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EXPLORING SAUDI EFL DISTANCE LEARNERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS SYNCHRONOUS CMC: EFFECTS ON LANGUAGE USE

By

Reham Basabain

Supervisor

Aisha Walker

University of Leeds

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Abstract

This paper aimed to explore Saudi student's attitudes towards SCMC and its influence on language use using six telephone interviews with CMC instructors, supplemented with an analysis of the available literature and research on the topic. Generally speaking, the findings indicated that distance learners faced more challenges in their attempt to interact with fellow distant learners, instructors, and the university than regular students; that student characteristics such as age, educational background, and milieu (environment) influenced students ability to pass SCMC-based English classes, particularly for older students; and that CMC lacked the ability to expose students to typical conversational situations downplaying students ability to hold real conversations. However, on the positive side this technology not only provided an opportunity for individuals to use both oral and written communication in learning English but also improved the learning context by enhancing students' learning and interaction experience. A significant flaw in the research is that the interview questions were presented to the instructors rather than the students themselves which may make it difficult to gain a true perspective of the attitudes of students towards CMC. It would make sense therefore, for future research to explore the attitudes of students themselves using a face-to-face qualitative interviewing technique which is more personable than telephone interviews, enables rapport-building and facilitates a deeper level of understanding. It also allows for the opportunity for new insights that may have previously been unconsidered. Among the factors that demand immediate attention is that SCMC influences language structure. Moreover, there are more specific areas that may require more detailed attention. For example, an exclusive utilisation of SCMC

supports the over-utilisation of short sentences, abbreviations, omission of subject nouns, and deletion of subject pronouns. It therefore, should be emphasised that although SCMC provides a unique platform for distant students to interact with their instructors, students' ability to SCMC English courses is easily interrupted by environmental and demographic factors. Consequently, the research recommends additional research to evaluate how best to improve students' interaction in SCMC classes. Moreover, KAU should facilitate a project to find out how to ensure that all distance students attend SCMC classes.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Study Context

Kawase (2012) asserts that social commentators had debated the potential effects of new kinds of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on society well before personal computers gained popularity. Hiltz and Turoff (1978, cited in Kawase, 2012) for example, asserted that computerised conferencing would have a dramatic sociological and psychological impact on various guises of group communication in the future and accurately predicted that the internet and computers would become an integral part of everyday life.

In modern times, Kawase (2012) claims that computers play an important role in learning and teaching and the use of computers is becoming increasingly common in first language (L1) acquisition settings. Although not conceived of as a substitute for the teacher, computers are acknowledged to be a medium that has significantly changed the ways in which we read, write and think (Selfe, 1989, cited in Kawase, 2012). Interaction between two or more individuals utilising online chat (synchronous CMC) has received considerable attention also. With the advent of CMC, creating language learning groups all over the world has become a simple and cost-effective matter.

According to Lane (1994) computer-mediated communication has been defined as *"synchronous or asynchronous electronic mail and computer referencing, by which senders encode in text messages that are relayed from senders' computers to receivers"*. Generally speaking, CMC can be conceptualised as the utilisation of networked computers to facilitate human interaction (Kalelioglu and Gulbahar, 2010).

From Mann's (2006) viewpoint, CMC conversations occur via electronic devices, also termed as telecommunications appliances, while Levy (2009) observes that the term was originally used to describe computer-mediated formats such as emails, instant messaging and chartrooms.

SCMC experiences an extensive usage in learning languages, especially in higher education. Its usage is explicit in universities and colleges that enrol distance language learners. The idea that SCMC provides a FTF-like learning context regardless of the distance between students and lecture halls remains the reason for its application (Carlsen, 2007). For example, Carlsen (2007) asserts that SCMC ensures interactive learning as it allows students to provide feedback during classes and provides them with the opportunity to give textual feedbacks.

However, although generic studies on the advantages and disadvantages of this mode of learning have been carried out extensively, more specific studies on student attitudes towards CMC are sparse. In order to increase knowledge in this area, this dissertation will investigate Saudi students' attitudes towards Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication (SCMC) on language use. As the present study aims to explore Saudi distant learners' attitudes towards this learning approach, it is pertinent that the research take place within the Saudi Arabian Kingdom. The study was conducted in King Abdulaziz University (KAU) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. This university has experienced tremendous development and expansion since 1967 when it was declared functional and extended from 2000 faculty and 37000 students, to 6148 faculty and 132094 students in the present day.

Although all students are encouraged to explore technological opportunities to develop their language proficiencies, the application of SCMC in KAU has online and external students as its prime targets. There are several factors that differentiate regular programs from online/external programs in KAU. For example, unlike other regular programs that enrol 18-year-old students only, online and external programs enrol students regardless of their age. Another difference is evident as regular program students are required to attend lectures in order to be allowed to sit for exams while online/ external students are only required to show up for examination in order to pass language courses.

Moreover, unlike regular students that undertake tests to determine their placement in four language courses, external and online programs encompass two fundamental courses: one that caters for beginners and elementary students and another that engages intermediate and pre-intermediate learners.

1.2 Research Problems

Continuous exploration of CMC has led to the idea that despite its numerous advantages, an extensive utilisation of CMC in education may lead to negative implications. Lattner (2012) for example, asserts that CMC communication lacks personal appeal and fails to provide a typical conversational situation. Additionally, from a socio-linguistic perspective Levy (2009) asserts that CMC facilitates the development of a simplistic language that accepts grammatical mistakes, extensive utilisation of short sentences, the use of emoticons and symbols to articulate emotions, and unnecessary

use of abbreviations. Clearly, CMC presents an attractive research subject for educators who need to explore its pedagogical application.

The idea that CMC has negative linguistic and socio-cultural implications in itself does not expose the challenges associated with using CMC in the teaching of language. Perez (2010) reveals that CMC application in education may pose problems associated with technological breakdowns. Clearly, the argument is valid as CMC-based learning entirely depends on Internet coverage and learners' ability to access or afford telecommunications gadgets.

It is also a problem for distance learners to attend online classes. For example, Anderson (1998) states that different areas belong to different class zones. This problem is further amplified as variant studies argue that distance language learners achieve lower grades than regular students. Such problems compel the research to evaluate whether CMC's perceived advantages outweigh its disadvantages.

1.3 Research Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore Saudi student's attitudes towards SCMC and its influence on language use. A literature review, divided into suitable sub-sections will be used to inform the research objectives and subsequent research questions posed to a chosen sample of students. The findings from these studies will be used to inform a comprehensive analysis of the key advantages and limitations of CMC from the perspective of the instructors in relation to language use and provide a framework for future research in this field.

1.3.1 Research Objectives

The key research objectives for this study are to uncover the obstacles that Saudi EFL distance learners encounter in interacting with their support organisation; to outline the possible impact of their experiences and background on their attitudes towards SCMC-based English language courses; and finally, to investigate the extent to which the omission of elements that would normally be present in everyday face-to-face interaction may prove an inhibitor to student learning.

1.3.2 Research Questions

The key research questions aligned with the research objectives are as follows:

1. What obstacles do distance learners face in communicating and interacting with their supporting organisation (instructors, administrators, and other students)?
2. How do distance learners' age, milieu, and educational background affect their overall progress and attitudes towards SCMC English Language courses?
3. What are the challenges the students might encounter because of the absence of eye contact between instructors and Saudi EFL distance learners during SCMC classes?

1.4 Research Rationale

The use of CMC in the teaching of languages is becoming increasingly popular and as Perez (2010) asserts is still a new concept for numerous educators. This being the case, it is a fascinating topic to investigate. This study will inevitably enhance educators' understanding on how SCMC can be used to support EFL instructions through a

thorough explanation of the potential advantages and drawbacks and utilise this information to enhance EFL distance learners' participation in classes. Although the focus of this study is on Saudi Arabia this does not mean that the key concepts and findings cannot be extended to other countries and used to inform international cross-comparisons.

With reference to the University of KAU, which is the focus of this research, the findings will help to inform educators' decisions on how to improve Saudi EFL distance learners' experience in SCMC English classes, shedding light on how time constrains, technological hitches, and personal issues impact on learners' ability to pass language courses. Consequently, the study's results may be used to tailor online programs in order to enable external students to experience mastery in English language.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This paper aims to explore Saudi EFL distance learners' attitudes towards synchronous CMC with a particular focus on effects upon English language. The examination of academic literature and supporting secondary empirical research, dissected into meaningful sub-sections will help to add substance to the chosen research methodology.

There has been extensive debate on the significance of using computer-mediated communication in education (Bertin and Grave, 2010; Grabe, 2007). Nonetheless, a critical evaluation of current literature reveals that although technological advancement has improved language learners' experience, other scholars believe that the involvement of computer mediated communication in English learning experiences numerous setbacks that demand educators' attention (Li, 2013; Rice, 2012; Blocher et al. 2012; Mamede, 2009).

Some commentators assert that the inclusion of CMC in education has far-reaching effects on learners' experience (Elliot, 2009; Mpavu, 2011). Macgrath and Johnson (2009) reveal that there are two primary ways in which students can learn English: through traditional methods and the utilisation of new methods. They explain that traditional methods encompass learning through the utilisation of printed, written, or face-to-face (FTF) communication while new methods on the other hand encompass the deployment of computer mediated communication to enhance students' knowledge of English. They add that numerous learning scenarios favour the application of CMC

over FTF or printed/written communication especially when learners are too far removed from instructors or learning material. Such situations require the application of technological means such as CMC to increase learners' access to learning resources.

Other commentators argue that CMC is advantageous because of its ability to transform learning into interesting and interactive processes (Fitzpatrick and Donnelly, 2010). According to Fitzpatrick and Donnelly (2010), interaction has long been viewed as the key ingredient upon which success depends in technology-related education. This is supported by Yun (2005, cited in Fitzpatrick and Donnelly, 2010) who found evidence that instructional techniques which incorporate different kinds of interaction can be integral to engaging students. Additionally, Lai et al. (2011) proffer that current educators recognise CMC as a legitimate means of knowledge production while Bertin and Grave (2010) assert that CMC is becoming an increasingly significant constituent of the learning and teaching environment. Furthermore, Macgrath and Johnson (2009) maintain that unlike traditional methods of teaching, CMC provides numerous platforms for teaching English language. The author exemplifies such scenarios by pointing out the contribution of CMC-CALL (CMC-Computer Assisted Language Learning) in revolutionising education.

Clearly, the idea that CMC provides a platform for individuals to participate in English learning while eliminating learners' need to avail themselves in classes or learning resource centres supports the argument that the utilisation of CMC in the learning of English is highly recommendable. However, the idea that the utilisation of CMC is still a new concept in education means that a lot remains uncovered about the disadvantages and benefits of using CMC English language learning process. There are some

fascinating areas to explore such as Macgrath and Johnson's (2009) suggestion that CMC introduces new genres and illiteracies while blurring the line between written and oral communications. However, a comprehensive analysis of the key features of CMC is necessary in order to arrive at robust conclusions about the key benefits of this approach. The characteristics of CMC will be explored in the following section.

2.2 Characteristics of CMC

CMC can be understood as a tool or process of communication. For example, researchers who base their arguments on technical-oriented presumptions view CMC as communications' facilitator which enables individuals separated by time and/or distance to interact using interconnected computers (Elliot, 2009). The process-oriented definition conceptualises CMC as a process where the sender sends an intended message to the receiver via communication media (Fitzpatrick and Donnelly, 2010; Cartelli, 2010). Hence, the two definitions can be combined to expose CMC as a multifaceted communication process that engages individuals or groups who interact with each other via networked telecommunications appliances thereby providing an opportunity for cultural exchange and learning (Bdemiray, Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu, 2012).

The key characteristics differ significantly from face-to-face communication. According to Anolli et al. (2002) whereas face-to-face conversation arises in a cooperative environment which is consistently regulated by mutual correction and adjustment, CMC occurs in a far less cooperative environment due to the specific conditions imposed by the medium itself. This has a significant influence on the regulation of CMC interaction.

In FTF communication the regulation of interaction is acquired through the utilisation of a complicated system of yielding behaviours and turn taking. To illustrate, when a listener takes a turn as speaker, the individual may demonstrate some of the following behaviours: an audible inhalation; a shift of the head away from the speaker; loudness in the first phases of speech and the initiation of gesture. This disparity in the regulation of the interaction can be described using the following CMC features. Whereas the scope of an utterance is entirely established by the speaker, synchronous CMC utterances are quite short. This enhances feelings of interactivity for participants and enables listeners to recognise that the speaker has not finished speaking. As a result of the persistent characteristics of text-based CMC, a communicator does not need to be present at the time of the discussion, but instead can choose to return to one's computer at a later date to catch up on the message that has been transmitted. Moreover, in the majority of CMC contexts particularly asynchronous CMC environments, two key elements of face-to-face conversation are omitted: the co-formulation of feedback and the message, which enables social meaning to be immediately processed and the collaborative commitment of those partaking in the process (Anolli et al. 2002).

Fundamentally, Anolli et al. (2002) assert that the potential for disappearing from screen has a significant impact on discourse style. Indeed, users tend to only send messages so that others will not forget them. Additionally, contextual information is difficult to decipher in a *'chat'* system. For example, distinguishing between participants and forming a comprehensible sense of their individual identities can prove challenging as the users emerge as a name in text against the background.

Although there has been a significant increase in CMC application for the past 20 years, a close evaluation of related literature proves that most researchers centre their interests on articulating CMC's characteristics that set it apart from face-to-face (FTF) communication (Rhoten, 2006; Bower and Brodsky, 2008; Shih, 2011). It is proven that CMC not only differs from FTF communication by process, but also by function (Elliot, 2009; Code and Zaparyniuk, 2010). The next section will evaluate the technological features of CMC that differentiate it from FTF communication in terms of function and form.

2.2.1 Technological Characteristics

Unlike FTF communications, CMC involves the extensive use of technology. For example, Macgrath and Johnson (2011) argue that computer network technology and appliances facilitate interpersonal and hyper-personal interactions by providing an online platform upon which communicators interact over distance and time. In other words, the technological viewpoint proffers that CMC provides an opportunity for communicators to overcome spatial and temporal constraints. As such, Macgrath and Johnson (2009) argue that unlike FTF communications, CMC consists of internetworked telecommunications appliances that enable human beings to communicate regardless of the time or distance that separates them.

Bertin and Grave (2010) reveal that communication via CMC may either be *'synchronous'* or *'asynchronous'* (Lattner, 2012; Hartley, 2010). As mentioned above, CMC communications may take place at the time of communication (synchronous) or involve the utilisation of information that had been posted earlier on (asynchronous).

This characteristic differentiates CMC from FTF communication as the latter only takes place when the sender and receivers interact in real time (Lattner, 2012; Hartley, 2010).

The idea that both synchronous CMC and FTF communication involve real time interactions between the sender and the receiver may blur the line that distinguishes the two. In order to maintain the separation, Perez (2010) points out that the most notable difference is that unlike CMC, FTF communication does not engage the utilisation of networked computers as communication facilitators. He also asserts that while synchronous CMC may combine audio, video, and text with hypermedia and hyperlink characteristics, FTF communication encompasses both verbal and non-verbal communications.

Although the above characteristics contribute towards its popularity, Bertin and Grave (2010) are of the view that CMC enables multi-dimensional interactions to be the main source of its preference. This is supported by Fischer, (2007) who suggests that CMC involves one-to-one, one-alone, many-to-many, and one-to-many interactions. Regarding its application in language, Mann (2006) contends that most communication platforms lack CMC's electronic ability to manipulate language. In summary, CMC can be described from a technological standpoint to encompass various forms of technological tools and knowledge that support interactive learning.

2.2.2 Social and Cultural Characteristics

From a socio-cultural perspective Lattner (2012) asserts that in contrast to FTF communication, CMC lacks the human appeal and is, therefore, unsuitable for learning. Lattner (2012) asserts that an extensive utilisation of CMC in learning may diminish

learners' ability to interact in realistic situations because it lacks a relational element that enables interlocutors to recognise interpersonal situations, thereby, reducing their capacity to express themselves freely. Macgrath and Johnson (2009) further found that oral communication was far more interactive, self-exposing, and intimate than conferencing due to CMC's impersonal nature.

On the other hand, Macgrath and Johnson (2011) argue that it does not necessarily follow that the restriction of individuals' ability to self-expose and interact using CMC, necessarily has a detrimental impact on interpersonal communication if combined with other communication methods. Citing qualitative research they assert that the utilisation of CMC sometimes associated with misinterpretations can be utilised alongside oral or rather FTF communication due to its capacity to include facial expressions, gestures, and other para-verbal, social, and non-verbal cues that support information's clarity.

Unlike other scholars who limit their conceptualisation of CMC's impersonal characteristic as a setback, Bertin and Grave (2010) hold a somewhat paradoxical view. They propose that the lack of personal-like communication rids CMC of auditory and visual cues that may divert learners' attention from discussion topics. It is also evident that students who use CMC take longer than those who use FTF communications to reach a common understanding that provides an opportunity for them to make better decisions with appropriate language and attitudes.

On the other hand however, despite the fact that CMC does not include non-linguistic and paralinguistic behaviours, it does reportedly support rational advancement throughout extended interaction (Bertin and Grave, 2010). Moreover, there is reason to

believe that CMC enables users to participate more *'equally'*. Rice and Love (1987:89) note: *"the lack of nonverbal cues about physical appearance, authority, status, and turn-taking allows users to participate more equally and with more extreme effect on CMC systems than in many face-to-face interactions".*

From another perspective the fact that CMC does not involve face-to-face interactions does not necessarily mean that the social and personal elements of interaction are diminished. Riva and Galimberti (1998) postulate that a critical psychosocial shift has emerged out of CMC which lies in the notion of interaction. Until recently, the physical presence of both interacting users has been used to segregate relationship from interaction, the former inferring inter-subjective communication which can be sustained even at a physical distance. Yet, even in telephonic communication, which came before computer technology, it cannot be refuted that interlocutors do interact, even though they do not see each other. This is particularly pertinent of video conferences whereby the simulacrum of the other individual's physical is conceived as more convincing by the extra visual channel – and circumstances in which physical contact is especially rarefied, including network communication between numerous computers, or when supposedly *'real'* contact is the outcome of high-quality simulation, as with virtual reality.

In contemporary times, Riva and Galimberti (1998) assert that networking allows individuals to access any sort of data without having to move. By becoming nodes in a network, people can evaluate the information they are accessing with greater freedom of manipulation and thoroughness, and since networking can take place anywhere an individual chooses, it opens the gateway to global interaction. Hence, rather than diminishing communication between individuals and the social elements of interaction, it

could be simply that what has emerged out of CMC is a modern, alternative notion of communication that does not necessitate physical presence.

According to Riva and Galimberti (1998) virtual space is now conceived as an electronic analogue of the interlocutor space whereby participants interact, a space which presents a convincing simulation of the physical presence of the other. A significant and important facet of Cyberspace is the interaction by which a new sense of self can be constructed. As a consequence, a new sense of presence fills the space with fluid forms of community. The premise of a community of individuals interacting in a technological environment is moving from culture-defining mass media to a proliferation of media as alternative sources of mediated experience. Hence, although the lack of interpersonal connection and social dimensions related to face-to-face interaction may be missing in CMC, this medium does facilitate other forms of interpersonal communication which transform the ways in which people communicate with each other.

2.3 Modes of CMC

Despite the idea that current understandings articulate CMC as conversational contacts characterised by unique technological, linguistic, and social-cultural attributes, Mann (2006) argues that CMC cannot be fully understood without the consideration of the ways in which CMC takes place. Hence, this section will contribute to the research objectives by providing insight about the prime CMC modes.

As aforementioned, the fact that CMC is believed to encompass two modes (asynchronous (ACMC) and synchronous (SCMC) demonstrates that CMC is a communication platform enriched with significantly unique communication capacities and exceptionally multivalent interactivity. Lattner (2012) points out that much of the

available literature currently focuses on the idea that unlike ACMC, SCMC conversations occur in real time through platforms such as chat rooms, video-conferences, and instant messaging. As such, communicators in SCMC contexts post messages that appear in typed form on computer screens, providing opportunities to scroll back and forth previously distributed discourse texts. Additionally, Bertin and Grave (2010) suggest that SCMC scenarios not only enable learners to experience a conversational situation that is identical to FTF communication but also enhance learners' language and monitory usage.

Although SCMC has been endorsed as a communication platform that supports learners' interactivity and the development of conversational skills, Mann (2006) argues that SCMC conversation experiences drawbacks based on the fact that it is not only demanding but easily disrupted. As such, unlike ACMC, the initiation of SCMC conversation requires learners to sign into and launch specific networks into a computer system. Moreover, the idea that SCMC mode requires participants to sign into a specific network at the same time has proven to be problematic bearing in mind different time zones and class times (Shih, 2011; Apostel and Folk, 2008; Fitzpatrick and Donnelly, 2010).

On the other hand, Mann (2006) points out that unlike SCMC, ACMC does not require interactions to be simultaneous and can take the form of e-mails, World Wide Web (WWW), newsgroups, web blogs, and postings that appear on bulletin broad systems. Additionally, proponents of the application of ACMC believe that this function provides ample time for students to read, comprehend, internalise, contextualise, and provide feedback to posted textual messages. Moreover, from the perspective of Macgrath and

Johnson (2009) ACMC mode is highly preferable as it provides adequate time for students to edit and monitor their writing and can be readily applied to collaborative writing due to its ability to foster critical thinking habits with participants.

Regardless of the obvious advantages and disadvantages, it is asserted that the selection of either ACMC or SCMC as a mode of learning is influenced by various factors. For example, while Ho (2011) cites that temporal, socio-physical, linguistic, cultural, and martial factors influence individuals' choice on what mode to use, Fitzpatrick and Donnelly (2010) maintain that other factors including individual dimensions, preferences, aims, purposes, and objectives play a fundamental role in the selection of either ACMC or SCMC mode. Ultimately however, Lattner (2012) postulates that institutional decisions, pedagogical objectives, fashions, trends, and personal curiosity are the main reasons behind the utilisation of specific CMC modes. With these findings in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that Fischer (2007) suggests that curricular goals should be used in deciding the mode that best suits the implementation of a particular task.

2.4 Scopes of CMC: Intracultural versus Intercultural

This section will review both the intracultural and intercultural aspects of CMC. Speakers in intracultural communication rely on prior culture and knowledge of a distinct speech community which is privatised by those belonging to that community. Language barriers are not transcended, although representations are individualised and subcultures are relied upon. On the other hand, in the case of intercultural communication previous knowledge that is privatised in the communicative process

belongs to diverse languages and cultures (Jackson, 2012). CMC is believed to be a concept that traverses variant disciplines. The concept can be understood from a technical viewpoint to consist of interconnected telecommunication gadgets that aid human communication (Mann, 2006). Mann (2006) describes CMC as proof of technological advancement and globalisation. Hence, CMC not only showcases technological advancement but is also a system that allows effective communication between individuals and groups. Fitzpatrick and Donnelly (2010) support this argument asserting that CMC has numerous multi-dimensional characteristics that allow people to interact regardless of their temporary and spatial separation.

Clearly, the fact that CMC can use technological knowledge and appliances to link individuals in different geographical locations, time class, and time zones have underpinned the endorsement of the technological-oriented definition (Yang, 2011).

Having been the subject of discussion and exploration for almost two decades, CMC is currently comprehended not just as a communication platform but as a process (Fitzpatrick and Donnelly, 2010). For example, Macgrath and Johnson (2009) suggest that CMC is nowadays attributed not just as a platform upon which individuals hold online discussions but as a concept with far-reaching linguistic, social, and cultural effects. Perez (2010) asserts that a typical CMC conversational scenario enables individuals from different socio-cultural backgrounds to learn from each other's cultures. This is exemplified by Ho (2011) who proffers that CMC not only facilitates cultural preservation and cultural interaction but leads to the development of new cultures and illiteracies.

In view of the above paragraphs it is clear that CMC's characteristics of space and independence are broadly recognised for affording both intra cultural and intercultural exchange (Macgrath and Johnson, 2011). However, most researchers continue to concentrate on CMC's intercultural implications as opposed to its ability to foster the sharing of cultural values between individuals from different native backgrounds, communities or countries; broadly described as telecollaboration (Abuseileek, 2007). Nonetheless, intercultural scenarios are explicit when individuals who share a native tongue, historical, and cultural background use CMC to interact (Shih, 2011).

A clear example of intercultural CMC is notable in Fitzpatrick and Donnelly's (2010) study involving American students learning Spanish and Spanish students learning English. The collaborative research involved the two groups who exchanged online across the two countries for two years. The students were asked to write an essay per week in their foreign language and exchange them with the student from the other group via asynchronous CMC in a blackboard for peer reaction. Generally speaking, it was found that the implementation of pragmatic linguistic interactions facilitates shared belief systems, meaning-making and understanding of intercultural differences.

An empirical example of a research project on intra cultural CMC is presented by Mann (2006). Here researchers grouped EFL university students into a technologic-enhanced group and traditional group. In order to eliminate intercultural CMC, the members of both groups followed the same syllabus but differed in mode of writing. The traditional group used paper and pen for writing while the technology-enhanced group exploited MOO for discussions and Microsoft Word for writing. The study aimed to investigate whether interaction modes affected the quality of students' peer revisions. According to

Mann (2006) the use of a mixed-methods approach helped to dispel some of the urban myths of this model and demonstrate the potential for genuine social engagement. To summarise then, CMC fosters both intercultural and intra cultural exchange meaning that communications occur within and without classes or within campuses and encompass intra-class CMC.

2.5 CMC in Language Education

This section explores the application of CMC in language education contributing towards an understanding of one of the paper's key objectives – to explore Saudi EFL students' attitudes towards the utilisation of SCMC and effects on language use.

Mahdi's (2014) literature review draws on 40 research articles and focuses specifically on the benefits of CMC on language learning and the elements which impact on the use of CMC in language learning. Generally speaking, the findings indicate that CMC can offer learners an important framework from which to communicate in the target language peripheral to the classroom context. Zeng and Takatuska (2009, cited in Mahdi, 2014) investigated EFL student's dialogues in synchronous task-based learning and discovered that this approach enhanced their language learning and facilitated text-based collaborative dialogue. They discovered that task-based synchronous NBC including chatting has the capacity to cultivate the negotiation of meaning. Additionally, Young (2003, cited in Mahdi, 2014) found that the internet motivated learners and minimised anxiety over language production due to the fact that students felt more comfortable when engaged in online chat.

In relation to specific language skills acquired, it was discovered that online listening skills in L2 required learners to utilise more learning resources than with text-based activities and took on an integrative approach to learning. It was also found that online listening activities lead to better retention of vocabulary resulting in noticeable cross modality gains. In relation to speaking, the studies found that the students who used CMC gained significant advancements in their oral communication skills and attained higher grades than their peers who did not engage in this process. With reference to written skills, Shang (2007, cited in Mahdi, 2014) determined that the use of email markedly enhanced written performance, lexical density and grammatical accuracy.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the author acknowledges the fact that there are many influences that can impact on student attitudes to learning that extend beyond the benefits of the model itself. For example, social presence meaning the degree of perception, reaction and feeling of being connected to another entity can aid second language communication. Studies have also demonstrated that task-type can also influence student's linguistic behaviour. One study undertaken by Yilmaz and Granena (2011) compared two activities, namely dictogloss and jigsaw. The findings indicated that dictogloss elicited a greater number of language-related episodes than jigsaw. Hence, the above analysis demonstrates the fact that although CMC is shown to have clear advantages for language learning acquisition, there are a range of other factors that need to be taken into consideration when considering student attitudes to CMC and its effect on language.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The section specifies the research philosophy, design, instruments, validity and reliability, research strategy, methods (including sampling strategy), ethical considerations and research limitations.

3.2 Research Philosophy

There are two distinct types of research philosophy namely *'positivist'* and *'interpretivist'* philosophy. According to Levy (2009) the two perspectives not only hold different views about research, but also propose contrasting views on how researchers should carry out their studies. Moreover, Kalelioglu and Gulbahar (2010) note that the two provide a comprehensive framework that guide researchers in data collection, data analysis, and utilisation of research results.

The first positivist research philosophy proposes the deployment of highly structured mythologies in research. Structured mythologies support researchers' ability to realise research quality results. Additionally, the philosophy capitalises on researchers' ability to quantify and generalise research results through the utilisation of statistical methods (Kalelioglu and Gulbahar, 2010). As such, the philosophy is significantly objective and critical thereby making it ideal in natural science.

On the other hand, Carlsen (2007) points out that the interpretivist philosophy, the chosen stance for this paper, is based on the idea that reality is too complex to be studied under the limitation of laws and theories of social science. Unlike positivist

philosophy, the interpretivist doctrine capitalises on researchers' ability to interpret research situation (Fitzpatrick and Donnelly, 2010). Furthermore, Levy (2009) asserts that unlike the positivist philosophy, interpretivist philosophy argues that there are numerous truths and meanings to facts and that these facts are favourable to all research situations and problems.

Interpretivist philosophy affiliates itself with interpretivist theory. According to Perez (2010) unlike the positivist philosophy which is best suited to statistical researchers, interpretivist theory is most suitable to qualitative researchers as it enables them to approach research problems from different perspectives, which in turn translates into an elevated ability to derive variant meanings from research findings.

Finally, Lattner (2012) states that the interpretivist theory is not only suitable for both qualitative and quantitative research, but also enhances the researchers' ability to analyse meaning-making behaviours as well as understand how such behaviours lead to observable outcomes. Nonetheless, Mann (2006) points out that one of the key drawbacks of this approach is that it lacks the ability to deliver generalised results.

3.3 Research Design

As the aim of this dissertation is to explore Saudi EFL distance learners' attitudes towards SCMC, it is deemed pertinent to use qualitative research focused on King Abdulaziz University. The rationale for choosing this research design is based on Bertin and Grave's (2010) comments that the qualitative model has long been used to explore non-quantifiable data such as feelings and attitudes. The model disregards the

application of statistical methods as Anderson (1998) advocates it for researches that examine quantifiable data.

The study involves the collection of data from six English language teachers. Research activities included telephone-based interviews with English language teachers. Qualitative research was deployed to reveal teachers' experiences regarding the SCMC's capacity to facilitate the realisation of interactive online English classes.

3.3.1 Research Instruments

The study was conducted through the deployment of qualitative study techniques. As such, research activities included the conducting of phone-based interview sessions with 6 KAU's English language teachers. According to Mann (2006), interviews provide an opportunity for researchers to guide respondents thereby preventing them from digressing from the topic in question. The application of interviews was also preferable as it enables researchers to seek clarity and further explanation in participants' responses.

However, Lattner (2012) contends that structured interview lists limit respondents from revealing opinions and feelings thereby increasing the risk of leaving out valuable information and inhibiting researchers from exploring research problems comprehensively. In order to compensate for this limitation, study activities included 20 minute telephone-initiated interviews with 6 teachers. Semi-structured interview lists were used to guide interview sessions. Such instruments are advantageous as Anderson (1998) reveals that they have a human appeal and provide an opportunity for the development of a personal relationship between the researcher and the respondent,

thereby enabling the respondent to reveal deep-seated and honest opinions, feelings, and attitudes about the subject matter.

3.3.2 Research Validity and Reliability

According to Carlsen (2007) researchers can guarantee research validity and reliability through pre-testing their research instruments. With this in mind, this research study ensured validity by submitting an interview list sample to the instructor who evaluated its ability to realise the research objectives. As such, the research questions were proven appropriate in relation to the study's objectives. This approach also supports Lincoln and Guba's (1985, cited in Golafshani, 2003) stance which employs the term *'dependability'* to describe the notion of *'reliability'* in qualitative research. By using qualified instructors to validate the sample list, this adds to the dependability of the chosen methodology.

Additionally, the interviews were conducted under the supervisors' direction and interview reviews capitalised on paraphrasing rather than direct quotes. The study also received a more than 70% response rate. Hence the research is considered valid and reliable.

3.4 Research Strategy

Levy (2009:780) defines research strategy as *"a framework through which researchers gather data and the transformation of such data into comprehensive information".*

The study consists of four chronological activities: data collection, followed by data presentation, data analysis, and, finally, conclusion. Upon the exploration of data, the

data was transformed into meaningful, comprehensible information through the technique of *'thematic analysis'*. The inclusion of relevant literature searches support results' accuracy as they provide arguments upon which researchers compare and evaluate their positions (Ho, 2011).

3.5 Research Methods

The current study utilises both primary and secondary data to support research objectives. Firstly, secondary data were used to enable the study to capture theories and concepts that contribute towards the subject matters' full comprehension. Consequently, relevant and current literatures were searched in printed and online materials. The selection criteria included the evaluation of study's abstracts, especially those published after 2005.

Additionally, the study capitalises on qualitative methods in the form of phone-based interviews to explore English Language teachers' experiences and EFL distance learners' attitudes towards SCMC.

3.5.1 Sampling Strategy

The selection of participants was performed using what is referred to as *'random sampling'*. According to Newman and McNeil (1998), random sampling allows one to assume that what is presented is an unbiased sample which represents the population from which it came. This model does not allow for the assumption that two randomly sampled groups are identical. Instead, one must assume that the likeliness of non-representation has been minimised through the use of this technique.

Six English teachers were picked from KAU's English language teachers' list after which they participated in answering interview questions. According to Bertin and Grave (2010) random sampling is advantageous as it facilitates representativeness.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

With reference to ethical considerations, the study prevented the violation of participants' privacy by protecting their personal information. Moreover, anonymity was upheld through the utilisation of symbols and figures to represent participants. Additionally, all participants were briefed on their right to withdraw from research activities.

The activity had taken place before they were issued with interview samples. The participants were assured that withdrawal was not tied to any consequence whatsoever and they were briefed about their contribution and the study's objectives. Additionally, the study took place under the university's administrations' authority who assured the researcher of the organisations' support.

3.7 Data Analysis

The data analysis involves the evaluation of qualitative data. Data was evaluated through the use of thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis is a method for analysing, identifying and reporting patterns, describing and organising data sets in great detail. This approach enables themes and sub-themes to emerge from the data embedded throughout the interviews.

Nonetheless, Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that this passive account denies the active role of the researcher in selecting themes of interest. As such it is important for the research to acknowledge their own values and theoretical stances in relation to qualitative research.

3.8 Research Scope and Limitations

As the research study targeted Saudi students it is evident that the study's activities were limited to Saudi Arabia. Essentially, no activity was conducted outside KAU as all participants were KAU's English Language teachers.

There are also issues associated with using telephone interviews. According to Cohen et al. (2013) telephone interviews have the advantage of being able to overcome any bias in the interviewee or researcher that may be caused by matters of dress, age, social characteristics, ethnicity, race or gender. They also have the advantage of minimising costs in travel and time. Also, where participants are unable to answer all of the questions posed further substitutes can be located from the sample listing. However, because telephone surveys do not have the sensory stimulation of face-to-face interviews there tends to be a limited time that is tolerable to participants meaning that careful consideration needs to be given to which items should or should not be included. This presents a risk to validity and reliability as the number of items has to be more carefully selected than in other forms of data collection. In view of the limitations of telephone interviews, it may be advisable to perform more in-depth, face-to-face qualitative interviews in future research. This would mitigate potential issues to do with

validity and reliability and allow for a more in-depth evaluation of attitudes and perspectives related to CMC.

However, the research methodology was also accompanied with specific strengths. Voice recorders were used to collate the information which was then transcribed and dissected into relevant themes. According to Remenyi (2011), verbal data needs to be captured as efficiently and quickly as possible. When interview notes are scribbled as the respondent is speaking, this can prove challenging and frequently results in incompleteness. On the other hand, recording can provide a significant advantage to the researcher being that it facilitates the creation of a transcript for the interview.

The approach to use teachers' experiences to explain distance learners' attitudes is a clear weakness. However, Mann (2006) provides a partial justification for this approach proposing that it is difficult to guarantee distance learners' participation. Moreover, instructors do provide a significant contribution to the subject area as they have first-hand experience with SCMC English class activities including students' participation and their ability to interact with students.

Finally, teachers and learners to some extent share the same experience. As Carlsen (2007) points out learning occurs in a typical communication scenario and message senders and receivers encounter the same communication experience as the two alternate roles.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

4.1 Interview

Six participants were selected randomly from English Language teachers' list after which the selected individuals were asked to attend a brief meeting in which they were informed about the research purpose, their participation and rights. They were required to submit their personal telephone contacts and were given the liberty to choose the time to participate in interviews.

Upon consideration of their preferred timescales, the participants were given semi-structured interview samples in which they were required to familiarise themselves with the questions. Each interview session took approximately 20 minutes in which the interviewer took notes on important points within conversations. Additionally, voice recorders were used to record interview sessions. However, voice recorders were only used with participants' knowledge and approval. The following questions were used to guide interview sessions:

Interview Questions

1. How do you think milieu, age, and educational background influence distance learners' attitudes towards SCMC?
2. How can you gauge students' knowledge in relation to CMC in King Abdulaziz University?
3. To what extent is SCMC used in King Abdulaziz University?
4. Why does CMC experience a wide application in King Abdulaziz University?

5. What are the pedagogical advantages of CMC?

6. What do you think are the obstacles that distance learners face in communicating with their support organisation, instructors and fellow students?

7. How you think students' age, milieu, and educational background affect distance learners' attitudes and progress in SCMC English classes?

8. What obstacles do learners face as a result of lack of eye contact with instructors in SCMC classes?

9. What linguistic characteristics downplay SCMC's ability to foster effective learning of English language?

The following responses were obtained:

1. Challenges students face in using SCMC to interact with their instructors and students

The most popular response to the first interview question was that distance learners faced more challenges in their attempt to interact with fellow distant learners, instructors, and the university than regular students. As such, results concur with Carlsen (2007) who states that although SCMC can connect students regardless of the distance between them and fellow students, SCMC's dependence on network coverage and technological appliances bar such students from the enjoyment of free, uninterrupted interaction that occurs in FTF communication. The same view prevailed in the present study's interview sessions as respondents mentioned technological hitches such as network coverage technological appliances and inaccessibility as part of the

challenges they faced as they tried to communicate with university administrators, fellow distance learners, and instructors.

Nonetheless, responses to the first interview question provided insight to students' attitudes towards SCMC classes and their educational progress. For example, almost a third of the group argued that distance students attained low grades because SCMC provided minimal opportunities for students to collaborate in learning and seek instructors' clarity. The argument contrasts with Anderson (1998) who argues that CMC can provide a FTF-like learning scenario where students participate through instant text messaging. However, the study concurs with Perez (2010) who asserts that factors such as students' low language proficiency, poor typing skills, and network problems prevent students from providing timely feedback present in regular language classes. Additionally, most respondents believed that SCMC offered limited opportunities for the interaction between learners and that such limitations prevented them from sharing their knowledge and experience in learning English language, thereby reducing their ability to acquire high grades. Nonetheless, overall most respondents believed that SCMC provided valuable contributions to enabling distant students to access real-time language instructions.

2. How students' age, milieu, and educational background affect distance learners' attitudes and progress in SCMC English classes

Participants' reaction to the second interview question lead to two categories of answer; one that articulated how distance students' milieu, age, and educational backgrounds

influenced their progress in SCMC English classes and another that explained how such characteristics influenced students' attitudes towards SCMC.

Participants' responses demonstrate that student characteristics such as age, educational background, and milieu (environment) influenced students' ability to pass SCMC-based English classes. These findings concur with Lattner (2012) who highlighted how the current pedagogical shift provides a learning scenario that differs from the original learning contexts. To illustrate, older students experienced difficulties coping with changes that existed in new educational contexts such as the use of technology to support English language instructions. Conversely, it was discovered that younger participants are more likely to pass SCMC-based English courses than older students where teachers associated older students' failure to poor technological skills. Additionally, most respondents believed that older students had a low experience using SCMC technology and that most of them were incapable of accessing real-time SCMC classes. As such, it was reported that a majority of such students depended upon voice-records for their learning.

Although it is evident that age influences distant students' ability to pass SCMC English courses, Levy (2009) argues that several factors cause older' students failure. For example, the paper found that, unlike younger students, older students have jobs and families and are therefore, likely to be involved in other matters during SCMC class. Hence, other than low technological experience, time constraints and environmental matters such as job and family engagements prevent older students from attending SCMC classes.

Environmental and educational factors also influenced distance learners' attitudes and ability to pass SCMC-based English courses. Nine participants expressed that environmental factors such as poor infrastructures and technological appliances unavailability prevented distant students from accessing SCMC classes that then translated into diminished grades and poor attitudes towards SCMC English language courses.

These findings are supported by a 132 sample survey undertaken by Anderson (1998) who discovered that educational background influenced students' attitudes and ability to pass SCMC-language classes. Both studies position that students with high educational attainments had comparatively advanced language and technological experiences and were, therefore, more able to participate in CMC classes than those with lower educational attainments. Similarly, a significant proportion of the current study's participants articulated that students with low academic attainments were less able to pay for technological gadgets and internet connections which in turn, influenced their attitudes towards SCMC language classes.

3. Challenges that distance learners encounter due to lack of eye contact with instructors in SCMC classes

It was evident from the research findings that many respondents encountered numerous challenges due to the absence of eye contact between learners and instructors in SCMC learning scenarios with the most recurrent answer being based on SCMC's impersonal nature. For example, most respondents supported Anderson's (1998) postulation that CMC lacked the ability to expose students to typical conversational

situations and that an exclusive utilisation of CMC in language downplayed students' ability to hold real conversations. As such, results reflected the fact that SCMC classes have limited ability to enable students to develop their conversational skills such as turn taking, opening and closing, and greetings. Instead, the lack of eye contact with instructors allows students to use emoticons, short sentences, and abbreviations that experience minimal usage in typical conversational situation (Kalelioglu andGulbahar, 2010).

Another popular response was that SCMC provided minimal opportunities for instructors to evaluate whether students use other language skills such as facial expressions and gestures correctly. Likewise, Carlsen (2007) is of the view that lack of personal contacts between learners and instructors paves the way for language simplification. Both agree that lack of personal contact and temporal constraints make instructors overlook typos, spelling mistakes, and grammatical errors.

English learners can use either traditional methods (face-to-face or print/written communication) or new methods (CMC-CALL) to study the language. Nonetheless, the section concurs with most KAU teachers' arguments that the utilisation of CMC is highly recommendable for English learners. This is supported by Carlsen (2007) who asserts that this technology not only provides an opportunity for individuals to use both oral and written communication in learning English but also improves the learning context by enhancing students' learning and interaction experience.

CMC has been the subject of research for various scholars. Successful and successive research have led to the comprehension of CMC as a communication media that uses a

wide scope of tools and processes to facilitate communication delivery and design (Shih, 2011, Yamada and Goda, 2013; Irala and Torres, 2009; Munguba, Valdes and Da Silva, 2008; Facefaiola, Davis and Edwards, 2010). Similarly, a majority of KAU teachers believed that CMC articulated a learning platform that enabled students and teachers to use computers and technological appliances to aid English instructions. The idea that CMC combines human-human and human-computer communication interfaces is, perhaps, one of the shared agreements among scholars and current results (Li, 2013; Bertin and Grave, 2010). A number of scholars including Levy (2009) and Anderson (1998) conceptualise CMC as a communication platform that makes use of computers as a media for information transfer. Moreover, Mann (2006) points out that unlike other forms of communication, CMC combines human-machine and human-human interactions with cognitive, structural, and socio-cognitive implications.

Clearly, the question *"what is CMC?"* is not a new one. However, despite the efforts to uncover what underlies the concept, Deutsch and Panichl (2001) assert that researchers are yet to settle on a definition that describes CMC comprehensively.

Numerous definitions have been offered to CMC and its implication on communication (Elliot, 2009). The fact that CMC has been the subject of numerous disciplines is, perhaps, the reason behind the existence of a variety of definitions. Nonetheless, Bertin and Grave (2010) argue that before 1997, the concept was significantly blurred by the idea that most definitions centred their articulation on the description of processes involved in CMC.

Wang and Chang (2011) proffer that although the concept has existed for a long time an attempt to define CMC and its applications was explicit in 1997 when the CMC magazine triggered the first online debate about the subject matter. The question aroused curiosity in variant scholars who not only attempted to understand CMC but also to contribute towards the improvement of related technologies. Macgrath and Johnson (2009) attempted to define CMC describing it as the creation, exchange and perception of information through the utilisation of telecommunications technology. As such, the definition attributed people as the creator and receiver of messages who facilitates its transmission through interconnected or, rather, networked telecommunications gadgets. Bertin and Grave (2010) further suggest that traditional definitions centred their ideas on the notion that CMC involved three actors: the sender (human) at one end, the media of communication (networked telecommunications gadgets) in the middle, and the receiver (human) on the other end. On the other hand, machines, mostly computers, were attributed to be communication facilitators that enable human beings to encode, transmit, and decode messages (Shih, 2011; Facefaiola, Davis and Edwards, 2010).

Clearly, the above definition did not mark the end of attempts to comprehend the subject. Nonetheless, studies prove that most researchers affiliate to the somewhat technical-oriented description. Macgrath and Johnson (2011), for example, endorse the definition by mentioning that CMC as communications, mediated by networked telecommunications gadgets (computers), between groups or individuals separated by distance or/and time. Likewise, Macgrath and Johnson (2009) provide a technical delineation by contending that CMC as communications take place between human

beings through the instrumentality of computers. As such, from a technical perspective, CMC is broadly conceptualised as transfer and receipt of information via computers that function as storage, input, and routing appliances (Bertin and Grave, 2010; Grace, Gordon and Anand, 2007; Olanirian, 2009; Kahai and Avolio, 2006).

However, just like the ever-changing CMC technologies, the description is a dynamic concept. However, unlike original delineations, current knowledge tends to deviate from tool or medium-oriented definition to emphasise interaction and process (Bdemiray, Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu, 2012). A rather human definition is made explicit by Macgrath and Johnson (2009) who perceive CMC as an organised computer-facilitated communication between persons, or as a platform upon which people interact over a specific network. In other words, current definitions use CMC as a generic term that includes all communications among groups or between individuals through networked computers (Bertin and Grave, 2010; Park, 2008).

The process-based definition leads to an abstract conceptualisation of CMC. For example, Mann (2006) argues that continuous researchers' attempt to use abstract concepts to define CMC has led to a scenario where CMC bears variant meaning and applications. Despite the advantages that come with such flexibilities, the abstract nature of CMC definitions may be problematic (Li, 2013). However, the study combines the present papers' results with Bertin and Grave's (2010) delineation who use a language learners' point of view to define CMC as a platform that enables language learners who have network access to interact with speakers or other learners of a specific language. As such, CMC should not just be understood as a communication tool but also as a technology, engine, medium for social learning and interaction. It not

only defines the space with which social relations take place but also provides the structures and tools through which individuals enter the space.

Various factors contribute towards the wide application of CMC in education. For example, a large proportion of respondents indicated that CMC provides a platform for language learners to interact with speakers and learners of a target language and this is clearly the reason behind its wide application in the education field (Bdemiray, Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu, 2012; Demiray, Taskiran and Yilmaz, 2012). Furthermore, Bertin and Grave (2010) assert that the integration of CMC in education is increasing as educators strive to transform the educational system into one that caters for learners' cultural needs. The current premise further reveals that the pedagogical shift has deviated language educators' cognitive presumption of learning and knowledge as processes that only involve the brain to one that considers environmental, social, and collaborative factors as issues that influence the learning and knowledge of a language.

In a nutshell, CMC can be comprehended as both a communication process and a mediation tool. Viewed as a tool, CMC is described as a technological tool that facilitates human interaction. More so, other scholars describe CMC as a process that involves the sender, the information (massage), and the receiver. Regardless of the definers' perspectives, it is widely agreed upon that the human aspect and historical and socio-cultural factors play a key role during the interaction (Elliot, 2009). However, a more inclusive comprehension of the subject matter may be attained through the consideration of processes, scopes, and modes of CMC.

It cannot be overlooked that technological advancement has contributed tremendously towards education (Shih, 2011). For example, results concur with Macgrath and Johnson (2011) who observe that the improvement in technology has transformed education and that learners from various geographical locations are able to learn from the same source. Clearly, this argument complements the present research results as most participants affirmed that the technological advancement has improved learners' access to academic resources in KAU. However, the latter supports the arguments by pinpointing that such advancements are the effects of advanced globalisation. As such, it is beyond argument that globalisation and, therefore, technological advancement reduce the distance between students and learning resources, thereby enabling such students to share learning resources regardless of their geographical location.

However, Macgrath and Johnson's (2011) argument fails to point out that the improved technology's practical elements contribute towards the learning of English language and overall education. Unlike Bertin and Grave (2010) and Macgrath and Johnson (2011) who base their ideas on the fact that technological advancements have transformed education, the present research supports Mann (2006) who places greater emphasis on the significance of technological gadgets in distance learning. For example, it is found that different models and types of computers mediate distance learning and as such, introduce the relationship between the advancement of computer technology, increased internet usage, and an increase internet-based learning. For instance, Mann (2006) argues that globalisation leads to an increased need to improve the computer technology in order to meet global communication requirements.

A close evaluation of related literature reveals that most scholars associate an increased usage of computers in language learning process with globalisation (Abuseileek, 2007). For example, Bertin and Grave (2010) argue from a commerce's point of view asserting that globalisation increases the rate at which commodities move across borders thereby forcing individuals to learn other people's cultural elements and languages in order to facilitate trade.

Similarly, Macgrath and Johnson (2009) support both sides of the contention by mentioning that globalisation increases the level at which individuals communicate, therefore, increasing the rate at which such individuals borrow and learn from each other's cultures. Consequently, this viewpoint tends to be affiliated with the idea that globalisation increases the rate at which capital, resources, and knowledge are exchanged across states' boundaries, thereby providing an opportunity for people to learn and share cultural elements such as language (Elliot, 2009; Zaharias, 2011, Reid and Prudchenko, 2013; Baggio and Beldarrain, 2011). This stance compliments Macgrath and Johnson's (2011) suggestion that the need to enhance international communication necessitates the utilisation of computer mediated communication to aid the learning of the English language.

It is, therefore, indisputable that computer mediated communication, also termed as CMC, has contributed towards the spread of the knowledge of English language throughout the world (Li, 2013; Chapelle, 2009). Along with the increased use and coverage of the internet technology, the advancement of the computer records having promoted CMC is a notably significant communication means (Shih, 2011). Currently, CMC experiences extensive usage in education.

Results emphasize the notion that CMC has offered a number of pedagogical applications since its first utilisation in an educational environment. A variety of secondary and primary research studies on instructive characteristics of both ACMC and SCMC have been published through which educators have recognised the opportunities that accompany the application of CMC in education. To date, CMC is not only renowned for its ability to support variant learning activities (discussions, simultaneous games, and role-play), but also its capacity to serve a number of learning objectives and functions (Fitzpatrick and Donnelly, 2010). Despite Fitzpatrick and Donnelly's (2010) assertion that the application of CMC is hardly limited to a particular discipline or topic, the present study's results show that KAU mainly uses CMC to aid English instructions. Most respondents believed that CMC was effective in a range of English-learning contexts including intra-class and inter-class learning situations. Nonetheless, respondents did not hesitate to point out that CMC complements current pedagogical needs. Mann (2006) supports this view arguing that most English teachers believe that CMC has proven to be an important and beneficial contributor to the educational context. Cleary, teachers and educators should familiarise themselves with CMC's in order to ensure the full realisation of CMC capabilities in education.

Judging from a socio-cultural theory's (SCT) point of view, the application of CMC in education offers an array of benefits to human's cultural and social developments (Fitzpatrick and Donnelly, 2010). Along with its potential to improve learners' language proficiencies, results conceptualise CMC both as linguistic and technical mediators that facilitate the transformation from a low mental function to an improved, cultural function (Shih, 2011).

According to Macgrath and Johnson (2009), CMC fosters the development of learners' cognitive processes by offering two types of mediators: other humans and psychological tools. In other words, CMC supports the development of interactive learning as learners exchange texts. Moreover, Mann (2006) points out that, when conducted under the right conditions, CMC learning improves learners' mastery in language as it supports collaborative learning and the interaction between learners and experts. In language learning, CMC enables learners to interact with native speakers of a specific language, thereby enabling learners to benefit from their knowledge.

Moreover, an extensive review of the available literature concurs with the present study in that CMC not only supports comprehensible and collaborative interactions but also socialisation (Shih, 2011). Moreover, Fitzpatrick and Donnelly (2010) cite that CMC facilitates learners' autonomy and reflective learning and that it supports mutual knowledge construction through the social negotiation of views in an authentic environment. Additionally, CMC provides an opportunity for learners to participate in the performance of significant tasks with an emphasis on production and reflection (Fitzpatrick and Donnelly, 2010). Such social interactions are highly beneficial as they support cognitive advancement (Li, 2013; Macgrath and Johnson, 2011).

From a linguistic viewpoint, CMC can be viewed as consisting of unique linguistic characteristics that differentiate it from traditional communications. As such, Mann (2006) asserts that unlike other communication platforms, CMC has four linguistic features. The first, perhaps, most notable postulation is that CMC includes both written and spoken languages (Elliot, 2009; Faiola and Matei, 2008). Clearly, from this

standpoint, the argument may attract scepticism bearing in mind that the two features are explicit in writing and speaking media.

However, Ho (2011) points to the fact that CMC is significantly dissimilar to writing and speaking media as it shares their properties. In addition the combination of both writing and speaking media characteristics provides that most learners believed that the combination of both features makes CMC superior to the two. Meanwhile, Macgrath and Johnson (2009) state that CMC not only combines such characteristics but also includes other features that involves neither writing nor speaking communication poses. Such features are clear as it is widely mentioned in the current study that unlike the two, CMC can combine both written and spoken communication forms and provide real-time interaction similar to FTF communications.

As such, CMC provides an opportunity for interaction between specific contexts and contextual aspects. The present study's results further reveal that CMC interaction may be conceptualised as a typical conversational scenario where participants are free to express emphasis and stress through the utilisation of italics and bodings, a function that is shared with speech from a first persons' point of view (Yang, 2011). Furthermore, Perez (2010) points out that CMC shares numerous characteristics with written language. Just like written communication, CMC lacks intonation, lexical density, permanent record of discourse, and the utilisation of textual formatting and punctuations in messages.

Another definitive characteristic is explicit in the idea that unlike other communication contexts, CMC uses a simplified communication register (Macgrath and Johnson, 2011;

Fitzpatrick and Donnelly, 2010). As such, results point to the fact that most distant learners used simplified communication registers for two reasons: first, because the speaker perceives the listeners as a language learner with diminished conversational competence and, secondly, because of space and time constraints that surround CMC conversations. The contention is further supported by Ho (2011) , Shih (2011), and Greenberg's (2008) study that report that language learners in CMC scenarios do not use mixed cases, fail to correct typos, and delete subject pronouns, auxiliaries, and determiners to reduce typing durations. Nonetheless, Bertin and Grave (2010) cite a study that associates CMC scenarios with extensive utilisation of abbreviations, short sentences, the approval of surface mistake, extensive utilisation of simplified syntax, and the utilisation of emoticons and symbols to express feelings. It, therefore, must be emphasised that CMC facilitates the development of a less sophisticated and less expressive language in comparison with other types of writing.

With respect to the structure of conversation, the current study points out two notable aspects that distinguish CMC from traditional FTF and telephone communication (Li, 2013, p. 26). For example, the current study concurs with Bertin and Grave (2010) who cite that the technological-supported automatic identification renders specific norms such as greetings, openings, closings, and turn-taking strategies optional in CMC. Additionally, Fitzpatrick and Donnelly (2010) cites that the reduced sensory nature of CMC conversations require a more explicit signification of non-understanding and understanding.

The final linguistic characteristic that goes unmentioned in the current study is evident in the mechanism to preserve topic threads in wiki exchanges, blogs, and emails. For

example, Macgrath and Johnson (2009) are of the view that such interests result in an increased message coherence and cohesiveness in CMC. However, it cannot be downplayed that variant technologies reduce specific communication features whilst amplifying others. Hence, the present section states that CMC does not engage a mere amalgamation of traditional forms of written conversation and telecommunications appliances, but rather articulates an exclusively new language system that needs to be analysed, discovered, and studied. This viewpoint is aligned with that of Fitzpatrick and Donnelly (2010) who reveal that the application of new communication technologies not only demands the attainment of new literary skills but also facilitates the language change.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

The key research objective of this dissertation was to examine Saudi distant learners' or, rather, external/ online students' attitudes towards the utilisation of SCMC-based technologies in EFL classes. In other terms, the study is geared to explore such students' attitude towards the implication of SCMC in the learning of English language. All research activities oscillated around KAU's English language teachers who participated by giving first-hand information that provide insights about distant students' learners' experiences and, therefore attitudes towards SCMC-based learning. This is a relevant research model as Carlsen (2007) argues that primary data supports results contextuality and that researchers who major their studies on secondary sources face the danger of reproducing results that do not meet context-specific issues.

Guided by Islamic doctrines, King Abdulaziz University has two separate facilities for male and female learners. The separation, however, does not bar the students from taking courses of their choices. The university upholds the ability to offer equal opportunities for all students. An attempt to attain the objective is exemplified as King Abdulaziz University offers online programs and external programs. As such, regardless of their ability to access classes, the university enables students to use technological means to attend online lectures. Equivocally, King Abdulaziz University is not new to the application of CMC in learning. KAU's external and online programs owe their functionality to an SCMC application named Centra, a conferencing web application supported by a company called Saba. Centra has proven its ability to foster participatory learning. For example, the application allows external students to participate in classes as it offers them an FTF-like learning environment. Centra has a number of icons

including applaud, hands, laugh, and responses no or yes to questions that allow students to interact among themselves and with their instructors during lessons. Moreover, the university encourages language instructors to use 'VoIP' (a voice application supported by Centra) in teaching online classes while students use texts chat to communicate with instructors. In that way, students are able to access and download voice-recorded lessons posted online for their revision.

As such, the project used KAU's language teachers as respondents in a qualitative survey intended to reveal how SCMC influences Saudi EFL distance learners' participation in learning English.

Although CMC experiences a wide range of applications, Perez (2010) reveals that its exceptional characteristics are responsible for the increased researchers' interest. For example, Anderson (1998) asserts that CMC provides an opportunity for multivalent communication that allows intrapersonal, individual-group, individual-individual, and group-group interactions. Furthermore, Carlsen (2007) argues that CMC surpasses the definition as a mere platform for communication to be termed as a technological opportunity with far-reaching linguistic, social and cultural implications.

There are numerous arguments that have been employed at an attempt to try and articulate the reasons for CMC's increased popularity. For example, while Mann (2006) argues that CMC applications came with globalisation, Levy (2009) suggested that globalisation, in itself, does not explain communication needs that necessitate the advancement of computer technologies and, therefore, CMC. As such, the latter emphasises that the need for faster communication and trade across national

boundaries necessitates the development of synchronous (real-time communication such as instant messaging and chatrooms) and asynchronous (for example, emails and Web Blogs) CMC.

Bearing in mind the idea that CMC takes place through technological appliances, it is inevitable to note that computer technology's advancements and internet usage support the utilisation of CMC in education (Kalelioglu and Gulbahar, 2010).However, a more precise version of this view is demonstrated by Perez (2010) who argues that CMC has numerous advantages over face-to-face and written communications. For example, Levy (2009) asserts that CMC enhances interactive and collaborative learning that then supports cognitive development. Moreover, Mann (2006) argues that CMC caters for current pedagogical needs as current educators emphasise the idea that learning environments and contexts are inseparable from the learning process.

Nonetheless, numerous concepts remain unclear about the challenges that underlie the utilisation of SCMC in education. For example, Mann (2006) argues that a significant proportion of related research studies explore linguistic, technological, and socio-cultural implications of CMC in education and advocates studies that explore how CMC influences students' participation in online classes. Furthermore, the study goes further to evaluate how students' age, environmental contexts, educational backgrounds and SCMC impersonal and technological characteristics influence distance language learners ability to pass language courses.

Carlsen (2007) asserts that researchers should conclude their projects by showcasing whether their research objectives have been attained. As such, the current study's ability to realise its objectives cannot be pre-empted.

For example, the study's results concur with Anderson's (1998) positions that distance students' educational background influence their attitudes and progress in SCMC English courses. Moreover, the study finds that demographic factors such as age and milieu influence distance students' attitude and progress in SCMC English language courses and that older students tend to fail such courses due to poor technological skills and practice.

Moreover, the study clearly demonstrates that environmental factors such as technological appliances' availability, financial constraints, and network problems not only influence distance students' ability to pass SCMC English courses but also influence their attitudes towards this mode of learning (Kalelioglu and Gulbahar, 2010). Moreover, this study's findings indicate that numerous setbacks emanate from lack of personal contact between instructors and students in SCMC-based English classes. These findings concur with Carlsen (2007) who states that SCMC undermines students' conversational skills thereby making them incapable of holding practical conversations.

Among the factors that demand immediate attention is that SCMC influences language structure. For example, Mann (2006) observes that an exclusive utilisation of SCMC supports the over-utilisation of short sentences, abbreviations, omission of subject nouns, and deletion of subject pronouns. It therefore should be emphasised that although SCMC provides a unique platform for distant students to interact with their

instructors, students' ability to SCMC English courses is easily interrupted by environmental and demographic factors. Consequently, the research recommends additional research to evaluate how best to improve students' interaction in SCMC classes. Moreover, KAU should facilitate a project to find out how to ensure that all distance students attend SCMC classes.

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