SYNCHRONOUS COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION AND LEARNER AUTONOMY IN FEMALE EMIRATI LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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This dissertation investigates the extent to which computer-mediated communication can facilitate the development of learner autonomy in female Emirati learners. The participants of the study were a class of university students taking a writing component of a foundation English course in a university based on an American model in the United Arab Emirates. Learners like the ones described in this study often experience difficulties when they enter Western style higher education institutions. They are often unable to take responsibility for their studies or apply successful strategies for learning (Shaw, 1997b). The learners' difficulties are often due to the fact that they have usually only experienced an approach to secondary education which offers them few opportunities for the development of learner autonomy or the development of higher-order thinking skills (Farquharson, 1989; Bel Fekih, 1993). In addition to this, there are few opportunities within the UAE society for national women to interact with people outside their immediate families and close circle of friends in order to develop these skills in other ways.

Synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been reported to offer opportunities for learners to develop autonomous learning skills (Hoven, 1999). It gives them the opportunity to construct knowledge while interacting with people from different sociocultural backgrounds (Jonassen, 1996). As the focus is away from the teacher, learners have the opportunity to participate in more autonomous ways than in regular classrooms.

The results of the small-scale study show that participants demonstrated the capacity for certain aspects of autonomous learning while interacting with guests in chat rooms. These capacities included self-reliance, decision-making, prioritisation, audience awareness,

collaboration, reflection, applying a range of comprehension and coping strategies, and risk taking. The participants did not show evidence of autonomous learning in all areas however. For example, they did not appear to demonstrate a high level of metacognitive awareness as they were not comfortable in taking responsibility for initiating the task, addressing their areas of weakness, or demonstrating that they had a more than cursory understanding of how chat was benefiting their learning.

These findings suggest that in order for learners to benefit fully from CMC, they need to already have a developing level of metacognitive awareness. The study highlights a need for instructors in higher education institutions in the UAE to incorporate support mechanisms into their courses. These mechanisms should assist the learners as they develop the necessary processing functions and skills for autonomous learning. The findings suggest CMC may have a beneficial role to play in providing such support for these learners.