Asynchronous Online Networking: Cross Cultural Collaboration and the Learning of Foreign Languages

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INTRODUCTION

Computer assisted language learning (CALL) has been at the forefront of foreign language education since the early 1980s. More recently researchers' and practioners' attention has centered on the sociocognitive approaches to CALL, that is, on the classroom practices and the electronic applications that make use of students' interaction via the computer to promote the foreign language learning potential. This article addresses the issues of cross cultural collaboration and computer mediated communication (CMC) and explores how asynchronous online networking can foster a) the collaboration across partner classes and b) the cooperation of students within partner classrooms with the aim of enhancing the learning of English as a foreign language and in particular the development of language and culture awareness and mediation skills and ultimately intercultural communicative competence.

BACKGROUND

Asynchronous Collaboration and Intercultural Language Learning

Since the 1990s online collaboration has been at the forefront of foreign language education. CALL activities are no longer limited to the students' interaction with the computer, but include tasks that involve their communication with other students in different parts of the world. It has been proved by researchers that hypertext and hypermedia offer students the opportunity to exchange information in an effective and motivating way and at the same time to expand and broaden their linguistic and cultural experiences (Paramskas,

1993; Warshauer, 1995a, 1995b). However, it has been strongly supported in the literature (e.g., Cummins, 1996; Debski, 1997; Warschauer & Whittaker, 1997) that the simple and random e-mail exchanges among students do not foster students' communicative skills on a systematic basis. It has been endorsed that CMC activities need to be founded on students' collaboration, that is, the learning process, which involves exchanging ideas, transmitting and receiving information, sharing experiences, and negotiating meanings, using the foreign language as the means of communication.

Online collaboration is established on the interaction of students' discourse communities (or else communities of practice), who present information regarding their national culture(s), collect knowledge regarding other cultures, and agree on solutions to common problems (Chapelle, 2000; Cummins, 2000; Vlachos, 2005; Warschauer, 1997a). Asynchronous online collaboration, which is our issue of study in this article, assists the members of these communities in learning and consolidating the target language since they offer them ample opportunities for exposure to authentic linguistic input, which they have the time to reflect on, process, refine, and enrich to produce output that fosters cultural communication and consequently language learning (Kern & Warschauer, 2000; Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000; Vlachos & Athanasiadis, 2005). It has been strongly supported in the literature that in the context of asynchronous online collaboration the members of these communities develop clarity in expression and writing skills in their effort to disclose their cultural identities and to approach and explore life in other social and educational environments (Cooper & Selfe, 1990; Crook, 1994; Cuban, 1993; Cummins & Sayers, 1995; Slaouti, 1997; Warschauer, 1995a, 1995b).

Since communication via the Internet has become a common practice in almost all aspects of everyday life and because applied linguistics have evolved progressively through contemporary pedagogical, psychological, and sociocultural trends and philosophies, a lot of research has been done regarding the learning/teaching practices in the context of online collaboration. Until the late 90s, researchers focused mainly on the interaction between students of a foreign language with native speakers of the specific language. This type of collaboration is defined by Papaefthimiou-Lytra (2004) as "bipolar." The rationale behind these studies and the "non native-native" or bipolar type of online interaction was based on the assumption of the communicative approach to language learning that native speakers constitute a linguistic and cultural model, which foreign language students should imitate throughout the learning process and against which their receptive and productive language skills can be assessed (Kalliabetsou-Koraka, 2004). Systematic studies of bipolar online collaboration proved that the networking with native speakers helps students to a) appreciate the culture of the people who use the target language as native, b) develop an understanding of what is linguistically and culturally proper in the social context in which the target language is used as a mother tongue, and c) behave and sound more native-like (Kourtis-Kazoullis, 2001; Zahner, Fauverge, & Wong, 2000).

However, with the new millemium, the need for an intercultural perspective in foreign language learning has been emphasized and research has focused towards this direction. The model of the native speaker now tends to be considered as monolithic and monocultural (Dendrinos, 2001; Kramsch, 1998) and has given way to that of intercultural speakers, who need to be able to establish their own culture, mediate across cultures using the target language, and tolerate, understand, and appreciate the cultural "otherness" of their international interlocutors (Byram & Fleming, 1998; Mackay, 1999; Mountford & Wadham-Smith, 2000; Papaefthimiou-Lytra, 1995a, 1995b; Papaefthimiou-Lytra, 1996; Smagorinsky, 2001).

The goal of the intercultural communicative approach is to assist students in developing the construct of the intercultural communicative competence, which is centered on the students' capacity to use the foreign language(s) to discover and relate to new people from various and diverse social and cultural contexts. CMC provides the means for the realization of this goal.

Therefore, from an intercultural perspective, students need to be involved not only in "bipolar" online collaboration but also in "multipolar" (Papaefthimiou-Lytra, 2004). In other words, students need to participate in communicative events in which they exchange their opinions and negotiate meanings not only with native speakers of the target language but also with people whose mother tongue and culture(s) are other than the target one in order that they are catered with opportunities for developing mediation skills and language and culture awareness, which, among other elements, constitute the construct of intercultural communicative competence.

Awareness and Mediation Skills across Languages and Cultures: A Data Driven Discussion

In this section we support that when asynchronous online collaboration is systematically integrated in the foreign language program of a school in the form of a cross cultural networking scheme, students build up awareness across a) their native language and culture, b) the language and culture of the target language, and c) their interlocutors' mother tongue and culture, as well as the necessary skills to mediate across them. The arguments presented are based on data that were gathered from the implementation of an asynchronous online networking scheme, "The Euro e-pals," which was created for the purposes of a PhD research (Vlachos, 2006).

"The Euro e-pals" lasted for the academic years 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 and involved three classes of primary school learners of English from three different European countries, Greece, Spain, and Finland. The learners of the partner classes exchanged information on specific cultural topics, such as health habits at school and at home, Olympic education, Christmas and Easter traditions, environmental problems, and so forth. The purpose of the exchange of information was to create projects which were published on the Web. The participating networked learners met and collaborated in a Web site that offered them, on the one hand, the facility to exchange electronic messages with the aim of interacting, exchanging information, and negotiating meanings, and on the other hand, the space to publish their projects, that is, the texts and the visual materials the learners collected or produced.

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