CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Background

I enjoyed teaching English to my students in the English Department of Satya Wacana Christian University (SWCU), Salatiga, Indonesia, and I continually looked for ways to make the speaking courses that I taught more enjoyable and interesting for my students. I believe that making the course more authentic and relevant to my students’ real interests will contribute to the success of their learning. Any methods that engage student interests in learning English are worth applying in my class.

At the same time, I am fond of chatting on the internet and I find that the technology provides an interesting and fun environment for me to communicate with others, not only in Indonesia but in other places all over the globe. With the spread of internet cafes in Salatiga, I observed that quite a number of students shared my passion in communicating via internet chatting and they occupied the personal computers of the internet cafes during their spare time to hook themselves up to the virtual world in order to communicate via various chatting software. SWCU noticed the business and education potentials of the internet so they established an internet cafe on campus in 2002. Soon, the spot became a popular hangout place for students between classes.

Based on my observation of students’ interest in communicating via the internet, I am intrigued with the possibility of applying the technology to my class. There are two particular issues that I consider to be important before applying the technology in the class: (1) does the technology have the potentials for language acquisition, and (2) if so, what are some effective ways to apply the technology to achieve a high level of acquisition?
Rationale

To answer these two questions, I refer to some of the studies conducted in the field of Second/Foreign Language Acquisition (SLA) and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). The positive influence of interactions to facilitate second language acquisition in non-CMC setting has been widely discussed. Long (1996) proposed the “Interaction Hypothesis” which states that negotiations of meaning that trigger interactional modifications can facilitate acquisition. These interactional modifications do so by intertwining “input, internal learners capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways” (p. 452). A study by Gass and Varonis (1985) also concludes that speech modifications made by the non-native speakers (NNSs) in their interaction either with native speakers (NSs) or other NNSs facilitate language acquisition. They argue that when the NNS’ conversation partners provide signals to individual NNSs that they do not understand the message conveyed, the NNSs notice that their previous output production was incomprehensible and they need to make necessary language modifications in order to make the output comprehensible to their conversation partners. In this case, the study suggests that both comprehensible input and the opportunity for NNSs to make their message comprehensible to their conversation partner facilitate acquisition. Another suggestion made by this study is that NNS-NNS dyads “offer NNSs the greatest opportunity to receive comprehensible input and produce comprehensible output through negotiation.” (p. 161). The positive influence of such negotiation of meaning in interactions has also been reported by Swain (1985) in her study of grammatical acquisition through negotiation of meaning and Smith (2004) with
his study of the relationship between lexical item acquisition and interactional modifications.

In recent years, the growth of the internet and the availability of various computer programs that facilitate online communication have been utilized to facilitate language production of second/foreign language learners. Studies on Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) (Blake, 2000; Fernandez-Garcia & Martinez-Arbeláiz, 2002; Freiermuth, 2001; Kitade, 2000; Lee, 2002; Smith, 2004; Tudini, 2003) show that this form of communication has the potential of providing opportunities for ESL learners to actively participate in communication using the target language, to notice interlanguage gaps in their language production, and to negotiate meaning. The studies also indicate that these results have a positive influence on the acquisition of the target language. In addition to the types of negotiation of meaning or interactional modifications that the learners use, the use of certain types of communication tasks seem to play an important role in how to increase the quantity and quality of interactions among learners. Such a role is believed to affect the effectiveness of language acquisition. Studies by Gass and Varonis (1985) and Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993) are two studies that specifically address the issue of task type selection and its effects on the production of negotiation of meaning/interactional modifications between interlocutors.

Gass and Selinker (2001) identified several forms of non-CMC interactional modifications, i.e. confirmation checks, comprehension checks, and clarification requests. Other studies on interactional modifications in non-CMC and CMC expanded this list of modifications to other forms such as collaborative checks, referential questions, expressive questions, rhetorical questions, total questions, and subject questions (Duff, 1986); overt indications of understanding, agreement, and disagreement, as well as recasts
(Kotter, 2003); request for help, self-correction, L1 use, topic shift, use of approximation, and keyboard symbols as discourse markers (Lee, 2002).

In addition to providing L2 practice, the internet also provides opportunities for the learners to expand the use of the target language outside the classroom setting and connects them with either native speakers or other non-native speakers learning the target language. This real life setting enables the learners to practice the production of authentic language. It has been noted that although many Indonesians receive many years of formal English instruction in junior and senior high school, there is very little opportunity for them to comprehend or produce the language as it is used in day-to-day or academic situations. Students compensate for this lack of opportunity either by gaining exposure themselves to television programs and books in English, going abroad, or inviting native speakers of English to class. Unfortunately, due to the high cost of conducting these activities, the majority of students cannot experience these activities, unless they are financially fortunate. The internet accessible through the internet cafes in various cities in Indonesia creates an opportunity for students to communicate with the rest of the world using international languages like English. The cost of an hour usage of internet connection at an internet café is considered quite affordable by Asia-Pacific Development Information Programme (or APDIP, a section of United Nations’ Development Programme) ranging from 30 cents to one USD per hour. It is not surprising that the APDIP ICT country profile for Indonesia in 2002 reported that 70%-80% of internet access in Indonesia is connected through the country’s 1,500 internet cafes. This trend gives positive hope for how the internet can expand the scope of English learning within and outside of the classroom setting. Teachers then have the opportunity to assign the students tasks that can be accomplished within and outside of the classroom either with their fellow classmates or with native speakers of English.
With the positive results of studies on the effect of CMC interactions on L2 production as well as the growth and popularity of internet usage in Indonesia, the proposed study will focus on the comparison of certain communication tasks for interactional modifications which have been shown to promote L2 acquisition. The focus of this study will be on the comparison of two L2 communication tasks which have been studied previously, namely jigsaw and decision-making tasks. In particular, the study will be conducted on NNS-NNS dyad interactions between Indonesian students studying English as a foreign language. The selection of this Indonesian setting is intentional, as I expect to focus on the benefits of CALL for pedagogical purposes in Indonesia. It is my hope that by focusing on certain aspects of interactional modifications, communication tasks and dyad combination, this thesis may contribute some ideas of how to make use of the internet technology to supplement and expand the face-to-face classroom communication materials to authentic day-to-day English in Indonesia.

Research Questions

In order to explore the use of interactional modifications and their use in certain types of communication tasks in internet chatting, the study is going to focus on the following research questions:

1. What is the frequency of each interactional modification used by subjects when engaged in the jigsaw and decision-making tasks in synchronous CMC?

2. Do the different task types (jigsaw vs. decision-making task) generate different frequencies for the interactional modification types?

3. What are the motives behind the interactional modifications used? What are the factors involved the use of different interactional modifications?
Organization of This Thesis

This thesis is divided into five chapters, comprising (1) the introduction, (2) literature review, (3) the methodology of the study, (4) the findings/results of the study as well as (5) the conclusions and possible future research. In Chapter 2, I will review and summarize prominent studies in interactional modifications, communication tasks, and CMC. Chapter 3 will detail the methodology of this study, including the participants, procedures, data collection tools and analysis utilized in the study. The results/findings of the data collection will be presented and discussed in Chapter 4, while in Chapter 5 I will draw some conclusions based on the findings in the previous chapter. Some suggestions for future research and implications of the study to classroom applications will also be offered in Chapter 5.