A Social and Cultural Analysis of Computer-mediated Communication Dialog in Asian Contexts

Pin-hsiang Natalie WU & Shih-min LIU
Applied Foreign Languages Department, Chien-kuo Technology University, Taiwan
Department of Education, National Kaohsiung Normal University, Taiwan
natalie@ctu.edu.tw

Abstract: The present study analyzes how social and cultural contexts influence the CMC interactions in a cross-cultural English collaborative learning project for university participants from Taiwan, Japan, and Korea. The main purpose of the study is to understand how social and cultural differences, manipulated by one's social and cultural context and interest toward international affair, influence the CMC dialogues among students of Asia, and how attitudes differ from one cultural group to another. The web platform communication tool used in this study was an online classroom established by Nicenet organization (www.nicenet.org). The project employed a qualitative research methodology using NVivo 9 digital software to analyze social and cultural aspects of the CMC dialogues. The results show that intergroup climate does play an important role in cross-cultural asynchronous CMC projects. Unfamiliarity among participants can present a constant influence on the flow of interaction, and feedback giving, which decreases motivation for participants from different cultural groups.

Keywords: Computer-mediated communication, cross-cultural, social context, Asia, second language learning

Introduction

The widespread use of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) to support foreign language learning in higher education is now very common around the world. The process of incorporating CMC into English learning is complicated because of variables associated with Second Language Learning (SL). Willingness to Communicate (WTC), Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), and Computer-mediated Communication Competence (CMCC) will all influence the learning process and lead to differences in learning achievement. MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, Kimberly & Noels (1998), used a complex heuristic model of variables influencing L2 willingness to communicate and concluded that social context is the principal factor governing willingness to communicate.

Motivation has been recognized as a central factor of intercultural communication competence in communicative interactions (Kupka et al., 2009). Likewise, in the analysis of Yashima (2002), the participants' attitudes toward the International Community, or International Posture (IP), measuring attitudes toward Interest in International Activities, Intercultural Friendship, and Interest in Culture, was considered influential on their motivation when measuring their willingness to communicate (Wu & Kawamura 2012). Wu & Kawamura found that international posture had a direct influence on motivation regarding cross-cultural, online communications. In Vygotsky (1978), Fernandez, Wegerif, Mercer, and Rojas-Drummond (2011), Paulus (2007), and Ocker & Yaverbaum (1999),

reciprocal and responsive collaboration, built on a good intergroup climate, is likely to increase peer interaction in the CMC process. Among the eight possible factors associated with CMC proposed by Andrew Tolmie and James Boyle (2000), the factors Size of Group and Knowledge of Other Participants clearly indicated that familiarity and acquaintance between participants increases the likelihood of success of online interaction.

This study analyzed how social and cultural contexts influence CMC interactions in a cross-cultural English collaborative learning project for participants from Asia. The main purpose of the study was to understand how social and cultural differences, manipulated by one's social and cultural context, and particularly in this study by intercultural posture, manipulated ongoing of CMC dialogs among students in Asia, and how their attitudes differed among three cultural groups. Intergroup attitudes influencing CMC were examined for: 1) level of social interaction displayed, 2) frequency of message;, and 3) message function.

Sixty-four university-level participants from Taiwan (26 students), Japan (29 students) and South Korea (9 students) were recruited for this study. The web platform communication tool used in this study is an online classroom established by Nicenet organization (www.nicenet.org), a formal Internet service that provides asynchronous computer-mediated communication. This web-learning platform is nonetheless user friendly and instructionally transparent for asynchronous CMC. Asynchronous CMC was considered a better choice compared with synchronous communication in the current study because asynchronous interaction allows more time and greater opportunity for one to reflect on one's own ideas, as well as on comments made by others (Paulus, 2007; Chou, Chen, and Hsieh 2009).

The project employed a qualitative research methodology using NVivo 9 Digital Software to analyze social and cultural aspects of the CMC dialogs. Different levels of social interactions displayed in the messages and message functions were coded and analyzed in order to analyze the relationships among all possible factors influencing the CMC interaction. Because participants from different cultural groups did not know each other prior this project, expressing social etiquette was considered environmentally friendly and a way of reinforcing social interaction that would contribute the success of the CMC dialogs. Other than that, introducing oneself to all participants was considered an even higher level of environmental friendly act. The following examples contributed by a Korean participant best portray such an attitude:

> Hello! My name is Yonghyun Kwon. My English name is Kate. You can easily [editor's note: simply] call me Kate! I'm [a] Korean student. Now I'm studying hard for English in U.S.A. I don't speak English very well. But I'll do my best. We are [editor's note: can] study together!
> Hi, My name is Yu Gyeong Kim. Call me Runa. I'm [a] Korean student. Now I'm studying in America. Difficult, but it's funny.

The above welcoming speech was not required by the teacher and therefore was considered a strong motivation to integrate others into the cross-cultural experience. In the process of analyzing Nicenet comments, expressions regarding social interactions were coded and then compared among participants of different countries. However, how participants socially interacted was also compared to the time and length of the messages they wrote and their responses to others.

Based on the frequency of comment writing and feedback giving, Taiwanese participants appeared to have the strongest motivation compared with learners in the other two countries, as shown in Figure 1. But the frequency of writing comments and replies does not completely demonstrate the intergroup climate in detail. Based on coding for frequency of social etiquette or motivation, almost all Asian participants included a certain level of social interaction. However, participants from different countries varied. Japanese participants usually started their comments with a short introduction that gave information

about themselves, but initiated no further social interactions. For example:

> Hi! I'm Hyodo Toshiaki, a student of Kwansei Gakuin University in Japan and I'm a first-grade student. Nice to meet you all.

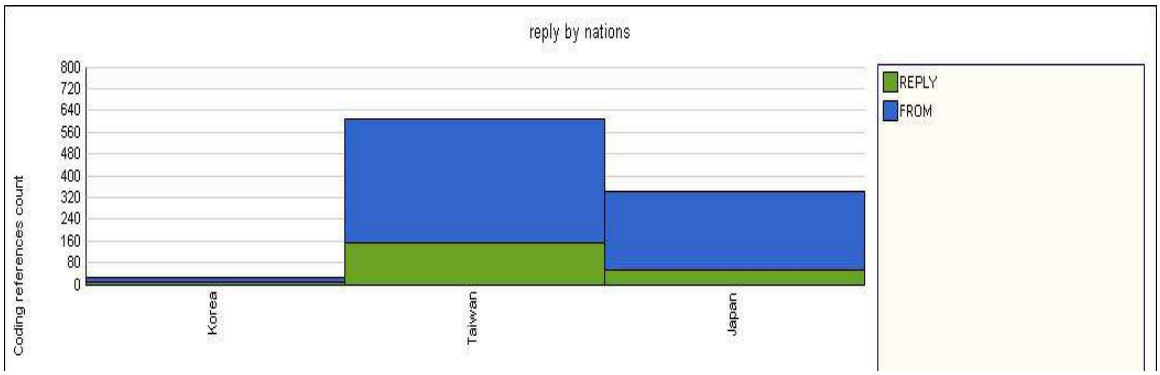

Figure 1: Frequency comments and replies from participants in the three countries

Korean students generally not only showed a stronger motivation for friendship but also shared English learning experiences. For example:

> Hi, My name is Yu Gyeong Kim. Call me Runa. I'm Korean student. Now I'm studying in America. Difficult, but it's funny … I need to study English hard.

Taiwanese participants were mostly task-focused and usually wrote what they thought was the "answer" to the questions without self-introduction or greetings unless they were making a reply to a certain person online.

These examples illustrate the learner's attitudes in the different cultural groups in this study. Taiwanese students tended to focus only on tasks whereas Japanese and Korean learners saw computer-mediated communication as a venue where a certain type of "social encounter" could happen. Among them, Japanese learners expressed social etiquette in the online CMC but not a desire for social interaction, whereas Korean participants wanted to build friendly relationships among the EFL learners. The social etiquette displayed in the Nicenet computer-mediated communication for different cultural groups is presented in Figure 2. Even though the social etiquette of Taiwanese students had the highest frequency, as seen in Figure 2, most of the instances were social etiquette appearing only in feedback given to specific people.

A closer examination of the way participants gave feedback provides a higher level of understanding of the attitudes toward cross-cultural interaction for these Asian participants in this study. Even though Japanese participants always introduced themselves in their first comments, which might be taken as a desire for acquaintance, most of the replies they made were to people in their own cultural group and were not intended as cross-cultural communication. Taiwanese participants expressed a very similar attitude, giving feedback mostly to other participants in Taiwan. For Korean participants, even though the number of messages was small, feedback was also given to other Korean learners instead of Japanese and Taiwanese participants. Social interactions among the three countries were shown in the Figure 2.

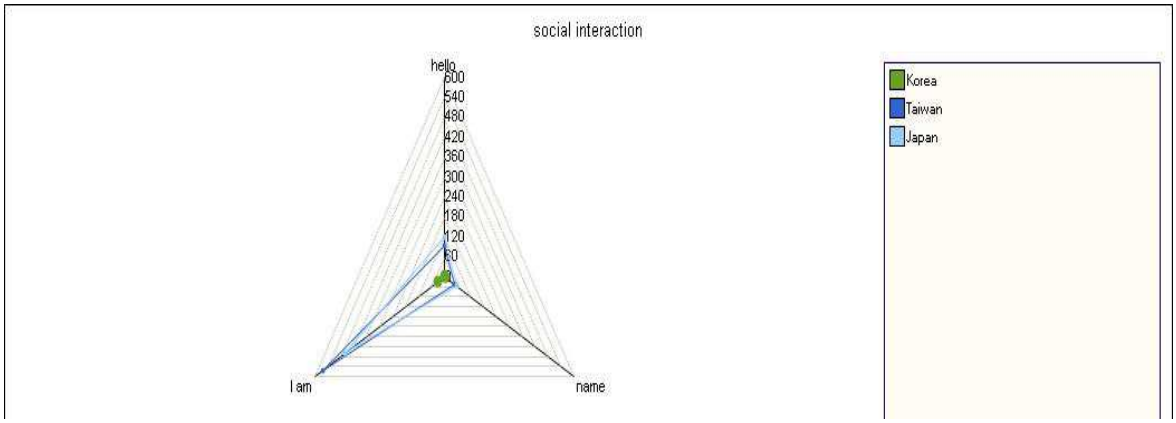

Figure 2: Social etiquette displayed by different cultural groups

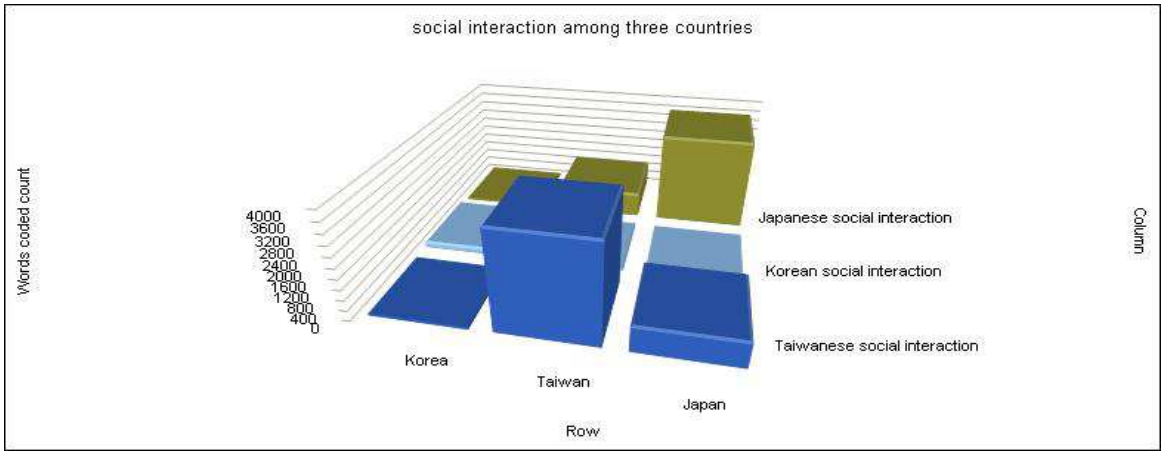

Figure 3: Social interactions among three countries

The function of cross-cultural CMC is to promote engagement among users of different countries in order to create productive discussions, which is considered beneficial for English learning in multicultural backgrounds in the current study. Based on the results of this study, it is clear that participants actually differ from one cultural group to another in terms of the nature of their social interactions.

Japanese participants usually included social etiquette in writing and meant to write for people of the same cultural group. Also, the Japanese style of social etiquette usually included only a short self-introduction which did not strengthen the interaction with other people. Taiwanese participants usually did not make cross-cultural interaction a social event. They were basically task-focused but would address someone when giving feedback. Korean students liked to share their English learning experiences with others, and were believed to be motivated to social interaction in a stronger way. But many Korean students' failure to use Nicenet actively was considered to be another lack of CMC motivation.

Overall, the weak social interaction among participants of the three countries resulted in feedback that was often too short, on many occasions only one or two sentences. Not knowing each other, participants tended to reply more to people of the same cultural group, or to their own classmates, which decreased the role of the multicultural experience in English learning. The primary lesson learned from this study was that intercultural social interactions will not happen automatically in CMC contexts. The study suggests that students are less likely to communicate with others whom they do not know. Unfamiliarity weakened the flow of interaction among all participants. As a result, instructors need to begin intercultural CMC with friendship building activities and exercises first, followed

only later by the curriculum-based learning assignments. When the participating students become friends first, they will then be less likely to communicate only within their cultural group. Intergroup climate does play an important role in cross-cultural asynchronous CMC project. Unfamiliarity among participants will constantly influence the flow of interaction, feedback giving, and will decrease motivation for participants from different cultural group. But teachers have the ability to shape the intergroup climate into a setting in which students feel safe and comfortable in sharing ideas outside their cultural groups.

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