

# Developing Sociolinguistic Competence through Intercultural Online Exchange

Mathy Ritchie\*

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## Abstract

The main goal of this study was to investigate whether computer-mediated communication (CMC) intercultural exchange offers the conditions necessary for the development of the sociolinguistic competence of second language learners. Non-native speakers (NNS) of French in British Columbia interacted through CMC with native speakers (NS) of French in Quebec over the course of one university semester. Drawing on the sociocultural perspective, this study used a qualitative approach to analyse the collected data. The data included the transcripts of text-based chat discussions and of a discussion forum. The framework used to guide the sociolinguistic inquiry consisted of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). The findings of this study suggest that intercultural CMC exchange offers positive conditions for the development of the sociolinguistic competence. NNS were exposed to stylistic variation and made minor changes in their use of sociolinguistic elements, showing that they developed sensitivity to the vernacular style used by NS. The results also allow for a general description of the sociolinguistic elements involved in this type of exchange.

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**Keywords:** language learning, computer-mediated communication, sociolinguistic competence, online intercultural exchange, French as a second language.

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\*Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada. e-mail: [mritchie@uvic.ca](mailto:mritchie@uvic.ca)

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## 1. Introduction

Intercultural exchanges (between native and non-native speakers) by means of computer-mediated communication have created research and pedagogical interest because they provide opportunities for learners to participate in intercultural dialogue while simultaneously developing the necessary strategies to perform successfully in the activity (Thorne, 2005). Through CMC, language learners have the opportunity to communicate in meaningful ways and to be exposed to contextualised authentic language, two factors described as essential for the development of the communicative competence of learners.

This chapter presents an investigation of a CMC exchange between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of French as a possible way to improve language learners' sociolinguistic competence. Like many language learners, the NNS in British Columbia involved in this study have not had many opportunities for interactions with native speakers and their culture outside the classroom. The goal of this study was to find out whether a CMC exchange with NS in Quebec would be beneficial for the development of their sociolinguistic competence.

### 1.1. CMC in the second/foreign language classroom

Many second and foreign language educators have embraced the use of CMC in the classroom for the simple reason that it allows language learners to engage in authentic communication with native speakers who can provide them with “expert” feedback. Besides this principal characteristic, CMC also offers the opportunity for extensive language practice, for intercultural learning, for the development of the autonomy of learners, and for reflection on form and content (Hanna & de Nooy, 2009). As Chapelle (2010) points out, plenty of studies have demonstrated in the last fourteen years that CMC offers conditions that foster language skills development, but more studies are needed to describe how learners interact and learn in this environment.

Synchronous CMC (communication in real-time such as text-chat) has generated a lot of support because it mimics oral conversation without involving the

potential pressure of a face-to-face discussion. Thus, chat has been described as a conversation in slow-motion (Payne & Whitney, 2002). Furthermore, it allows learners to use a discourse that is similar to an oral conversation while also providing them with more time to concentrate and to reflect on the form and content of their intervention (Warschauer, 1996). In these interactions, language learners do not have to worry about pronunciation and judgment from classmates. Studies have shown that students participate more frequently and more equally in online discussions when compared to regular face-to-face in class discussion (Beauvois, 1997; Warschauer, 1996). Moreover, online discussions allow for a more learner-centered environment where students are willing to take more risks and use less of their first language to communicate than in face-to-face interactions (Abrams, 2006).

## 1.2. Sociolinguistic competence

Many SLA researchers have been interested in looking at the sociolinguistic competence because they have acknowledged language learners' difficulties in acquiring and using the full range of speech styles or in developing "stylistic variation" (Dewaele, 2004). Sociolinguistic competence refers to the learner's "knowledge of the sociocultural rules of language and discourse" (Brown, 2000, p. 247). In his definition, Brown includes learners' sensitivity to dialect or variety, choice of register, naturalness, and knowledge of cultural references and figures of speech. Tarone and Swain (1995) define this competence as the ability of the members of a speech community to adapt their speech to the context in which they find themselves. For example, a more formal variety will be used in an interview whereas an informal register, a "vernacular" style will be used amongst friends. Lyster (1994) defines the concept of sociolinguistic competence as the "capacity to recognise and produce socially appropriate speech in context" (p. 263).

Research on sociolinguistic competence in SLA has mainly focused on the linguistic variants used by native speakers and second language (L2) learners and on the conditions required to acquire these variants. One interesting finding is that L2 learners will generally overuse formal variants and underuse informal

variants in similar communicative situations (Nadasdi, Mougeon, & Rehner, 2005; Tarone & Swain, 1995). According to Dewaele (2004), the overuse of formal variants by NNS is one fairly consistent result of research studies on stylistic variation linked to the lack of access to the community of practice of NS and the exposition to one communicative context that is the classroom.

Results regarding the conditions required for its development have shown “the important effect of informal contact with the target language, both through native-speaker contact in general and, more particularly, in the target-language community” (Howard, 2006, p. 381). Other research studies have shown that learners who have spent time in the target language community increased their use of informal sociolinguistic markers. Such studies on French language have focused on the omission of “ne” in negative sentences (Dewaele & Reagan, 2002; Rehner & Mougeon, 1999; Sax, 2003), the use of the pronoun “on” versus “nous” (Sax, 2003), and the learning of social routines and colloquial vocabulary (MacFarlane, 2001).

Although sociolinguistic competence is recognised as an important aspect of L2 learners’ competency, it remains a concept difficult to grasp, to define and to teach. Indeed, this competence involves the learning of the sociocultural principles that determine the norms of appropriate behavior and language use of a specific community, which is difficult to teach in a classroom (Hinkel, 2001). Besides suggesting prolonged and regular contact with NS, suggestions and strategies on how to foster the development of that competence are lacking in language instructors’ curriculum. The use of an intercultural CMC exchange may be an alternative solution for addressing the issue of sociolinguistic competence development in the second/foreign language classroom. Indeed, research studies have shown that in this environment, language learners pay attention to the form of language used by NS such as different registers and they are inclined to imitate these language uses (Davis & Thiede, 2000; Hanna & de Nooy, 2003, 2009; Savignon & Roithmeier, 2004; Uzum, 2010).

Very few studies so far have looked at the potential of an intercultural CMC exchange for the development of competences related to the use of language

in context such as the sociolinguistic competence. [Belz and Kinginger \(2002\)](#) investigated the learning of the acquisition of pronouns of address (specifically, the use of tu/vous and du/Sie). Results showed that by interacting through e-mail in the L2, learners were forced to choose the appropriate pronoun. The researchers argue that L2 learners were provided with a wide range of discourse options and with timely assistance from native-speaking peers.

## **2. The study**

During the spring semester of 2007, two groups of students met online for nine weeks to discuss cultural topics on the course management system Moodle. On this web platform, students were able to send and receive e-mail, enter an assigned chat-room and participate in a discussion forum that included all the participants. Each student was required to participate in a minimum of six chat sessions and three discussion forums. Students were put randomly in groups of three to five students that were generally made up of two students from Quebec (native French speakers, NS) and two students from British Columbia (non-native speakers, NNS) for the online chat. In total, fourteen groups were assigned to specific chat-rooms. The discussion forum included all of the students from both groups.

### **2.1. Participants**

The participants in British Columbia (n=24) were enrolled in an intermediate French as L2 class that focused on the development of oral and written skills and on culture. More than half of the students had been to a French speaking area or community before (65%). Half of the students answered that they were never or rarely using French outside the classroom. The other half answered that they were speaking French occasionally with friends and family or with customers at work. The group was composed of students with various cultural backgrounds; 60% of them declared having English as a first language and 45% declared speaking English only normally at home. The other languages spoken at home were: Mandarin, Cantonese, Gujarati, Korean, Arabic, and Spanish.

Participants in Quebec (n=29) were enrolled in a course on French literature and culture that was designed for French speakers. The college was situated in a major Canadian city in the province of Quebec and characterised by its multicultural diversity. The official language in Quebec is French and Quebec is the only Canadian province whose population is mainly francophone, constituting 79.6% of the population ([Office of Commissioner of Official Languages, 2007](#)). However, results from the post-study questionnaire revealed that a little less than half of students considered themselves Francophones. The other half of the students answered that they had been living in Quebec for a period between three years and seventeen years and also came from different cultural backgrounds. Despite the heterogeneity of this group, they are called native speakers of French in this study because the course they were taken required a native-like level of French and because their instructor considered them to be native speakers.

## **2.2. Methodology and analysis**

Drawing on the sociocultural perspective, this study used a qualitative approach to analyse the collected data. The aspect of sociocultural theory mostly represented in second language acquisition (SLA) research is that “the human mind is always and everywhere mediated primarily by linguistically based communication” ([Lantolf, 2002](#), p. 104). As a mediated process, SLA is seen as developing when learners engage in social interactions, often with more capable social members. Within this approach, learners are seen as active agents because they learn by the act of socialising with others. Sociocultural theory recognised that use and learning are inseparable and that consciousness emerges from practice ([Magnan, 2008](#)). This social view of language acquisition considers the complexity and richness of SLA and includes other realms of inquiry and practice such as culture and discourse.

The corpus analysed included forty-three discussion threads. Each thread was examined with the use of a grid describing the use of participants’ sociolinguistics elements. The grid was designed with the help of the common European framework reference for languages (CEFR) which has

a thorough section on sociolinguistic competence. The qualitative analysis of the transcripts was divided in three main parts. The first part focused on describing which elements of the sociolinguistic competence were displayed in the discourse of the participants in the online chat and in the discussion forum. The second part focused on identifying differences in the use of the sociolinguistic elements by NS and NNS. It was assumed that the NS would use the appropriate sociolinguistic elements in each specific context and that different ways of using these elements by NNS would point out a lack of development of their sociolinguistic competence. This way of measuring the competence was proposed by [Rehner \(2002\)](#). She suggested that variation in advanced learners be measured by comparing how they alternate between forms that are used by NS. One way to do so is by observing whether they use the expressions used by NS in the same communicative situations. Finally, the third section focused on looking for changes over time in the use of specific sociolinguistic elements in the discourse of NNS with the objective of finding sociolinguistic development.

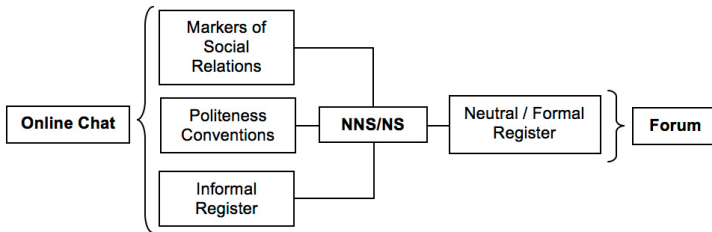
The common European framework reference for languages was used as a guide rather than as an evaluation tool in this investigation and was not presented to the participants. This framework provided the most detailed description of the elements included in the sociolinguistic competence when compared to other frameworks such as the standards for foreign language learning in the 21st Century ([American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1999](#)) or with the core French provincial language curriculum in British Columbia ([British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2001](#)). The CEFRL organised learners' competences in two broad categories: general competence and communicative competence. The communicative competence is described as containing three components: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence. The categories included in the sociolinguistic competence are: markers of social relations, politeness conventions, expressions of folk-wisdom, register differences, and dialect and accent. The last category, dialect and accent, was not used in the analyse of the discourse of the participants because it is generally concerned with the oral form of language.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Sociolinguistic elements

The results of the first analysis showed that most of the sociolinguistic elements were displayed in the exchanges as shown in [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1. Display of sociolinguistic competence elements with CMC tools



In the online chat sessions, participants used markers of social relation such as greetings on arrival and departure, and expletives such as “Oui, c’est tellement génial!” (*Yes, it is so great!*). They also expressed politeness either by showing interest in one’s well-being, which was done mostly in the greetings on arrival and departure, by expressing admiration towards someone’s experience, and by expressing affection and gratitude towards one another. The chat sessions were characterised by the use of an informal register. The usual capital letter and the period to mark the beginning and the end of a sentence were not always displayed, sentences were incomplete, and there was an extensive use of exclamation marks and points of ellipsis (...). The content of the message appeared to be more important than the form as a lot of typing errors, spelling and grammar mistakes were left by the participants. A few expressions that would normally be found in an oral conversation like “cool”, or “ouais” for “oui” or “euh” to show hesitation, were also observed in some chat discussions.

The category “expressions of folk wisdom” does not appear in [Figure 1](#) because very few of these expressions were found in the discourse of the participants. For



example, one NS wrote “chacun ses goûts” (*to each his own taste*) and another one wrote “à toi l’honneur” (*you do the honors*). These fixed formulae found in proverbs and familiar quotations are more likely to appear in graffiti, t-shirts slogans, TV catch phrases and posters than in daily conversation (Council of Europe, 2001, p.120) . Therefore, it is not surprising that the online chat did not foster their use.

The discussion forum which displayed a more formal register seemed to offer a better context for expressions of folk wisdom. Still, these expressions occurred infrequently. Besides giving the opportunity to NNS to write in a more formal manner, the discussion forum did not display elements of the other categories. Yet, if participants had had to comment on each others’ paragraph, more of these elements would probably have been displayed. For example, when responding or commenting on the paragraph of one student in particular, we can assume that the participant would have used greetings and would have paid attention to politeness conventions. However, because the discussion forum fosters the use of a more formal register, participants would have used these elements in a more formal manner. Consequently, the use of the discussion forum and the chat in this way, would have allowed L2 learners to see how NS use the sociolinguistic elements in the different online contexts and would have exposed them to greater stylistic variation.

### **3.2. Differences in use between NS and NNS**

The analysis of the discourse of NS and NNS showed similarities and differences in the use of sociolinguistic elements. Similarities were found in their use of address form; both groups called each other by their first names and used the pronoun “tu” when talking to someone in particular. Similarities in use were also found in the way they took turns in the exchange and in their way of using positive politeness.

Differences were found in the choice of words for greetings, in the choice of words for expletives, and in the expressions of negative politeness. Table 1 and Table 2 recapitalise some of the differences found between NS and NNS in regards to the use of sociolinguistic elements.

Table 1. Differences in use between NS and NNS

Expressions	NNS	NS
Bonjour/Au revoir	76	15
Salut/Allo/Bye-bye	37	72
Je pense que	38	20

Table 2. Examples of choice of expletives

NS	NNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ouais finalement!! (<i>Yes finally!!</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Au ouii?!?!? C'est fantastique. (<i>Ah yes !?!?!? It's fantastic.</i>)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ooooo nice!! (<i>Oh, nice!</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Je vois!! c'est bien! (<i>I see!! That's good!</i>)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oui, c'est tellement génial!! (<i>Yes, it so great!!</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ah oui, c'est intéressant!! (<i>Ah yes, that's interesting!!</i>)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aaaa cest cool sa!! (<i>Aaaa that's cool!!</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vraiment, tu es super! (<i>Really, you are super!</i>)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trop génial: super chanceuse! (<i>Too great: super lucky!</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• C'est intéressant!! (<i>That's interesting!!</i>)</li> </ul>

Table 1 shows that the favored word for greetings on arrival was the word “bonjour” for NNS where the words “salut” and “allo”, two more informal words for greetings, were the preferred choice for NS. The greetings on leaving the most used for NS was the English word “bye” or “bye-bye” which is quite informal in French, and for NNS, it was “au revoir” which is a more neutral expression. Similar findings were found for the choice of expletives. The expressions used by NNS were less colloquial than the ones used by the NS as shown in Table 2. For example, NNS used expressions such as “C’est intéressant!!” (*That’s interesting!!*) and NS used a mix of English and French, as in “C’est cool ça”, used “ouais” instead of “oui”, and used specific combinations of words such as “tellement génial” (*so great*) and “super chanceuse” (*super lucky*). NS’ expletives belong to an informal register and they seem to represent a “vernacular variety” of speech used by some of the francophone youth of this college. Finally, NNS showed a lack of strategies for expressing negative politeness such as “hedges” in their discourse to avoid making absolute statements. Indeed, NNS used the expression “je pense que”

(*I think that*) almost twice the times as NS did as shown in Table 1. NS used as many hedges as their counterparts but they chose other strategies. For example, they used other introductory phrases such as “Je crois que” (*I believe that*), tag questions such as “n’est-ce pas?” (*isn’t that so?*) and approximators of degree such as “généralement” (*generally*).

### 3.3. Development of sociolinguistic competence

A closer look at the elements used by NNS showed a few examples of changes over time. Changes were found in greetings on arrival and departure, in choice of expletives, and in the use of strategies to express hedges. The following extract shows a possible influence of the NS on the choice of words for greetings for the NNS (S\* and C\*).

(1) Chat-room 3, Chat 3

- S\*: Bonjour Joel (*Hi Joel*)
- J: allo!! (*Allo!*)
- S\*: allo Caroline (*Allo Caroline*)
- C\*: Bonjour Sabina... bonjour Joel (*Hi Sabina... hi Joel*)
- J: allo Caroline!! (*Allo Caroline!!*)
- E: salut, le monde!!! (*Hi everyone!!!*)
- C\*: Salut Erica (*Hi Erica*)
- S\*: ... salut Erica (*Hi Erica*)
- E: salutCaroline! SalutSabina, salutJo!!! je suis super contente de vous voir!  
(*Hi Caroline! Hi Sabina, hi Jo!!! I am super happy to see you!*)

In this extract, the NS (J and E) wrote “allo” and “salut”. Both NNS (S\* and C\*) wrote “bonjour” but also “allo” and “salut” in response to the words use by the NS. In further exchanges, they also kept on using “bonjour” most of the time, S\* using “allo” once in chat 5 and C\* using “salut” in chat 6. It seems that in this group, the NS had an influence on the greetings the NNS chose to use. Similar results were found in the choice of words for greetings on departure in the same group.

(2) Chat-room 3, Chat 4

- **J:** bref je suis désolé mais je vais devoir vous laissez!  
*(So I am sorry but I have to go!)*
- **J:** Bye Bye tout le monde! *(Bye Bye everyone!)*
- **J:** xxxxxx *(Kisses)*
- **S\*:** Je comprends. Je dois partir aussi  
*(I understand. I have to go too.)*
- **S\*:** Au revoir *(See you soon.)*
- **C\*:** Au revoir Joel! ...bonne soirée  
*(Good-bye Joel! ...Have a nice evening)*
- **J:** toi aussi 😊 *(You too)*
- **E:** Bonne jsoirée. désolée, je me prenais une pomme  
*(Have a nice evening. Sorry, I was getting an apple)*
- **C\*:** LOL.. mais byee byee à vous! *(LOL..but bye bye to you!)*
- **S\*:** bye *(Bye)*
- **E:** bye bye! *(Bye bye!)*
- **C\*:** okay, au revoir tout le monde!! *(O.K., see you later everyone!)*

In this extract, the NNS (S\* and C\*) naturally chose “au revoir” at first; then in response to the NS who selected “bye bye”, they wrote it as well. Again, it seems that they are very receptive to the expressions used by the NS.

A few expletives were modeled by the NNS. For example, the word “cool” was used in the third session by a NNS in response to a NS that was using this expression regularly. In general, the expletives used by the NS were not modeled by the NNS. The English words such as “cool”, “wow”, and “nice” were not used by the NNS perhaps because they were making an effort to use French words only. Other expletives including words from the oral informal register such as “ouais” instead of “oui” for “yes” or expressions which may sound funny to English speakers such as “j’adore” which means “I love it” or “génial” used for “great” and “super” were also not selected by NNS. NNS might have chosen consciously not to use these forms because they “belong” to the community of practice that represents this specific group of NS. [Dewaele \(2004\)](#) talks about

“in group” membership to describe how members of a group use specific speech patterns to show that they “fit in”. L2 learners using these words could be seen as out of place and could bring unwanted effects from the interlocutors. This means that a strong trust relationship must take place before NNS have the desire, and most importantly feel welcome, to identify with a group of NS. However, the exchange allowed NNS to notice how these elements were used by NS of their age and might have contributed to their knowledge on stylistic variation.

In the case of the use of hedges, some NNS have used a different strategy besides “je pense que”. In the extract below, the participants are discussing multiculturalism in Canada and one of the NNS (C\*) used other strategies in response to the NS.

(3) Chat-room 3, Chat 4

- **E:** j'avoue la diversité, le mélange des deux en toi fait quelque chose de nouveau (*I agree diversity, the mix of both in you make something new*)
  
- **C\*:** Canada est un pays de multiculturalisme.. si **en général** preuve de tolérance et d'ouverture d'esprit les uns envers les cultures-- **comme Erica a dit**  
(*Canada is a country of multiculturalism.. if in general proof of tolerance and openness of the ones towards other cultures—like Erica said*)
  
- **E:** mais, je trouve que les gens ici sont formidables et je n'ai jamais perdu de vue qui je suis. Sabina, toi, tu es un méchant cocktail d plusieurs nationalités, n'est-ce pas?  
(*But, I find that people here are awesome and I never lost sight of who I am. Sabina, you, you are a powerful mix of several nationalities, are you?*)
  
- **S\*:** Ils ont d'autres difficultés aussi (comme la discrimination etc.) mais **je pense que** les avantages de multiculturalisme sont plus importants  
(*They have other difficulties too (like discrimination etc.) but I think that the advantages of multiculturalism are more important*)

- **C\*:** **Donc, vous aimez le multiculturalisme de Canada?**  
(*So, you like the multiculturalism in Canada?*)

In this extract, “Je pense que” is used only once by S\*. C\* added to her idea the phrase “en general” meaning “in general” and also “comme Erica a dit” meaning “like Erica said” in her first intervention in this extract. Both of these phrases are used as strategies to avoid making absolute statements or to distance herself from the statements. In her last intervention, she asks a question which also shows that she developed another strategy. It is possible that she has developed these strategies by modeling the discourse of the NS which could show the development of her sociolinguistic competence.

The changes observed in the discourse of the NNS seemed to have occurred in reaction to the language behaviour of the NS. These results are similar to the ones by [Lee \(2004\)](#) who found that L2 learners interacting with NS recognised different registers, discourse patterns and style and imitated these new language forms by integrating some of them in their own discourse.

#### **4. Discussion**

This CMC exchange provided an environment which was conducive to the development of NNS’ sociolinguistic competence. By chatting online with NS of the target language, NNS saw how NS used the sociolinguistic elements in their discourse through their choice of words for greetings, in the way they express positive and negative politeness and in their choices of expletives. The discussion forum was used to display a more formal register, to which NNS were able to adapt.

The results of this research study did not reveal enough changes to show evidence of sociolinguistic competence development for the NNS. However, the changes observed indicated that some of the NNS were sensitive to the way NS used the sociolinguistic elements. As pointed out by [Rehner \(2002\)](#), researchers looking at measuring sociolinguistic development of L2 are faced

with speakers with a repertoire in a state of flux. This state of flux is influenced by several independent variables such as social characteristics, situational variables, the influence of the first language(s), the degree of exposure to the L2, and the type of input received through instructors and pedagogical material. Therefore, the few changes observed in the discourse of the NNS are difficult to interpret.

In addition, some participants might have been less ready than others to acquire knowledge about sociolinguistic rules. Dewaele (2004) suggests that sociolinguistic knowledge has to become “proceduralised” before users can make automatic decisions about appropriateness (p. 315). It means that the L2 learners in this research study might have needed more time before starting to use new linguistic forms. Added to this, is the suggestion that the NNS might not have been ready to use the vernacular style represented by this group of NS. It might mean that a strong trust relationship must be built before NNS have the desire, and most importantly feel welcome to identify with a group of NS.

Seen in the perspective of sociocultural theory, the exchange provided the conditions necessary for second language acquisition as L2 learners engaged in meaningful social interactions with more capable social members. As Lee (2004) observed, learners participating in online discussions are active agents as they are pushed by their motivation to socialise with others to produce coherent discourse that goes beyond linguistic and grammatical accuracy.

## **5. Conclusion and further reflections**

Computer-mediated communication exchange with NS seems to be a valuable substitute to face-to-face interactions to develop the sociolinguistic competence for those who do not have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the target language environment. In this study, the use of a discussion forum and of an online chat to communicate with NS allowed L2 learners to experiment with two language registers, one of them being difficult to access in their learning environment. With these exchanges, they noticed the way NS used various

sociolinguistic elements. Some NNS seemed to have modeled these language behaviors as some changes were observed in their discourse.

Further research is needed to establish which factors could maximise the development of this competence. For example, research could determine the type of explicit instruction to be provided during the exchange to maximise students' development. Research studies could also look at how L2 learners perceived the use of other registers other than the neutral and the formal register. For example, is there a certain confidence level that L2 learners need to achieve before they decide to integrate more idiomatic forms in their discourse? Or, is there a certain degree of relationship that has to be reached before learners want to identify with the speakers of the target community or before NS accept NNS as part of their in-group? It would also be interesting to see how online interactions with NS compare to face-to-face interactions with NS in regard to the development of sociolinguistic competence. For example, does it have the same beneficial effect on learners? Does it need to last longer to have the same beneficial effect? In addition, it would be most interesting to see if learners who show an improvement in their sociolinguistic competence in an online text-chat could transfer their competence to an oral conversation.

This study proposed that contact with NS by way of new communication technologies is one way of solving the question of how to teach sociolinguistic competence in the L2 classroom. In more general terms, this study aimed to emphasise the importance of contact with the target language and culture in the development of language learners' skills. This study will add to a growing body of research on CALL and more specifically on research involving computer-mediated communication exchange between native speakers and non-native speakers.

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