

# Adopting Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC) into Second Language Classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

The content of this article is based on the recent practice of adopting text-chatting, a form of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC). The benefit of text-chat in second language acquisition has been focused on computer-assisted language learning (CALL) research and second language acquisition research (SLA). However, the consistent result has not been successfully provided. Thus, the pros and cons of text-chat activities in the second language classroom in the ELF context are discussed in this article. The aim of this article is to examine the effect of text-chat activities in second language classrooms. Overall, text-chat activities are possible potential of fostering second language acquisition in terms of students' performance, motivation toward learning English, and other skills (e.g., chatting skills) although they have some disadvantages to manage the class. The possible use of text-chatting will be discussed.

**Keywords:** *Computer-Assisted Language Learning, Synchronous-Computer Mediated Communication, Text-Chat Activities, Second Language Acquisition.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the pandemic of COVID-19 spread all over the world, classroom management has to be transformed. That is, it has to be changed from traditional face-to-face instruction to online/virtual instruction using a laptop, smartphone, or other electronic devices. The temporal school closure in the early days of this pandemic had a negative impact on in-class communication (e.g., [1]) and also foreign language classrooms itself [2]. However, flexible change in an online classroom made learners get better classroom instruction and develop their language skills (e.g., [3]).

Despite the recent context caused by COVID-19, second language acquisition (SLA) research, especially computer-assisted language learning (CALL) research, tried to shed light on the use of technical support for second language development. The previous research provides positive evidence of CALL in classroom management (e.g., [4]) and language development such as vocabulary acquisition (e.g., [5]), grammar acquisition (e.g., [6]), and pronunciation learning (e.g., [7]).

In addition, synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC), a form of CALL, is one of the beneficial tools in language learning. This system can be a substitution tool for face-to-face instruction. Previous SLA research has been investigating the effect of SCMC in terms of interactional feedback (e.g., [8]), and oral fluency development (e.g., [9]).

This article tries to shed light on the various dimensions of text-chat activities according to the author's practice in which text-chat communication was adopted. Before describing the class, previous empirical and pedagogical findings were summarized. After providing the information on the research settings, the pros and cons of text-chat activities in the second language classroom are discussed based on the instructor's reflections and objective measures holistically. Finally, the possibility of text-chat interaction in language classrooms will be concluded.

## 2. THE BACKGROUND

### 2.1. Computer-assisted language learning

To date, technology has been widely developed and adopted in classrooms settings. However, we may wonder how to use those technologies to provide better learning outcomes. The field in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) tried to shed light on the benefit of assisting technology (i.e., computer or other electronic devices) for language classrooms. One of the CALL systems used in the language classrooms is computer-mediated communication (CMC), in which learners and their instructors can interact each other on-line. The forms of CMC are divided into two types, synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC), in which the immediate response could not be provided. On the other hand, SCMC is the tool in which the user could communicate with each other without time lag (i.e., synchronously). Moreover, SCMC has two types of modalities, text-based and audio-visual based interaction such as video call. Both types of interactions are beneficial tools to facilitate interactive communication (e.g., 10-11). One huge difference between text-chat and video call is that the communication is text-based or audio-based. Whereas using video calls is almost the same as face-to-face communication, text-chat is a completely different activity from face-to-face communication. As we can speculate that video calls can be a substitution for daily communication and may have a positive impact on language development. However, it can be difficult to wonder how valuable text-chatting is.

In the next section, I will summarise the previous studies which provide advantages and disadvantages of assistance by computer from the view of empirical (second language acquisition research) and pedagogical perspectives (Teachers' practice) with a particular focus on text-chatting.

### 2.2. Pros and cons of text-chat

In the theory of second language acquisition (SLA), interaction using the target language, exposure of target language input, output opportunities are necessary to acquire [12-13]. Also, giving feedback for the target language use with some errors is important for language acquisition to get the opportunities to provide learners with the negative evidence of the target language [14] and form-meaning mapping [15-16]. Text-chatting, a form of SCMC, may suit these environments. Previous research showed that text-based SCMC makes L2 learners develop their target language accuracy [17], complexity [18], and grammatical knowledge [19]. Moreover, text-based chat has potential benefits for

oracy skills (i.e., fluency) [9; 20-23]. The study comparing the effect of text-chat with traditional face-to-face interaction and longitudinal study which is the classroom-based experiment, in which the participant (i.e., their students) took the text-chat based English class for a semester provide a positive effect of text-chat for oracy skills. However, recent meta-analysis showed nonsignificant effect on fluency development [20, 23]. In addition, the text-chat activities may decrease the anxiety while speaking tests [24]. In addition to that, adopting SCMC leads to more active participation [25-26]. The students' communication strategies while text-chat interaction in an English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom was also investigated [27]. The students interacted with each other using some communicative strategies such as self-repair (i.e., correct errors on their own), clarification request (e.g., what do you mean?), and translanguaging (i.e., showing the mother tongue word/expression). He also discussed the benefit of text-chatting. In his class, the number of turn-takings increased, suggesting that his students actively participated. Also, he suggested that text-chatting makes the students raise awareness of linguistic forms.

To sum up, using text-chat is one of the effective tools for developing students' language skills such as metalinguistic awareness, oral performance (i.e., fluency), and motivation toward communication. All those researches were empirical research. To synthesis the findings and to apply the text-chat into classroom practice is necessary. Moreover, investigation of SCMC regarding EFL context must be provided.

## 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study examines a text-chat based course with lower English proficiency levels in an EFL context. The aim of the study is to highlight the advantage and disadvantage of adopting text-chat in EFL classrooms in terms of pedagogical and practical perspectives (e.g., classroom management, learners' development). In order to achieve the aim, I set two research questions. RQ1. What is the benefit of adopting text-chat activities in EFL classroom with low proficiency learners? RQ2. What is the demerit of adopting text-chat activities in the EFL classrooms?

## 4. METHODS

### 4.1. The class

Two classes were chosen for the present study as the classes in which learners participated in the text-chat based activities during the whole semester. The classes were at the college in Japan and the students were all Japanese learners who learned English as a foreign

**Table 1.** The information on the target classes

	No. of students	Style	Textbook	Proficiency
Class 1	31	Pair work	Kelly & Kelly (1991)	Elementary
Class 2	32	Group work	Harris & Leeming (2018)	Elementary-Intermediate

language (EFL). Both classes were held twice a week and each is one hour long. There were about thirty students in both classes. The class style was the task-based language teaching (TBLT) method, in which learners should interact with their partner or group members (see [28] for more details). The textbooks were selected by the author [29-30]. These TBLT textbooks contain pre-task instruction (provide vocabulary or one-minute speech), and main tasks (information gap activities/presentation). However, since the textbooks are not structured for the online class, the instructor decided to skip some tasks. The information about the class schedule is summarised in Table 1. The procedure of the two classes was shown in Tables 2 and 3.

**Table 2** The procedure of the class 1

	Activities	Min.
1	To review the target vocabularies	10
2	To complete the task	45
3	To check the task completion and review	5

**Table 3** The procedure of the class 2

	Activities	Min.
1	To introduce the topic they will discuss	5
2	To discuss the target topic	40
3	To summaries their discussion	5

*Note:* The students were expected to read the article in the text, which is related to the discussion before the class.

Almost all students have got grammatical instruction in their junior high and high school. In addition to that, they did not get enough opportunities to speak the target language (i.e., English) and they have relatively high motivation toward learning English. Therefore, the instructor decided to use these textbooks in the classrooms. While the classes were different in terms of the students and course style, the students and the instructor interact with each other using a text-chat function of Microsoft Teams.

#### 4.2. Data Acquisition

In this study, the instructor’s reflections are the most beneficial perspectives to answer the research questions. In addition to the reflections, learners’ motivation and

attitude toward the classes will be discussed in accordance to the questionnaire which was conducted the last class in the semester and the conversations during the class.

Also, I conducted the objective measures to show whether the language skill, especially oral skill was developed. To validate the development, the students were expected to perform two tests before and after the semester (i.e., pre/post-test design) which is the similar design done by the previous study [9]. The tests were argumentative speeches which are adopted from the previous examination by EIKEN foundation. The students recorded their own speech with their smartphone or laptop, and submitted it to the instructor. The data were analysed in terms of the validate fluency measures, speed fluency, breakdown fluency, and repair fluency [31-33].

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study tried to shed light on the advantage and disadvantage of adopting text-chat based activity in EFL classrooms with low-proficiency learners. Four sections are provided to answer the first research question (i.e., advantage) and the last section provide the discussion in terms of the disadvantage of the practice (i.e., the second research question).

### 5.1. Corrective Feedback

Teachers can give feedback in the text-chat-based course easier than face-to-face interaction. Especially, it becomes easier to recast (i.e., correcting learners’ errors without interrupting the interaction). Based on the text-chat classrooms, it is possible not to interrupt the conversation but to highlight the error, using direct “reply” to the chat, as shown in Figure 1 below.

In the case of my practice, there are fifteen chat boxes because all thirty students worked in pairs. Their interactions were continued one after another. Thus, the instructor could not catch all the text and repair them. I tried to repair the students’ errors as much as possible but it is difficult to do it. This is the same problem in face-to-face classrooms. However, when a student can find the instructor’s repair, he or she replies to my comment and tried to check it and text it accurately next time.

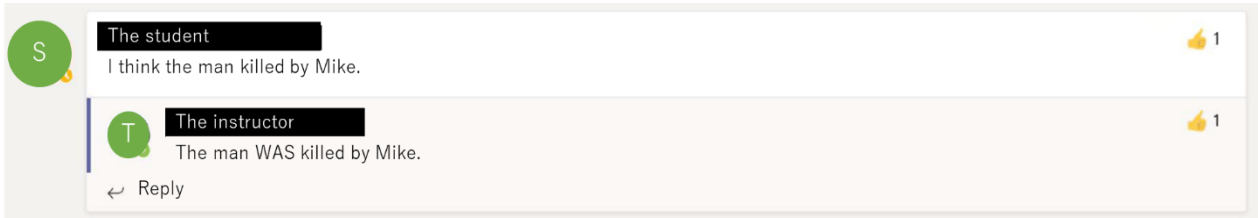


Figure 1 Example of the recast in “reply” function while text-chatting.

### 5.2. Developing oral skills

Previous research investigating the effect of text-chat for oracy skill development suggested a mixed result. For fluency development, the experiment in which the researcher compares the degree of development in a text-chat group, face-to-face group, and control [9]. He concluded the text-chat is better than the face-to-face group. However, the benefit of text-chat has been providing mixed results [20, 23]. Thus, to validate the effect of text-chatting in my class, I and my colleague conducted classroom-based research, which was already presented [21]. We tried to focus on the development of oral performance especially fluency. As mentioned earlier, we tried to replicate the previous findings [9]. In particular, we use the fluency measurements which are famously used in second language fluency research, that is, speed fluency: how fast they can utter, breakdown fluency: how much they stop their utterance, and repair fluency: how much they repair/repeat their utterance (e.g., [31-33]). The results provided the overall tendency of the development. The selected results are shown below.

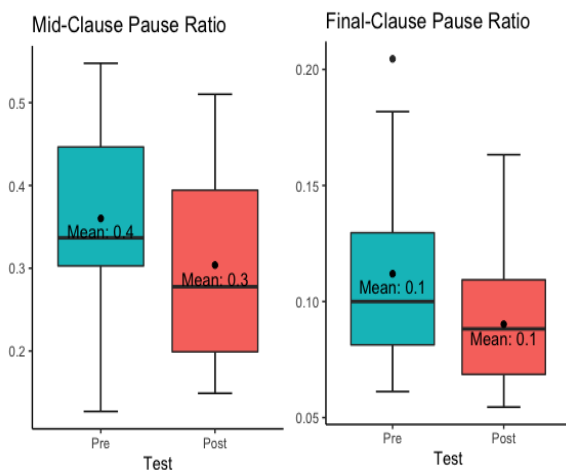


Figure 2. Box plots of pre/post result.

Mid-clause pause ratio (left) indicated the frequency of pause within the clause and final-clause pause ratio (right) the frequency of pause between the clause. Though not statistically significance (*mid-clause pause ratio*; Pre:  $M = .360$ ,  $SD = .112$ ; Post:  $M = .304$ ,  $SD = .115$ ;  $F(1, 42) = 2.886$ ,  $p = .097$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .064$ ), *final-clause pause ratio* (Pre:  $M = .112$ ,  $SD = .040$ ; Post:

$M = .090$ ,  $SD = .028$ ;  $F(1, 42) = 4.425$ ,  $p = .041$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .095$ ), the results showed decreased pause length of both pause behaviour, that is, positive tendency of learners' performance. These pause behaviours reflect the process where linguistic source such as syntactic structure and lexical item are encoded to the prepared context [34-35]. Thus, the students may get used to speak the target language through the courses. However, this development is presumably affected by the use of the target language, rather than text-chatting. It is possible to consider that this weak effect comes from the participants' proficiency. Their target language proficiency was relatively low to low-intermediate. The effect of text-chat activities for those learners was weak but for learners whose proficiency is high will be strong. However, recent study focuses on the optimal practice schedule and optimal training for fluency development suggested that massed and blocked practice is beneficial [36-37]. Moreover, out-of-classroom exposure is an important key to get better oracy skill [28-29]. Considering these findings, text-chat itself is beneficial for developing language skills but frequency is the key factor to develop oral skill.

### 5.3. Motivation Toward Learning English

In Japanese context, typical learners tend to demotivate toward learning English [40-42]. From the view of the teacher's reflection of their performance while text-chatting, the students were actively participating in the activities. While most of the L2 learners in the Japanese context have anxiety, it is speculated that the anxiety of speaking L2 may decrease when they interact through text-chatting [24]. It is necessary to note that this decrease in their anxiety may be led by the class style and text-chat. The research on task-based language teaching, which is a recent classroom style, decreases the participants' anxiety to speak L2 because they pay attention to deliver the content of the message rather than to speak accurately [43]. In the case of my practice, while the students answered that they were not good at English and they dislike English according to the questionnaire done on the first day of the course, almost all students could interact in English while completing the task. Moreover, according to the questionnaire on the final day of the course, they enjoyed interacting with their peers and the

class. Also, they answered the benefit of the text-chat. They said that they could see the interactions and instructions anytime and when they could not understand the meaning of them, they could search the word with a dictionary or web dictionary. This helped them understand the meaning accurately.

#### **5.4. Potential of text as an input**

“Learning can only take place when learners are exposed to input ([44], p.7).” This concept has been emphasized in the theory of second language acquisition (e.g., [45-47]). One of the researches on input focuses on textual enhancement. Many studies on textual enhancement have modified or enhanced the written input with bolding, capitalizing, underlining, and so on [48]. The previous research has provided the mixed result of the effect of textual enhancement, the positive effect (e.g., [49]), the negative effect (e.g., [50]), and no effect (e.g., [51]). The text-chat activity is one of the opportunities to get and use textual enhancement. I use bolding and underlining while sending the text as a repair of the student’s error. As discussed in 5.1., the students could notice and repair their errors. Reflecting on my practice, textual enhancement has a positive effect. However, we should investigate the significant development rather than their behaviour at that time. Reliable evidence is necessary to conclude the effect.

Rather than the textual enhancement, the students mimicked the grammatical structure or vocabulary the teacher or peers used. The instructions of the task or giving them the hints to complete the task was delivered in English. Also, the students were prohibited to use Japanese (their mother tongue) in the class. Thus, they had many opportunities to expose the target language. Through the exposure, they tried to interpret the meaning and also to use it as their own expression. This can be the case in which the students did not have enough linguistic sources of the target language (i.e., vocabulary and syntactic structure). Thus, they absorbed the examples and applied them smoothly.

#### **5.5. Disadvantage and limitation of the practice**

The text-chat-based course has some disadvantages and limitations. First, comparing the face-to-face classrooms, we could not see the students’ faces. It is possible to understand how much they understand when we can see their face. When they seem not to understand correctly, teachers tried to explain more or tried to adjust the information. We cannot deliver this adjustment of instruction or explanation. This is the same for the students. They said that they wondered whether they wrote English accurately or their peers understand their message correctly. Thus, it took time to check their understanding, leading to unsmooth interactions.

In addition, successful interactions depend on typing skills rather than linguistic skills. Intuitively, a successful interaction needs delivering a message smoothly. In my case, some students could not interact with their partners or group members enough due to slow typing speed. This is also a possible limitation for text-based classes. Similarly, those who use a smartphone, rather than a laptop, felt difficulty typing longer messages. This must be the caution when adopting the text-chat in the classroom, not only in second language classrooms. One related positive effect of this issue is that their typing speed became faster during the course. This typing skill is related to the recent educational concept of so-called 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills. Making their typing faster is a by-product of text-chat language learning, it presumably helps the students to get better skills.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Due to the pandemic of COVID-19, the teachers and school managers were forced to consider the new way of instruction. This article tried to provide possible substitution of daily classroom management, namely text-chat communication. Based on the previous research, text-chat communication support language development in terms of speech performance. It also can be a positive effect on accuracy. Moreover, from the view of the author’s practice, a text-chat-based class style may have benefits for many dimensions of second language development. To support the benefit of text-chat in a second language classrooms, further empirical investigation and practical adaptation of text-chat should be conducted.

## **AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS**

The author contributes to all aspects of this research (i.e., conceptualizing and writing the manuscript).

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