online interactions, studies of telecollaboration have demonstrated how online interactions have been jointly constructed by participants into successful communication with "high functionality," or unsuccessful communication with "low functionality" (Belz, 2003; Ware, 2005). Communications with either low or high functionality resulted from contextual tensions along institutional and social dimensions, attitudes toward telecollaboration, different genres of CMC, and social discourses regarding CMC tools.

In the current study, the joint construction of online interactions was identified in the interactional patterns and norms the participants established through configuration of the context, based on construing contextual elements such as synchronous CMC environment, unfamiliar interactional features, big classes, and the importance of maintaining face. For example, the participants took action to reshape their CMC context to solve the unexpected interactional features and frustrations that arose. However, their reconstruction of the context was accomplished through Tom's resumption of his teacher's role. Even though the student participants themselves were active in restructuring their online social meetings for the context of the CMC activities, they wanted only the teacher to be able to invite others and control the entrance to the chat room. The teacher responded to the students' requests, exceeding what they had requested by controlling not only entrance to the chat meetings but also turns-at-talk to make their CMC interactions "natural" in comparison with FtF interactions. The reconstructed context for their CMC activities afforded the participants traditional, teacher-directed classroom interactions. The way that the participants reconfigured the contextual elements of the synchronous text-based Web chat led them to accentuate their roles as teacher and students. Their co-construction of the context of the CMC activities was intertwined with the social roles they played as members of their discourse community. Namely, the

participants' joint actions in reconstructing the CMC activities were done based on what they perceived a teacher and students should do, reflecting their prior socialization experiences in language learning.

Another way that the participants jointly constructed the context of the CMC activities was by saving one another's face (Goffman, 1959; Kramsch, 1985), adhering to their FtF interactional norms. The participants' collaborative efforts in saving their own and others' face while sharing their living and studying experiences in the United States were partly due to the participants being adult language learners, who were not accustomed to making mistakes in public while making themselves understood to others (e.g., McDonald & McDonald, 1996). They often expressed "embarrassed" feelings about the mistakes they made coming from a lack of English skills required for synchronous communication, which led them to be more supportive of protecting each others' face through such strategies as commiserating with same or similar experiences and avoiding disagreements. The participants' shared strategies for saving face (Goffman, 1959; Kramsch, 1985, 2000) were meant to establish collegial and supportive environments that would reduce embarrassment in making mistakes in front of classmates. The participants' negotiations of frame and footing in face-work were enactments of their membership of this social group, one that valued becoming a supportive participant who contributes to strengthening group harmony and saving others' face in communicative events (see Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Sullivan, 2000; Yu & Wen 2003; Yum, 1997 for Asian students' emphasis on group harmony and face in social interactions). In addition, the teacher, aware of the students' frame and footing on face-work, reenacted their face saving strategies to protect not only his students' face but also his own when the students were struggling to express themselves in English in class-wide discussions. As Tom mentioned in an interview regarding his teacher's role (Interactional Norms, above), he placed priority in helping his students to save face and in managing smooth class discussions, rather than in critical reflection on or deeper thinking about co-constructing social relationships with others. This face-saving norm did not encourage the participants to develop their CMC meetings as a social space for critically reflecting on self and others.

The participants' learning experiences in online chatting demonstrate that language learning and language socialization are interwoven into the fabric of CMC practices. For example, the ways in which the participants utilized CMC activities and constructed their learning experiences correlated closely with their professional roles. The required typing skills and written English proficiency for synchronous CMC meetings were beyond the intermediate English proficiency level of many of the participants in this study. These requirements discouraged and prevented the spousal participants from joining the CMC meetings, even though the CMC tool helped the participants to solve the problem of securing physical classroom space for their social gatherings. However, to those spousal participants who planned to attend graduate school, use of a CMC tool had investment value, because they needed to acquire expertise in typing and reading English in order to study in an American graduate program. They persevered in their CMC activities and overcame gate-keeping barriers, unlike the other spousal participants who did not see any investment value regarding their CMC activities. The CMC activities these participants were engaged in widened the division among academic and non-academic participants, becoming a social space for academic gatherings, against their original hopes for strengthening social bonds among themselves. As a cultural artifact, the CMC tool in this study privileged academic professionals who were more experienced working with computers and producing written English. Considering the relationship between (writing) technology and power (Kramsch, 2000), it is necessary to regard language learning through the CMC tool as a social practice that has discursive meanings for those who use the tool and develop its literacy.

This study shows that learners shape their learning contexts as active social agents. The way they constructed affordances and configured the context for their CMC activities is interconnected with language socialization at a specific time and place. The process of constructing affordances is dialogic

engagement between learners and contextual elements in a learning task (Kramsch, 2002; Leather & van Dam, 2003; van Lier, 2000, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Contributing to previous studies of CMC contexts, this study contends that one also needs to see the configured context co-constructed by language learners to fully capture the complexity of CMC practices, since the context for any learning activity is an interconnected relationship among contextual elements of the learning environment that learners configure for learning tasks. This perspective of context is anchored to ecological perspectives of language learning (Kramsch, 2002; Leather & van Dam, 2003; van Lier, 2000, 2002), which allow researchers and teachers to avoid rigid conceptions of learning and its contexts. Ecologically exploring the ways in which learning contexts are jointly configured within group dynamics by participants illustrates their identities/subjectivities regarding co-constructed norms, rules, and goals, as well as specific interests and concerns embedded in their language socialization processes through CMC. Ecological perspectives are not only concerned with participants' online lives, but their offline lives, too. Examining how language learners carry their interests and life stories over to online language learning spaces requires more research into how online and offline lives of participants are interconnected, while shaping affordances regarding their CMC activities (Lam, 2000, 2004; Leander & McKim, 2003; Ware, 2005).

Additionally, expanding conceptions of context for CMC activities as language socialization practices entails an understanding of language learners' complex lives, a complexity that comes from multiple social roles, providing the participants with different affordances for their CMC activities. In this vein, this study demonstrated how people are discursively placed in certain subject positions according to gender, profession, age, language, and class in their uses of CMC tools, especially when language educators use CMC tools in various social and educational settings outside higher educational institutions in which the participants are less homogeneous in terms of their social roles and positions. It suggests that studies of CMC uses in language education need to examine language acquisition and language socialization as inextricably intertwined entities.

This study was conducted predominantly with Asian international students and scholars and their spouses in a US university language program. However, its findings suggest some points for language teachers to consider in planning CMC tool use in their teaching practices. First, individual learners' subject positions regarding CMC tool use need to be considered in plans for integrating CMC activities into teaching practices, in addition to gauging students' typing skills and differences between written and oral language proficiencies. Class size is also a critical factor in having productive CMC discussions. This point emerges from the observation that a large group of chat participants generated multiple strands of dialogue, creating confusion and frustration. It reflects the conclusions of other studies (Kitade, 2000; Kötter, 2003) of synchronous CMC suggesting that no more than five should be in any single synchronous virtual meeting at one time. Lastly, this study highlights how important the teacher's role is in designing and delivering an appropriate pedagogy using CMC tools for any kind of learning activity (Kern, 2000; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Ware & Kramsch, 2005) in that it is crucial for language educators to thoroughly examine the appropriateness of a selected CMC tool for the purpose of an activity, as well as the opportunities and constraints in students' uses of that tool for the planned learning task.

APPENDIX

Survey Questions for Chat Meeting

First Name: Last Name:

Email Address:

(Check One)

Male   Female
Graduate Student   Visiting Scholar   Other (specify)

Age (e.g., 20s; 30s):

Which country are you from?

How long have you been in the States?

What was/is your major in your undergraduate or graduate study?

How comfortably do you use word processing programs, email, and web browsers?

(Check one)   Low   Intermediate   Advanced

How well do you type in English?

(Check one)   Low   Intermediate   Advanced

Have you ever used instant messengers?

If so, which one(s)?

NOTES

1. The International Programs Office of the local university runs an ESL program, "American Culture and Language Program," which provides free ESL classes for international students, scholars, and their spouses.

2. The language program administers a placement test before the semester starts. When the test is administered the students are also surveyed for personal information, language learning experiences, and their wishes for ESL classes. In the survey, the students' foremost wish for the ESL class is having many social activities.

3. This information about how the class came to have CMC meetings was revealed by the teacher when I interviewed him regarding their CMC activity.

4. All the names in this paper are pseudonyms.

5. I was informed of the CMC activity of this ESL class after the class designed their CMC activity. But I was introduced to the class and got permission for my study from the students before the class had their first chat meeting and could observe all of their CMC meetings, which commenced two weeks after the semester started, and all FtF class meetings except for the first week of the semester.

6. MSN Instant Messenger[TM] is a free Web chat tool allowing the participants to invite each other when they are logged on. When a participant invites other participants, a new interface window is generated. When the participants had their first chat meeting, some of them invited each other as soon as they were logged on; they then had to solve the problem of multiple chat windows.

7. A total of 12 participants attended the October 5th chat meeting. The capitalized or misspelled words in the chat excerpt are copied verbatim from the original chat text.

8. A total of 11 participants attended the October 12th chat meeting. The capitalized or misspelled words in the chat excerpt are copied verbatim from the original chat text.

9. The excerpt from a recorded interview is translated from Korean to English by the researcher.

10. The local community has a social organization for international women—"Round the World Women." Members of the organization meet twice a week to cook and to visit various places in the region.

11. A total of 9 students attended the November 16th chat meeting. The capitalized or misspelled words in the chat excerpt are copied verbatim from the original chat text.

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