Written Conversation:
A Written or an oral genre?

Internet, first developed in 1960s, is an association of computer networks that enable messages to be sent from any central computer on one network to any host on any other. Internet is now the world largest computer network that provides an increasing range of services and enables unprecedented numbers of people from all around the world to be in touch through email, web log and instant messaging, etc. (Crystal, 2001). Instant messaging (IM) is a text-based computer mediated communication (CMC) that allows two or more people in different physical space to talk or chat in real time (Segerstad, 2001). By using IM program individuals in different places enact their most crucial need to communicate, socialize and negotiate meanings.

This study is an attempt at a theoretical investigation of IM from the rhetorical genre perspective. Referring to some studies found in the literature, I intend to investigate how people who participate in IM use language and other sign systems to conduct everyday conversation through writing. I also intend to discover how participants learn the IM genre using Vygotsky's (1978,1986) notion of situated learning.

First I will explain how the IM program functions. Then, I will discuss some studies that have examined computer-mediated communication from different perspectives, which will be followed by defining the theoretical framework. Through comparing and contrasting the term pre-genre as defined by Swales (1990) and the term primary genres as discussed by Bakhtin (1986), I will base

my argument on the notion of IM as a primary genre. Then, I will examine the

main concepts based on the new rhetorical genre studies and try to apply them

to the IM primary genre. The main concepts of rhetorical genre studies that I will

use are: social motive, the rhetorical situation and its being recurrent, and genre

specific textual features as discussed by Bakhtin (1986) and Miller (1984/1994).

The questions I intend to examine follow:

1) Is IM a pre-genre or a genre?
2) What is the social motive or the purpose of IM?
3) How is IM a recurrent typified situation?
4) What are the social and contextual features of the IM rhetorical situation?
5) What are the textual regularities of IM?

Finally, I intend to explore how individuals participate in IM as a genre and

become expert users. How do they learn this genre to communicate successfully

in a particular IM discourse community? In the following section the function of IM

program will be explained.

What is Instant Messaging?

IM is a synchronous computer-mediated-communication conducted

through writing: a participant types his or her message on a computer keyboard

and the other participant reads the text on a computer screen and responds to it.

IM allows two or more people in different physical spaces to have conversation in

real-time by using text-based messages. IM is time-based, but not place-based

(Henze & Southard, 2003); participants who use IM have to be both online but do

not necessarily need to be physically in the same space to communicate. For

people to use IM, first the software for the IM program must be downloaded and

stored on a particular computer. Then a regular web browser and an Internet connection are required for the communication to become possible.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

As I went through the literature I realized that IM as a newly emerged mode of communication mediated through computer has been analyzed from different perspectives. For example, Kwasnik and Crowston (n.d.) have examined the "environment of world-wide-web" using the concept of genre (p.1). Defining genre as a "fusion of content, purpose and form of communicative actions," they have investigated "digital genres" (p. 7). In another study, Nix-Jackson (1998) through reviewing the literature has found that Bakhtin's theory of dialogism is the best theoretical framework for investigating electronic discourse that is "communication that exists via electronic networks"

Segerstad (2001) has investigated the use and adaptation of written language to the conditions of CMC. She has found that in IM, language has both the properties of spoken and written language. Crystal (2001) has also explored the ways in which the electronic medium has an effect on language in general and on individual languages in particular. It seems that these two studies use a linguistic approach to IM.

Sethi (2002) has investigated the role of technology on the ways that people communicate with each other. In particular, he has examined "how and why employees use IM in the workplace"(p. 2). And finally, Henze and Southard (2003) have investigated both "electronic synchronous and asynchronous discussions as venues for knowledge-sharing and knowledge-building activities"

(p. 2) that are used in professional communication courses. Electronic discussions "signify different types of communication in which two or more people exchange typed messages across a computer network" that include chats, IM, etc. (p. 4). Using the new rhetorical genre theory (Miller, 1994) they have argued that electronic discussion combines characteristics of oral and written communication. They have also analyzed how students participate in electronic discussions and how they learn this electronic genre and communicate successfully.

These studies have examined some aspects or some features of IM; however, none has explicitly analyzed IM from the new rhetorical genre perspective, probably, because not only is IM a newly emerged computer genre, but also new rhetorical genre studies are recent and not stabilized yet.

This paper is an attempt to investigate IM from the new rhetorical genre perspective by using the studies mentioned above as the research data. My own experience as a user of IM for everyday conversation will probably affect the investigation.

As mentioned above the main theoretical framework adopted for this study is the concept of genre as defined in the new rhetorical genre studies. Bakhtin's (1986) notions of primary genres, utterance and addressivity form the main theoretical construct of this study. According to him, the term primary genres refers to the types of every day real-life dialogue that have their own recognizable features. They are suitable artifacts for enacting communicative purposes embedded in every day situations. The notion of utterance as the basic

"unit of speech" is the concrete realization of language in its actual use in social situations (p. 71). As Bakhtin (1986) argues, utterances are directed to addressee(s) and are dialogic. In other words, every utterance is both a response to the addressee's previous utterance and an anticipation of the next utterance.

The above-mentioned concepts are accompanied by Miller's (1984/1994) discussion of social motive, recurrent rhetorical situation and textual forms or regularities as the main concepts related to genre. Miller (1984/1994) defines genre as involving "situation and motive" (p. 24) that can be best defined by pragmatics or "the rhetorical action the discourse performs," an action that "encompasses both substance and form" (p. 24). In fact, it is the rhetorical situation comprising the participants, their purpose of communication, the social context, etc. that determines the form of utterances and their substance. Successful communication through genres such as IM requires that the "participants share common types" that are "socially created" (Miller, 1984/1994, p.29). The participants need to recognize the situation as recurrent and similar to what they have already experienced. Therefore, they can produce responses that best suit the situation and meet the communicative needs. Successful communication entails the mutual participation of the participants in the discourse community. According to Swales (1990) a discourse community comprises participants, both novices and old-timers, who share communicative goals and use specific genres as the main communicative tools to fulfill those goals. Therefore, it can be said that the IM discourse community comprises participants, both novices and experts, who share communicative goals and mainly use the IM

genre and other communicative tools to fulfill their communicative goals. I use the term "participant" here to refer to both the receiver and the sender who are interchangeable in IM as in a real-life dialogue.

This theoretical framework is complemented by the theory of situated learning that is based on Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) notion of social learning. Using situated learning as a model I will try to describe the way individuals learn to use IM. Newcomers to IM as a genre are not explicitly taught how to use IM program for communication. They are likely to learn the IM genre and its specific features by using it in real time, though they may apply their past knowledge of other genres to the new situation (Churchill & Erickson, 2003). It is through the coparticipation with skilled participant(s) (Vygotsky, 1986) that newcomers gradually learn the genre and its conventions and become expert instant messengers or old-timers who easily communicate through the genre fulfilling their communicative needs. In the following section after defining pre-genre and primary genre, I will argue that IM is a primary genre.

IM: Pre-genre or primary genre?

Before investigating the main research issues, I think a point needs to be clarified. This point refers to my initial doubt of whether IM is a genre or not. In my search to find the answer I realized that Swales (1990) has categorized casual conversation or chat as "pre-genre" (p. 58) rather than genre because, as Atkinson argues, "ordinary conversation is a fundamental kind of language use" in which there are "individual discrepancies" (as cited in Swales, 1990, pp. 58-59). This argument suggests that IM that involves casual conversation is a pre-

genre rather than a genre. In other words, since there are individual differences in the terms of utterances produced, types of every day informal conversation are not generic. However, I think that IM is a genre or, in Bakhtin's (1986) terms, a primary genre with its specific regularities since as he argues, "even in the most free, the most unconstrained conversation we cast our speech in definite generic forms" (p. 78). Therefore, I have based my argument on Bakhtin's (1986) categorization of genres into "primary" and "secondary genres" (p. 61-62). In this view, IM would qualify as a primary genre with specific generic features.

According to Bakhtin (1986), primary genres include types of every day "real-life dialogue" that are "the simplest and the most classic form of speech communication" (p. 75). Therefore, it can be said that written utterances typed and sent in IM have their own "individuality" and "creativity" that acquires its "normative forms…in practice" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 81). This argument suggests that in IM, although individuals may use different utterances to fulfill recurrent communicative purposes, utterances still have "relatively stable types" (p. 61); otherwise, participants could not be able to communicate through the genre. The concept of recurrence will be discussed in detail in a separate section in the paper.

Based on Bakhtin's (1986) discussion of genres, it can be said that types of every day conversation, especially intimate conversations among friends that are very common in IM, are "freer and more creative genres of oral speech communication" and they are "subject to free creative reformulation"(p. 80). In other words, in IM the forms and conventions seem to be "more flexible, plastic

and creative" rather than "rigid" and "trite" (p. 78). As Schryer (2005) argues, although "genres have structures, they are open to change"; they are constantly under change and "creative improvisation" (Schryer, 2005). These changes, as she explains, result from the changes in the rhetorical situation. The IM primary genre becomes part of the situation, not just a response to it: when the situation changes, the genre specific features change too and vice versa. The IM genre participants develop their own creative forms to respond to the social motives embedded in the situation. The social motive for the IM genre will be discussed in the next section.

Social Motive for the IM genre

As Bakhtin (1986) emphasizes, "language arises from man's need to express himself, to objectify himself" (p.67). In the IM program, language as the main mediating tool is used in the IM genre to fulfill communicative needs. Depending on the context in which IM is used, it can have different social motives. For example, in the workplace that Sethi (2002) has examined, IM is used for "rapid exchange of information" (p. 7). According to almost all the studies, IM is commonly used for socialization and conversation or, using Bakhtin's (1986) terms, "real-life dialogues" (p. 74). IM "has a social communicative role" in which participants realize their communicative purposes through writing in real time (Kwasnik & Crowston, n.d.).

In general, it can be said that the main social motive of the IM primary genre is socialization, informal communication and fulfilling different communicative purposes such as interactional, informative, personal and

heuristic purposes. A point should be taken into account that according to Bakhtin (1986), the different types of everyday communication are different genres having their own specific social motives and generic forms. However, in this paper all these types are considered as real-life dialogue whose main purpose is socialization and informal conversation because it seems that examining all different types requires broad empirical investigation that is likely to be impossible in such a small-scale project. Also as Bakhtin (1986) argues, "no list of speech genres yet exists, or even a principle on which such a list might be based" (p. 80).

IM as a recurrent typified action

Sethi (2002) argues that IM is "impromptu communication with few governing rules" (p. 11). Also Henze and Southard (2003) believe that electronic discussions such as IM are "unestablished genres" (p. 5). However, as mentioned above, IM fits Bakhtin's (1986) definition of primary genres that are both generic and recurrent. As Miller (1984/1994) notes, one of the features of a genre is its being a response to a "recurrent" situation (p. 71). She argues, "recurrence is implied by our understanding of situations as somehow comparable, similar or analogous to other situations" (p. 71). Recurrence as she defines (1984, 1994) is "an intersubjective phenomenon" (p.29). In other words, it is the participants or the users of the genre who recognize the situation as recurrent and respond to it through genre.

Based on Miller's (1994) discussion of genres, it can be said that the recurrence of the IM rhetorical situation is defined by its users. They know that

they can fulfill different communicative purposes; they can greet, ask for information, express their wishes, talk about every day social subjects etc. through the IM genre. Therefore, it is the recurrence of social motives on the part of participants or the IM users that allows the recurrence of the rhetorical situations. The IM genre mediates participants' private intentions to communicate with participants who are distributed in the physical space. Participants exchange utterances in actual situations to fulfill their individual communicative needs.

The social and contextual features of IM

The IM genre is part of the rhetorical situation and a response to it at the same time. The rhetorical situation comprises the participants, their purpose of communication, the social and contextual features in which communication occurs etc. Referring to the above-mentioned studies it can be said that IM both is similar to and differs from oral and written communication in terms of its social and contextual features.

The first similarity between IM and face-to-face conversation as well as writing is that they are all directed to an addressee. According to Bakhtin's (1986) discussion of addressee, it can be said that as in face-to-face verbal conversation, in IM there must be at least two participants for the communication to become accomplished. Utterances are dialogic and directed to addressee(s); they are links between the previous utterances and the anticipating utterances exchanged in the dialogue. In IM as when we participate in a verbal conversation, we "anticipate the reply, we are hoping we are understood and we are thinking of our next sentence" (Nix-Jackson, 1998, p. 1). "Utterances are

shaped by a number of social factors"(p. 1) such as the history of the participants' relationships, their social roles, the conversational purpose and the topic of conversation.

As mentioned above the utterances are directed to addressee(s). In IM depending on the way the participants sign in, they can be known or unknown to other participants. If the participants sign in as available in the instant messenger box using their real names rather than nicknames, other participants can easily recognize them. However, if they sign in with nicknames or as anonymous, they are not any longer known to the other participants. As Segerstad (2001) argues, they may change and play with identities and hide their sex, age, name and other attributes. The knowledge of the audience as part of the rhetorical situation will probably affect the flow of the communication and the written utterances and genre specific features. For example, utterances sent to a close friend may differ from the ones sent to another friend or an unknown addressee.

Another contextual feature related to the notion of addressivity in IM is that participants have the tool provided by the IM program to choose the addressees with whom they wish to communicate in buddy lists[1] and the system alerts them when their friends are online (Segerstad, 2001). IM users can sign in in the program having different degrees of availability. For example, they can sign in as invisible so that the other participants do not see them as online or they can sign in as busy that shows that they are online but busy and do not want to communicate with others. However, if they sign in as available, the other friends

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[1] A Buddy List is a window that shows writer's buddies (friends, family, coworkers, and others) who are signed on IM. Whenever they sign on, their screen names appear in the writer's Buddy List, and the writer can communicate with them instantly.

or participants who are online at that time have the choice whether to start the communication or not. As Sethi (2002) argues, "being available on IM symbolizes an open door to communication", which may be responded to or not (p. 7).

The second similarity between IM and face-to-face conversation in terms of their social contexts is that both are conducted in real time although there is a short delay in responding in IM compared with face-to-face conversation. Like a verbal conversation, IM as a synchronous CMC requires its participants to be online simultaneously for the successful communication (Segerstad, 2001). Since IM is real-time, it allows the immediate exchange of utterances; participants can receive immediate response in the course of the conversation.

There are some differences between IM and the everyday verbal conversation. In the verbal conversation "there is always more going on than just the utterance of the words. There is voice inflection, there is body language and there is gesture" (Nix-Jackson, 1998, p. 1). However, in IM because participants are in different physical places, they do not have access to pitch, rhythm, loudness, face expressions and body language, which may pose some constrains on communication. As Allwood argues, in speaking the feedback is provided not only through spoken words, but also through head movement, and shrugging one's shoulders (as cited in Segerstad, 2001). The lack of these feedback resources in the IM social context may lead to the misunderstanding between the participants; the emotions embedded in the utterances may not be fully or accurately exchanged. This limitation is to some extent compensated for by sign systems other than language available in the IM program. Some sign

systems considered as textual regularities of the IM genre will be discussed in detail

As mentioned above, a very distinctive feature of IM that differentiates it from the face-to-face conversation is that in IM conversation is fulfilled through writing rather than speaking. It seems that writing in IM have some specific characteristics that differ from traditional writing.

The first feature is that in IM the writer can receive an immediate response that is impossible in traditional writing. In traditional writing, the writer writes to the potential reader without expecting an immediate response. As Segerstad (2001) argues, face-to-face conversation and IM are synchronous while traditional writing is asynchronous. In IM the participants expect immediate responses; every utterance is a response to preceding utterance(s). As Werry argues, an electronic written conversation makes for less time delay for feedback compared with a traditional written communication (as cited in Crystal, 2001).

Another difference between writing in IM and traditional writing is that in IM the writing process is not similar to that of traditional writing. In traditional writing as Segerstad (2001) explains, the writer has the time and opportunity to rephrase, rewrite, revise and correct the utterances; however, in IM due to time pressure and immediacy of the conversation there is not that much time for such a long process. Time is an important situational factor that affects the writing process and the utterances in terms of their linguistic features (Segerstad, 2001). Although in IM as in a verbal conversation, it is the participants who determine the turn changing or "the boundaries of each concrete utterance," (Bakhtin, 1986,

p. 71), the pressure of time does not let them to do significant editing while writing.

Another feature that differentiates the conversation in IM from a face-to-face conversation is that in IM utterances are read rather than being heard. In fact, in IM utterances are coded in symbols rather than in sounds (Segerstad, 2001). The "intertasking between reading writing and speaking" that is of typing the utterances and reading them at the same time adds to the complexity of the situation that will be discussed in the next section (Nix-Jackson, 1998, p. 10). This situational factor is not explicitly discussed in any of the studies; therefore, future investigations are needed to provide a better understanding of this issue.

However, based on the studies reviewed above, it can be argued that reading the utterances instead of listening to them not only decreases the speed of the conversation, but also influences the form of utterances. As Clark and Brennan argue, in conversation the participants try to minimize the collaborative effort or the cognitive load of the utterances (as cited in Segerstad, 2001). Therefore, as Segerstad (2001) has found, the utterances are "shown to be more spontaneous and spoken-like" and their syntactic structure is similar to an informal spoken language; therefore, they are likely to be cognitively easy to understand and process (p. 270). Also, Foertsch argues, in IM "the pressure of making a quick reply and the potential for rapid feedback often result in texts that are interactive, colloquial and spontaneous" (as cited in Nix- Jackson, 1998, p. 10).

As Crystal argues, the limitations of writing in IM cause the participants to develop some strategies not only to overcome the limitations, but also to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation (as cited in Segerstad, 2001). These strategies that are realized in specific forms and textual regularities are emoticons, capital letters, punctuation marks and more importantly different types of abbreviations. All these textual features are discussed in more detail in the next section.

The textual regularities of IM

As mentioned above the IM primary genre has its own textual features. These features together with the substance being embedded in the situation form the IM primary genre. These features or regularities not only realize the communicative needs through the genre and other sign systems, but also as Crystal (2001) argues, help participants to overcome the limitations imposed by the contextual features discussed above. Reviewing the above-mentioned studies, I found that in Segerstad's study (2001) these features are examined more completely than in the other studies from a linguistic perspective.

Each discourse community that utilizes the IM genre develops its own specific regularities that are only recognized and understandable in that discourse community. However, some forms seem to be common in all discourse communities who use the IM genre. These textual forms are 1) "emotions" (Segerstad, 2001, p. 152), or emoticons, 2) capital letters, 3) punctuation marks and, more importantly, 4) different types of abbreviations that will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Emoticons

In IM participants have no access to facial expressions and gestures to express their feelings, emotions, etc.; however, a sign system is provided in IM program that comprises "emoticons". The term "emoticon" as used in Yahoo IM is a blend of two words: emotion and icon. This term refers to icons that express emotions. Icons as defined by Peirce are signs that have a similarity with the real life subject (as cited in Saeed, 1997). For example, a sad emoticon is a sad face: [:(] or [☹]. It seems that the term emoticon is much more accurate that the term "emotions", which is used by Segerstad (2001, p. 152). Emoticons can be considered as the abbreviated forms of concepts that are likely to prevent misunderstanding that may happen in the course of conversation.

Emoticons have a large variety of facial expressions that can be used for different purposes. For example they include *kiss*, *blushing*, *big grin*, *crying*, *do not tell anybody,* etc. They convey different feelings, modes, emotions such as sadness and even actions such as crying and smiling. Although these emoticons can be expressed in a typed messages using language such as "I am crying" or "I kiss you"; however, they are not common in IM due to some reasons the most important of which is to minimize the efforts of typing. Depending on the IM program, participants can express their emotions whether by typing the emoticons using different signs on the keyboard and/or choosing the emoticon from the emoticon box available in the program. For example, instead of typing the message that "I am smiling" that takes some times, the user can choose the suitable emoticon and send it; the emoticon shows the face of a person who is

smiling. Also the sender can type simple eyes and a smiling mouth [:)] to convey his or her happiness.

An important point needs to be mentioned that these signs as in any sign system must be shared among the participants to be understood; the IM genre users should have a shared knowledge of these emoticons to be able to communicate through them.

Capital letters

Another feature that Segerstad (2001) has found in her study is capital letters. As she notes, "typing words or phrases in capitals seems to be an attempt to convey prosodic features such as stress and emphasis on words" (p. 155). Since in IM the conversation is written, participants do not have access to sound characteristics such as loudness of syllables and changes in the pitch of speaker's voice; therefore, to compensate the need posed by the situation they type words or phrases in capitals. Sometimes participants may type the whole utterance in capitals that is equivalent to shouting (Sgerstad, 2001). Also as Seegrstad (2001) has found, "extensive use of all capitals might be taken as rude behavior" (p. 155). Using this feature to convey stress and emphasis on words depends on many factors such as the participants, their relationships with each other, the topic of the conversation and their shared background knowledge of the topic.

Punctuation marks

Punctuation marks signal discourse structure (Dale, 1991). In face-to-face conversation the structural relations between utterances or within utterances are

expressed with various marks such as words or phrases; however, in IM these relations are indicated by punctuation marks. IM as a primary genre has its own rules of punctuation. Punctuation marks can have different functions. For example, question mark indicates a question, colon "marks a step forward", exclamation mark express attitudes or feelings and comma indicated "differing degrees of relatedness" (Dale, 1991, pp. 9-10).

In IM as Segerstad (2001) found in her study, punctuation marks such as full stop (period), comma, question mark, three periods and exclamation mark are very common. She has noticed that in IM punctuation marks have the same functions as in traditional writing. Frequent use of punctuation marks as in traditional writing suggests that participants use their knowledge of written genres in IM situation to fulfill communicative needs.

As mentioned above, since the IM primary genre is a newly emerged genre, its features are flexible and subject to change. Participants creatively develop forms and regularities to respond to the communicative needs (Segerstad, 2001). Sometimes when I am using IM due to time pressure, I use a punctuation mark as an utterance that is understandable and meaningful by itself. For example, instead of typing "what do you mean?" or "type it again", I only type the question mark, "?", which is an utterance by itself and fully understood by members of the discourse community.

Abbreviations

It seems that abbreviations are the most distinct feature of the IM primary genre since almost in all the above-mentioned studies especially in Segerstad's

(2001) study they are discussed. Segerstad (2001) has found that many of the abbreviations are "developed specifically to suit the needs of online communication" (p. 158). This issue suggests the creative role of participants in IM in developing the forms unique to the genre. She has found three types of abbreviations, which are: 1) acronyms, 2) numbers and 3) letters.

Acronyms are abbreviations that are made up from "the first letters in a phrase" (p. 158). For example, "ASAP" which is not specific to IM, is an acronym that stands for "As Soon As Possible". An interesting point about this acronym and probably other acronyms is that they are understandable for the participants but not readable. In other words, they cannot be articulated as a word but as separate letters.

Numbers that represent the sound value of a syllable are another type of abbreviation frequently used in IM. For instance, number "4" is used as the word "for" because both seem to have similar pronunciations. The numbers can also be combined with letters such as "2morrow" which stands for "tomorrow" and "2night" that stands for "tonight".

The third type of abbreviations is letters representing the sound value of a syllable forming an abbreviated representation of a word. For example, the letter "u" that stands for the word "you" and "r" that stands for the word "are".

Learning the IM genre

The issue of how participants learn the IM genre is only discussed in the study conducted by Henze and Southard (2003). However in the other studies the creative participation of the participants is emphasized: how they creatively

use the facilities designed in the program to fulfill their communicative needs.

Participants' creative development of forms and regularities suggests that new

participants are not explicitly taught how to use the IM genre. It seems that it is

through participants' using the genre in the IM discourse community that they

learn it. Therefore, learning the IM genre seems to be both social and situated.

The social and situated aspects of learning the IM genre will be discussed in the

following paragraphs.

As Henze and Southard (2003) have discussed in their study, when

newcomers face the IM situation, they "make judgment about how to participate

based upon their sense of what type of situation they are in" (p. 5). They have to

"decide whether it is a recurrent rhetorical situation and they participate in ways

that have been useful in the past" (p. 5). As mentioned above the "recurrence of

a rhetorical situation is a matter of individual perception and intersubjective"

(Miller, 1984/1994, p. 29). In other words, each user should recognize the

situation as recurrent and similar to what they have experienced before so that

he or she can use his or her knowledge of the genre to respond to the situation.

For newcomers the rhetorical situation is new, so they have to learn the IM genre

as a mediating tool in discourse community to communicate.

As Henze and Southard (2003) discuss in their study, newcomers to IM

genre have two resources to learn the genre. The first is "the applications of the

past genre experiences to the new situation" (p. 10). In IM rhetorical situation,

newcomers use their knowledge of oral genres such as greetings, farewell, etc.

in which they are experienced. They apply some of their "participation strategies"

developed in past experience of oral genres to the "newly encountered genre" (Henze and Southard, 2003, p. 11). As Bazerman argues, "when we travel to new communicative domains, we construct our perception of them beginning with the forms we know" (as cited in Henze and Southard, 2003).

The second learning resource is coparticipation of novices with experts in the IM discourse community through the IM genre. According to Swales' discussion (1990) of discourse community, one of the characteristics of a discourse community is its having "reasonable ratio" of "novice and experts" (p. 27) to have interactions through genres. As Henze and Southard (2003) note in their study, "genres are not merely tools used to communicate in a discourse community, but also they fulfill a social epistemic role in creating new participants" (p. 11). In other words, newcomers and experts interact through genre that functions as a learning tool for the new comers.

Discussion

IM is a text-based CMC program that evolved about a decade ago. Nardi, Whittaker and Bradner (2002) note that IM is "a flexible and immediate medium of communication" that allows the participants who are in different physical places to communicate through writing (as cited in Sethi, 2002, p. 4). The IM program presents a new situation for communication; therefore, its users as members of a discourse community should develop tools to respond to their shared communicative goals. This creatively developed tool is the IM primary genre. The IM primary genre though may be considered as the simplest form of communication has its own generic forms. The IM primary genre is the

enactment of the participants' need to socialize and converse as in every day conversation. Participants recognize the IM situation as recurrent so that they can use their knowledge of the genre to communicate in the IM discourse community.

The IM primary genre has some unique contextual characteristics: 1) it is real time, 2) it is dialogic, 3) its participants are in different physical places and 4) conversation is conducted through writing. Therefore, the responses realized in written utterances are immediate, there is not much time for drafting, rewriting, etc., and responses are read rather than heard. The notion of addressivity in the IM genre seems to be very complex and affects the rhetorical situation as well as the genre. If participants sign in with their real names, they are completely known to the other participants; however, if they use nicknames, they are not any more recognizable to the discourse community.

Each distinct IM discourse community has its specific regularities recognizable by its participants. However, some regularities seem to be common in all discourse communities that use the IM genre. These textual regularities are 1) emoticons, 2) capital letters, 3) punctuation marks and 4) different types of abbreviations.

Newcomers to the IM situation initially apply their past experiences of the genres to the new situation. Then gradually by interacting through the genre with the IM genre's expert users, they learn the genre and its specific forms and regularities. Indeed, learning is an integral part of the communication through the

IM genre. Newcomers learn the genre without being explicitly taught; they learn the IM genre by using it in their social interaction with other participants.

Users of IM program form a discourse community who uses the IM genre as their "properties" to fulfill "common goals" (Swales as cited in Freedman, 1996, p. 97). Based on Vygotsky's (1987) emphasis on the role of mediating tools such as language, signs and symbols in human development, it can be said that in IM discourse community the IM genre acts as the mediating tool through which learning occurs. In fact, participation in the IM genre is an "authentic" activity in which both "newcomers and old-timers" have a "shared responsibility" (Freedman & Artemeva, 1998, p.5). In other words, both novices and old-timers should cooperate using the mediating tools so that the novices learn the IM genre. It is through "the processes of co-participation" of the newcomers and old-timers in the genre that the newcomers learn the genre (p. 3).

IM users form a discourse community that can be considered as a "community of practice", a group of people who share a concern and work together to fulfill that concern or to make some improvements in whatever concern they have (Wenger, 1998, p. 6). IM users are a group of people "who share a concern" for communicating through the IM genre (Wenger, 2005, p. 1). Using the IM genre, participants, both newcomers and old-timers learn how to use the genre "better", which suggest the notion of "collective learning" (p. 1). In fact, the IM genre is the mediating tool through which "members" of the community of practice "interact and learn together" (p. 2).

Conclusion and implication of the study

This study is a theoretical investigation of IM from the new rhetorical genre perspectives. IM is a newly emerged text-base computer-mediated program that allows people distributed in physical space to communicate in real time. It seems to me that this program provides a new situation to which the participants respond. They use language as realized in written utterances and other sign systems to enact their motive to communicate and socialize. By conducting this study, I intended to investigate why people use the IM program, how they use language and other sign systems to conduct everyday conversation through writing and how they learn to use language and other sign systems to communicate.

In an attempt to answer the above questions, I reviewed some of the resources found in the literature and based my investigation on Bakhtin's (1986) discussion of primary genres and argued that IM is a primary genre fulfilling participants' communicative need to socialize and chat in real time but in different physical places. After discussing the IM situation as being both similar to and different from oral and written communication, I examined some textual regularities that Segerstad (2001) has found to be common in all discourse communities who use the IM primary genre. These regularities are emoticons, capital letters, punctuation marks and different types of abbreviations. Finally, I discussed how newcomers to the IM discourse community learn the IM genre through applying their past experience of the genres to the new situation as well as using the genre in actual situations communicating with expert participants.

This study sheds light on the IM as primary genre and reveals its characteristics from the perspective of the new rhetorical theory; however, more comprehensive empirical investigations of IM are required.

Adopting the new rhetorical genre perspective, empirical analysis of utterances produced by different discourse communities who use the IM genre will provide not only the information about IM genre in general, but also about the specific features of the genre in different discourse communities. Also conducting interviews with both expert participants of IM and newcomers to the IM discourse community and even observing how they use and learn the IM genre will reveal valuable information about how this genre is learned. Further investigations may also examine the cultural differences realized in the IM genre as being used by participants of various languages and cultures.

In the new versions of IM programs participants can not only type their messages, but also verbally talk and see each other on the monitor screen by using web cameras. All these features allowed by technology seem to add to the complexity of the IM genre. Therefore, future investigation of these features will provide valuable information.

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