

Intercultural competence in web-based student exchange environments

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Abstract: In this paper, three case studies of web-based peer interaction with different agendas are investigated. The pedagogical design concerns language learners engaged in intercultural exchanges over blogs and wikis. The data consist of posted online interaction and interviews where the student activities are mapped out in relation to steps in Intercultural Communicative Competence online. The results show that the planning and implementation are specifically important phases in intercultural exchanges.

Keywords: Web-based activity, wiki, blog, intercultural exchange, collaborative language learning

1. Introduction

For teaching and learning practices, development of web-based technology has meant creating affordances for multilingual interaction networks and language learning over vast distances. For intercultural communication online, the area of telecollaboration in foreign language education platforms has been an area with increased interest (e.g., O'Dowd, 2007). It is of essence to investigate pedagogy in such platforms, where traditional borders between learning sites are becoming blurred. It is connected to the transformation seen in the continually changing online landscape caused by the network society (Castells, 2000).

This paper presents three case studies of student engagement in intercultural exchange interaction. The purpose is to explore the nature of the exchange interaction and the implication of the web-based technology.

2. Intercultural web-based exchanges

The increased use of the web for learning has altered the structures of communicative practices for learning. They are affected by the actual use of the technology and how literacy is materialized, which has changed conditions for learning (e.g., Beetham & Sharpe, 2007; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007).

Concerning networked pedagogy and the use of web-based writing environments, the meaning of peer work has been discussed (Lundin, 2008). When learners are online there is a type of community driven approach which offers opportunities to meet online, apart from learning traditionally organized by the teacher. The learner autonomy that the web offers is something that takes time for students to get used to. In fact, collectively producing content on the web has implied a dramatic change for learners (Lund, 2010). Ware and Kramsch (2005) claim that: "Web-based technologies have been advocated as particularly promising examples of computer-based learning with the potential to enable language students to interact across geographic, linguistic, and cultural lines" (Ware & Kramsch, 2005, p. 190).

2.1 Online intercultural communicative competence

The concept of culture is in need to match the complexity of the modern globalized world (Bhabha, 1994; Risager, 2007). Through web-based intercultural exchanges, online environments are situated in a context where language and culture are associated with more than national identity (Helm & Guth,

2010). In communication where English is the lingua franca, learners are multilingual who “have grown up in a variety of national, supranational, and ethnic cultures” (Kramsch, 2006, p. 250).

In intercultural communication online, models of Byram’s (1977) influential model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has been modified in research involving exchange studies dealing with intercultural competence (e.g., Belz, 2007; Dooly, 2011, Elola & Oskoz, 2008, Liaw, 2006; O’Dowd, 2007). This model has been adopted and expanded to embrace various online contexts in new online literacies and foreign language learning (Helm & Guth, 2010).

Concerning web-based tools for written communication, two common technologies are blogs and wikis for asynchronous modes of interaction, having an influence on exchanges. Such technology implies a specific type of turn-taking interaction. This gives time for reflection in the delay in response time between communicators (Levy & Stockwell, 2006). For peer work in the form of peer critiquing and joint writing, such environments lend themselves well. In studies of network-based writing, activities where learners critically pay attention to how their writing is perceived by others, create conditions for learning and promotion of linguistic and cultural skills (e.g., Lee, 2010; Thorne, 2003).

2.2 Language learning as participation

From a sociocultural perspective, learning is seen as situated in a social and a cultural context. Learners are connected with the social and material environment where they participate in joint interaction (Warschauer, 2005). In communication, learners often need to understand perspectives of others. This is a process of dialogue in “co-construction rather than transmission” (Tomasello, Kruger, & Hilary, 1993, p. 501). This implies that communication is a temporary transformation where those involved “become inhabitants of a partly shared social world, established and continuously modified by their acts of communication” (Rommetveit, 1974, p. 23). It should be pointed out that being engaged in dialogue, is not only restricted to speech interaction but to any verbal communication, also written (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

3. Data and methods

The data in the paper consists of three case studies where web-based environments were applied in language and communication courses in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for engineering students at a technical university. The studies are performed in non-experimental, natural settings. The use of different web-based environments has been part of the language learning scene for a few years now.

The three studies are examples of different activities evolving by using such environments and what activities are developed. Case study 1 concerns non-native English speaking international engineering students at a Swedish university engaged in poetry blogging with native English speaking students in the US, Case study 2 is a technical writing exchange taking place over a wiki between the same student body as in the previous case study. The students gave and received feedback to each other and collaborated on texts related to their technical writing studies. Case study 3, finally, is an exchange taking place between two groups of non-native English speaking students, one from Sweden and one from Taiwan over a wiki. This third study involved intercultural communication topics where differences and similarities were highlighted among Swedish students and Taiwanese students such as everyday engagements in studies, family life, holidays as well as discussing ways of life in the two countries. Even though the content of the third case study was the only one explicitly dealing with cultural aspects, in all three case studies, there is an overarching element of cultural issues being discussed.

The gathering of data is primarily done by observations of the student driven posted interaction on the web. In addition, there are also student interviews where follow up questions are asked concerning the web-based interaction. When investigating the traces of the posted activities the archived versions of web-pages were investigated to determine the nature of the page revisions.

Dooly (2008) gives an overview of some general points from online collaborative learning projects. The data is scrutinized from these points, or tendencies, from the planning and the implementation phase. The analysis of the intercultural dimensions of the data is based on the three principal features of ICC, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness and intercultural adroitness.

4. Results and discussion

The three studies in this paper are examples of how trajectories of web-based exchange environments can develop in quite contrary directions due to the technology and the student preparations. Both environments are asynchronous writing environments, offering a certain amount of delay in responses. However, the blogging format offers a specific reflective element, allowing postings to be added chronologically. The wiki on the other hand gives an environment where users can add text but also override previous entries. The web-based setting offers a diverse language learning environment where students from different linguistic and national backgrounds can be engaged in a range of language learning activities as long as student preparations are made.

In the three exchanges there are a few recurrent items highlighted by the students that stand out as the driving force for online discussions, creating a dynamic environment. One such item is the implications of addressing others through giving response and sharing text. Another item is receiving feedback from others and the interactive work that is produced through the web-based context.

From the planning and implementation stages suggested by Dooly (2008), planning and setting up the exchange proved to be crucial points when students were involved in an exchange. Fostering students in ways of collaborative work online, proved to be a way forward for interaction and joint understanding of persons from another culture. In connection with this, finding ways of clarifying the online work and understanding the plan of action in order to get started early, proved to be important steps, although not always easily applicable. When considering the framing of a web-based writing environment in language learning, it caters for development of the three elements of ICC, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness and intercultural adroitness. The results show that applying the ICC model on the three case studies, students embrace skills of interpreting events from other cultures, willingness to explore and participate in online communities, knowledge of processes of interaction and communicating online as well as cultural, literacy and language awareness. The expansion of the concept of ICC suggests that the competences needed for online intercultural communication are multifaceted and involve a broad range of skills.

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