

Developing Oral Communication in English for Thai Secondary School Students by Using Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication at Rayongwittayakom School

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Abstract: *The aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of using synchronous computer mediated communication (SCMC) to develop oral English communication for Thai secondary school students, including finding out the attitudes of students toward the teaching techniques in terms of oral English communication development. It is believed from previous research that SCMC can provide more opportunities for students to practice communication in English and develop a variety of interactions. The study was conducted with data collected from Thai secondary school students at Rayongwittayakom School. The participants were randomly selected to learn oral communication via the SCMC technique. The data was collected via the oral pre-test and post-test and assessed by using the Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM), classroom observations, a questionnaire and interviews. The data was collected over a period of eight weeks, with follow-up interviews, face-to-face and online. During the eight week period, the participants were first observed by the researcher in terms of behavior of learning. Then the questionnaire and interview were employed to countercheck the information gathered.*

Keywords: Oral English communication development, SCMC, online internet chat, face-to-face interview, SOLOM, classroom observation, Thai secondary school students, questionnaire and structured interview.

Background and statement of the problem

English have been taught since 1862 during the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868), but the results of its teaching leaves a lot to be desired (Brudhiprabha, 2013). The results of teaching are still far from satisfactory. A well-known authority of ELT in Thailand, M.L. Boonlua Debyasuvarn noted that only 10 percent of Thai students in the educational system are proficient in English (Debyasuvarn, 1981 cited in Broughton, 1999, p. 71):

“The late Ajarn M L Boonlua Debyasuvarn said she believed only ten percent of students in the education system become proficient in English to the extent that they can communicate satisfactorily. In her paper Ajarn Boonlua claims that ten percent succeed whatever method of teaching is used because ‘they can absorb and make sense of everything that is taught in every subject’. They are high academic achievers.”

It is also reported by the National Council of Economic and Social Development, Journal of Economics and Society of August 2014 that the percentage of Thai students who can communicate in English remained the same as indicated (NCESD, 2014 cited in Zoom, Thairath News, 14 November 2014). The question is what causes our utter failures in ELT.

More recently a guru of ELT (Brudhiprabha, 2013, p. 7) had this to say:

We must revolutionize Thailand's schools. We must dispel the "nguu-nguu-plaa-plaa" (smattering) **philosophy of ELT**. We must discard the status quo with our deliberate crusade. We must attempt to make ELT in Thailand all that it should be. Otherwise, we will miss the ASEAN boat! The time for just talking or playing lip-service is over. There is a saying and a truism that "actions speak louder than words". That is to say, we have no time to waste any longer! I submit that 'there will be no renaissance without revolution'. That's our strategy. We must lead the way in educational innovation. 'The day of the status quo is over.'

So, the researcher came up with an idea to employ a different method of teaching English as a foreign language in order to find out the effectiveness of it and solve the problems of teaching English as a foreign language at a high school.

At Rayongwittayakom School, Rayong, Thailand, the researcher studied the achievement of secondary school students by looking at the average of overall English for communication in the year 2012 and 2013, and found that students' scores were not satisfactory according to the school administrator.

In this study it is believed that the methods of teaching are the major issues, and we need to use modern technology in the classroom, particularly in the age of IT. Therefore, this research study is going to make an investigation into an alternative method called Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication (SCMC). Several specialists said that Thai students are afraid of speaking English because they are afraid of making mistakes (Toolsiri, 2005; Wanthanasut, 2008). In Thailand, speaking skills are a critical part of language learning and the teaching process, but Thai learners in general have few chances to interact with English native speakers. The exposure to English of Thai learners is thus somewhat limited (Khamkhien, 2010). Recently, there have been many techniques that researchers and educators have studied for teaching English as a second language in order to develop learners' communicative skills. Further, the SCMC technique could provide speaking practice activities to scaffold students and enhance communication in the real world (Gao, 2012). The theoretical rationale of this study was that theory and practice must go hand in hand. In a research study Brudhiprabha (1992, p. 53) stated that in ELT, "theory without practice is indeed futile, and practice without theory is also fatal".

Purposes of the study

The specific purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of using the SCMC to help secondary school students in Thailand to develop aural-oral skills in English. Thus, this researcher set up the following specific purposes:

- 1 To investigate the effectiveness of the SCMC technique in developing English oral communication among secondary school students.
- 2 To study students' attitudes toward the SCMC technique in oral communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication (SCMC) technology SCMC has been commonly applied to enhance various aspects of foreign or second language learning. As a technology and communication tool, SCMC has been said to have a strong potential for encouraging the negotiation of meaning in interaction. This is because of SCMC's resemblance to spoken communication and the textual features of discourse, which allows learners with more time to attend to language output (Blake, 2000; Satar & Özdener, 2008; Smith, 2005; Sykes, 2005). The benefits of applying SCMC to second language classrooms have been reported including more equitable student participation (Kern, 1995), more learner language output (Sequeira, 2009; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996), better quality of linguistic production, more student motivation and interest and reduced communication anxiety (Satar & Özdener, 2008).

Technologies and SCMC technique to promote oral language communication skills

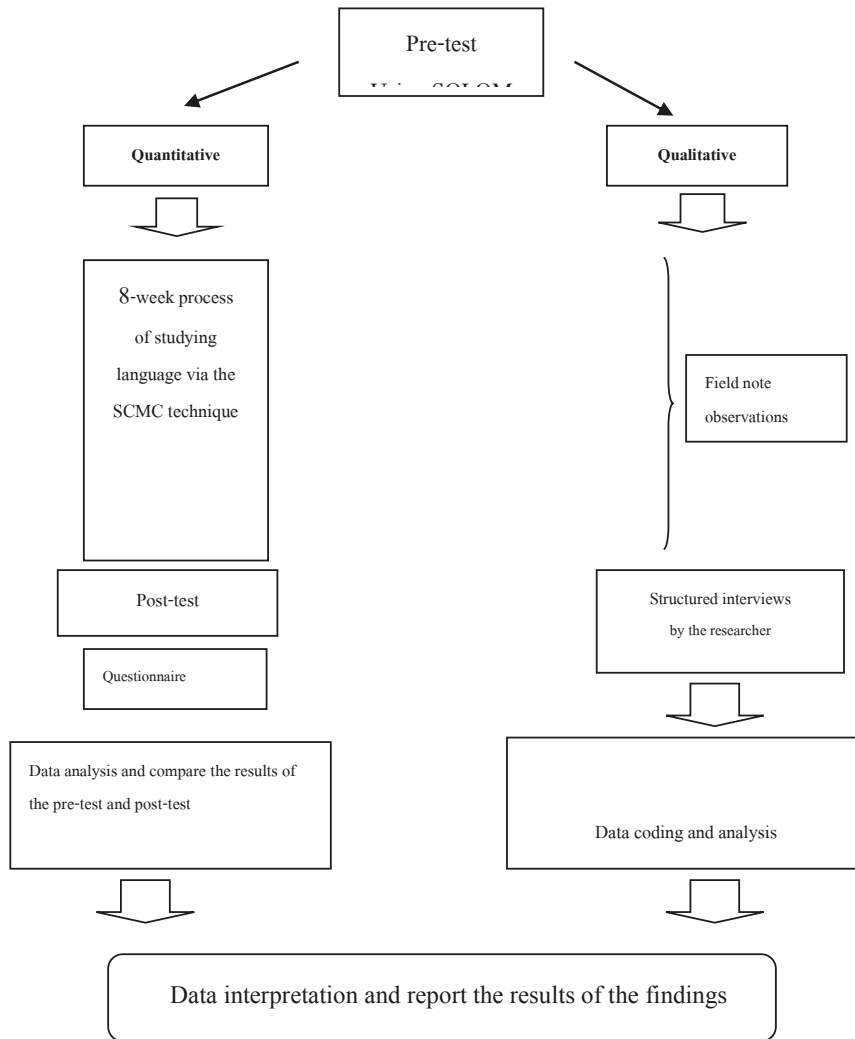
Computer-mediated communication such as synchronous chat can be utilized to promote speaking practice and synchronous chat freeware can be used to increase learners' self-confidence so they will be willing to communicate orally in a language class. Fotos and Browne (2004) stated that the increase in SCMC research in speaking development would be the introduction of many technology tools in the foreign language-learning (FLL) world (e.g., Skype, Tango, Line, or Facebook). The digital medium has become more and more popular in developing oral skills (Abuseileek, 2007; Jauregi, de Graaff, van den Berg, & Kriz, 2012; Vinther, 2011). Several research studies supported that SCMC, in its synchronous manifestation, facilitated the acquisition of oral competence (Jauregi et al., 2012; Kervin & Derewianka, 2011; Levy & Stockwell, 2006)

Research Methods and Design

This study employed a mixed methods approach to obtain answers to the research questions. According to Creswell (2014), the term mixed methods approach is one in which the researcher tends to base knowledge claims on pragmatic grounds (e.g., consequence-oriented, problem-centered, and pluralistic).

Research framework based on the Creswell diagram

Mixed-methods procedures for the study:



Research framework based on Creswell (2014)

Procedures of the study

The researcher introduced the procedures and tasks of this study to the students who were the participants and explained the tasks and how to set up this study to the native English speaking teachers. English for communication classes for secondary students lasted 50 minutes per period and students studied two periods of English per week.

Research instruments

Pre-test interview

The pre-test and post-tests were in the form of an oral interview designed by the researcher. The purpose was to find out the level of language proficiency of the subjects. The pre-test interview was conducted by the English native speakers and the scores of language proficiency recorded in a rubric called SOLOM.

The SOLOM rubric to score the pre-test and post-test

The SOLOM was used in this study in order to reveal the overall oral communication ability among students before and after students practiced oral English communication through SCMC. The results of the SOLOM pre-test and post-test were compared in order to find out the differences of oral language achievement. The SOLOM was adopted from Gottlieb (1999). The rater and rubric for this study was Student's Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM). The SOLOM assesses a student's oral comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Students scoring at level "1" in all categories can be said to have no proficiency in the language. Students scoring at level "5" in all categories can be said to be proficient in the oral language. In this study the SOLOM was administered by native speakers. The SOLOM scores were given by native English speakers who interviewed the participants. Students scoring at level "1" in all categories can be said to have no proficiency in the language. And students scoring at level "2" can be said to have a low average, level "3" can be considered fair or average, level "4" can be considered upper average or good and level "5" means proficient in the language.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed by the researchers focusing on the five aspects of the study.

Questions 1-8 asked about the communication ability of participants after using the SCMC technique.

Questions 9-15 asked about confidence after using the SCMC technique.

Questions 16-27 asked about motivation in learning.

Questions 28-34 asked about the SCMC support learning.

Questions 35-42 asked about the method and facility.

Questions 43-50 asked about the attitude of a participant toward using the SCMC technique.

Research Results

The participants with under average and above average English were assigned to practice oral communication with native speakers six times per week. The practice period was eight weeks. After the participants finished all the procedures of the practiced oral communication by using the SCMC technique, they were interviewed after the study. The participants were evaluated on the test scores of the before and after treatment by using the Student's Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM). SOLOM was used to evaluate students' oral language focusing on 1) Comprehension 2) Fluency 3) Vocabulary 4) Pronunciation and 5) Grammar.

Table 4-13 The SOLOM scores compared before and after treatment for both above average and under average participants.

Participants		Comprehension	Fluency	Vocabulary	Pronunciation	Grammar
Under	Before	2.26	2.20	2.00	2.53	2.20
Average	After	3.13	3.33	3.50	3.26	2.73
Above	Before	2.73	3.13	3.20	2.80	2.66
Average	After	4.13	3.46	3.60	3.53	3.26

Note: The highest score for each category was 5.

Table 4-13 illustrates the student's SOLOM scores () compared before and after treatment for both above average and under average groups in five criteria. The scores of SOLOM from under average and above average in the five criteria were increased. The highest post-test mean scores that increased were comprehension and vocabulary. The least increased was grammar scores. The post-test mean scores of five categories for under average students had higher increases than above average students.

The answer to question

“What were the attitudes of students with different language competencies towards the SCMC in terms of oral communication development,” is as follows.

The research question was proven by the end of the experiment when the participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire. After filling in the questionnaire, the data was revealed in percentages about their attitudes of learning to improve English oral communication by employing the SCMC technique.

Table 4-14 The scores of the agreement collected from the questionnaire.

	Topics of study	Under average (\bar{X})	Above average (\bar{X})
1	Communication ability	3.55	4.09
2	Confidence	3.22	4.05
3	Relationship	3.07	3.41
4	Motivation	3.32	3.62
5	Support	3.27	4.22
6	Method and facility	3.38	4.03
7	Attitude	3.14	4.02

Note: The full score of each category was 5.

Table 4-14 indicates seven perspectives from the questionnaire and compares the mean scores that represent the level of agreement from under average and above average. The data from the table show that the SCMC method provided students at the high level of agreement. All categories are labeled more than half. The participants agreed that SCMC provided more opportunities to communicate in English, support participants in learning and practice oral communication.

The results of the structural question interview

The researcher found that most of the participants at the structural interview step were satisfied with the technique and stated that they not only practiced speaking but also listening, thinking, and problem solving. The other advantage to learning was concentration and focusing. The participants said that the SCMC technique gave those more chances to speak than in a traditional class.

The SCMC is an effective technique in terms of developing oral communication in English for Thai secondary school students, which was evident by the records of the observations and interviews of students toward using the technique. Many aspects of developments occurred. Most of the findings resulted in confidence, positive attitude towards English and motivation to learn the subject. The SCMC technique was effective in terms of support, motivation, increased confidence, and provided more methods and facilities to practice oral language communication. The results from using SOLOM show the improvement of the participants after employing the SCMC technique. Further, the results

from the questionnaire reveal that the participants had positive attitudes toward the SCMC technique in terms of oral language development. The evidence from the structural interview emphasized that there were positives of the SCMC toward English oral language practice. Finally, the hypothesis of this study was accepted.

Discussion

This research studied the effectiveness of the SCMC technique in terms of developing oral language communication for Thai secondary school students. There were two purposes to the study: 1) to examine the effects of using the SCMC technique in terms of developing oral language communication while studying oral language communication in English among a group of learners with different English competency, and 2) to study the attitudes of both the above and under average oral language communication skill students toward the SCMC teaching technique.

The discussion of quantitative data of the study

The research hypothesis was confirmed by the end of the experiment when the participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained fifty questions with 5 rating levels for the answer of each question. The five levels of ratings for the answers were 1-5 where 5 means strongly agree, 4 means agree, 3 means neutral, 2 means disagree and 1 means strongly disagree.

The findings from comparing the pretest and post-test scores collected from the participants with under average English proficiency showed that the average scores of the post-tests in this group of participants were higher than the pretest scores after using the SCMC method. The findings of the test scores also showed that the participants with under average English proficiency, using the same procedures as the participant with above average English proficiency, could also improve their oral language communication by learning employed through the SCMC technique. The results of the study showed that the mean scores of the under average group on the pre-test and post-test. The average of SOLOM scores were of the participants. The average score of the pre-test was 11.20. On the other hand, the average score of the post-test was 16.00. The data from the study also indicates that the post-test is higher than the pre-test score. By using the observation, pre-test and post-test, the researcher was able to obtain evidence of the students' development in using language by employing the SCMC technique. Thus, the researcher could say that the SCMC tasks had a positive impact on the development of L2 oral communication, indicating the participants' preference in practicing communication by using the SCMC.

The results on the change of proficiency scores by using SOLOM showed that the SCMC had significant improvement on communication skill from the pre-test to the posttest. The SOLOM mean score of the under average group increased from 11.20 to 16.00. Furthermore, the SOLOM mean score of the above average group increased from 14.53 to 18.00. The results were, to some degree, expected because the tasks carried out in SCMC are communication focused tasks, and therefore aim to encourage the students to express their own ideas and explore others' perspectives. As a result, the tasks would help the students generate ideas and encode the ideas using oral language for communication. Li (2012) found the same benefit, that SCMC seems to have more advantage probably because the participants had more opportunities in SCMC to speak and the exposure to more ideas. The results show that SCMC tasks had statistically significant benefits for the development of

L2 communication, and they were as the means for developing comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation and grammar.

The findings of the study also show some connections between the learning processes employing SCMC and the learning outcomes. To illustrate, the SCMC showed a large proportion of turns involving opportunities for L2 learning and the development of the ability to incorporate others' views in building one's own arguments. The participants were more engaged in responding to native English teachers through questions and answers in SCMC tasks. Participants in both the under average and above average groups showed the clue of improvement, suggesting that the participants may engage in exchanges of ideas in SCMC tasks because of various reasons. First, the students may feel more comfortable to frequently confront their members and challenge their points of view. Second, SCMC discussion, together with the requirement of a spoken to express their ideas, encourages the students to focus on comprehension and interaction. Hence, it seems to benefit students from the discussions in SCMC in terms of the use of oral communication development. This is confirmed by Hung (2012) that there were changes in terms of comprehension in different SCMC sessions. It seemed that the balance of using different types of language communication skills would be effectively learned by collaborative work in SCMC technique.

Conclusions

From the findings of the study, the researcher suggests that SCMC is an important medium for L2 development because SCMC provided the students with opportunities to use oral language for communication. Students are more likely to pay attention to create meanings in oral communication tasks. The study also revealed the positive attitudes of the students toward the SCMC technique in terms of oral language communication practice. As the researcher previously suggested, SCMC language by its nature does not need to always be grammatically accurate. This study suggests the grounds for the use of SCMC for second language communicative learning.

Most participants liked the SCMC method, but there were a few participants who were not interested in IT, computers and technology and did not pay much attention to the study through the technique. In general, most of the participants who were able to talk via Skype had good experiences and they were likely to do it again in another language course in the future. Besides, some students still talk to their Skype partners through other social media networks such as Facebook or Twitter. Some students talk face-to-face with partners in daily life. Finally, as synchronous communication plays an important role of secondary school students' lives, it can be stated that the study of SCMC helped participants to experience real-life situations that involved daily topics of conversations of secondary school students.

Recommendations for further studies

For school teachers

For the teachers and educators who are interested in using or applying the SCMC technique to second language classes, there are many aspects to be concerned in terms of the effectiveness of the technique. On the teaching level, the findings indicate that through the new technology, teachers can be more creative in their teaching and also the techniques that they use to teach every aspect of the language can be tailored to be more engaging as well as

more appealing for the students. In fact, teachers can even monitor the process of learning every moment by keeping in touch with the students over the Internet.

The teacher who is interested in applying the SCMC technique in L2 class has to know the level of language proficiency of students. Most of the levels of students could be learned by using the SCMC technique but teachers must conduct the practice activities that scaffold the learners. In the classroom of language learning there are differences of students, for instance, gender and the personal background of knowledge. The outcome of the study may vary.

The goal of the language developing area or skills of L2 must be set and teaching activities designed which are best for each skill. One of the important implications is probably the purpose of using the SCMC method. Although the findings suggest that SCMC had positive effects on oral communication development, it may not necessarily mean that it is effective for learners in developing all aspects of language leaning. The results of the study revealed the effectiveness of using SCMC for the participants to exchange ideas and learn to construct communication matters. Furthermore, the purpose of an SCMC task is to help learners acquire certain communication skills, the meanings, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency and grammar. The learning language components of the study focused on five aspects (comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar). The participants achieved high scores and indicated the development of using SCMC by using SOLOM. Not all of the areas of language learning achieved at a high level. The grammar and written language were developed after the oral communication had been achieved.

For further research

The researcher further recommends the study of using the SCMC to develop other areas of second language skills. The effectiveness of the SCMC toward second language learning still needs to be discovered for other groups of learners with different purposes.

This study has several limitations. The number of participants was small; it is possible that greater differences in the amount of language and interaction generated in either mode may have been found among a larger number of learners. This study also focused on a group of learners at the secondary school level. The qualitative study of the research investigated the attitudes of the students toward the SCMC technique by using structured interviews. It was found that the more effective way to discover the attitudes of students is using a structured interview with their first language. The structured interviews were set up and the answers were limited while the structured interviews could retrieve more information and the questions could be made from the answers of the informants.

Another suggestion for further research is the effect of on-line instruction on other learning issues, such as learner differences, culture and community, or behavioral limitations. Finally, further research might be suggested for the investigation of the impact of SCMC on more specific aspects of motivation, such as student's preferences, areas of language development, etc.

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