The purpose of the study was to examine students’ beliefs about the utility of synchronous online discussion (SOD) in language learning and their participation in the SOD and how they were related by using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Thirty-four ESL students from diverse cultural backgrounds who were enrolled in an English Language Program (ELP) at a university in the U.S. participated in the study. The results showed that the students’ beliefs were significantly related to their participation in the SOD, and could explain such participation considerably even after controlling their English proficiency. On the basis of the results, it is argued that teachers need to help students to understand more explicitly the purpose of participating in synchronous online discussions and how they are relevant to their language learning. Otherwise, the potential benefits of the use of SOD in language learning may not accrue to learners as expected.

I. INTRODUCTION

The significance of learner perspective in second/foreign language learning has been increasingly recognized, and much attention has been paid to the role of language learners in second/foreign language learning (Tarone & Yule, 1989). Thus, such learner factors as motivation, attitude, anxiety, strategies, style, and beliefs have been investigated and found
to play significant roles in second/foreign language learning processes. One of the most vigorously discussed learner factors is learners’ belief about language learning, defined as learners’ preconceived ideas, assumptions, perceptions, opinions, philosophies, and mini-theories of the nature of language and language learning processes (Horwitz, 1987; Wenden, 1987).

However, only a few studies (Beauvois & Eledge, 1996; Meunier, 1997; Warschauer, 1996) have focused on those learner factors in the context of computer mediated communication (CMC). The research on the use of CMC in the second/foreign language classroom have primarily focused on the effectiveness of its use in terms of increases of language input and output (Blake, 2000; Kern, 1995; Sotillo, 2000; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996) or negotiation of meaning (Pellettieri, 2000; Smith, 2003) through interaction because of its direct implication for second language acquisition. They reported some anecdotal affective benefits such as low oral production anxiety and increased motivation (Beauvois, 1992; Kern, 1995). However they did not seem to investigate those affective factors and their influences on learners’ language learning behaviors systematically and thoroughly.

In addition, they mostly reported on how the use of CMC influenced learners affectively or cognitively with the naive expectation that they would benefit from the use of it in both ways. However, they did not gingerly look into how learners’ preconceived beliefs or attitudes constructed by prior learning experiences or cultural background influence their learning behaviors in the CMC. Rather, they often investigated the unilateral influence of the use of CMC on the learner variables such as motivation and attitude, not the influence of those learner factors on the use of CMC in language learning. In this vein, the research that I conducted centered on how learners’ beliefs affected their experiences in the synchronous online discussion. Particularly, in this paper, I will report on some descriptive data of students’ participation in the SOD and their beliefs about the utility of SOD in language learning, and examine how well the students’ beliefs can explain their participation in the SOD by using multiple hierarchical regression analysis.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Research on Beliefs about Language Learning

Horwitz (1987) has been widely credited with initiating the systematic investigation of learner beliefs about language learning, using an instrument she called Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI). The instrument consists of five major