Chapter 75
Writing and Culture in CALL:
21st Century Foreign Language Learning via Email Tandem Exchanges

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the importance of writing as a key ability to address in the foreign/second language classroom. The need to design and implement projects and tasks that foster authentic cultural learning through the meaningful use of written production is addressed, and a project that meets these criteria is presented. This email tandem exchange project was conducted between 94 intermediate-level students (47 pairs) from Columbia University/Barnard College in New York and the Universidad Autonóma de Madrid in Spain during the Fall Semester 2010 (and subsequently in 2011 and 2012). There were several goals to this project: to help improve students' writing skills; to encourage them to learn about culture through authentic and real exposure to the target language (TL onwards, understood as "direct contact with a native speaker"); to foster progress in their use of the TLs through peer-to-peer corrections; and to take an active part in their own learning through self-assessment. Based on students' opinions, this project had a very positive impact on the way they viewed the foreign/target culture on both sides of the Atlantic. It also helped them enhance their written proficiency and acquire a new lexical mastery that would have been impossible through the limited and less-real scope of the classroom.

INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF WRITING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

In today's globalized world, communication happens between cultures, across countries, and in many languages. Written communication is a key element in professional and business development, so being able to effectively write in one's own language is important. However, learning to do the same in a foreign language has become almost as necessary in order to have a competitive advantage in career

development, and therefore a challenge to be specifically addressed in the foreign language (FL) class-room at the University level. Also, if we take into account that writing is a skill that needs to be explicitly learned in L1 education, the need to effectively address it in the L2 setting becomes even more salient.

The communicative approach that can be found in most FL classrooms nowadays focuses predominantly on aural production and interaction skills, which often include collaborative tasks in which students can constantly practice the TL in meaningful exchanges. These approaches certainly foster effective language learning in use, but oftentimes leave less room for reading and writing in the in-class lesson planning. These skills are then assigned as homework for the student to develop on her own time, mostly as part of individual work at home to practice grammar and lexical items from the syllabus. However, when we consider language as a means of communication in today's world, and the fact that we teach so that our students will be able to effectively communicate with speakers of that language, writing becomes a necessary skill that requires attention and work beyond its traditional content-practicing purpose. Cushing Weigle (2002, p. 1) agrees by stating that "the traditional view in language classes that writing functions primarily to support and reinforce patterns of oral language use, grammar, and vocabulary, is being supplanted by the notion that writing in a second language is a worthwhile enterprise in and of itself". And Gruba (2004) takes it one step further when discussing methodological shifts from communicative teaching approaches (which happen largely within the physical setting of the classroom) to teaching with a more action-oriented approach (which entails exposing the students to language in authentic contexts, and encouraging them to interact with the FL *beyond* the realm of the classroom, also shifting communication exchanges from teacher-student or student-student, to student-other speakers of the TL): "Socio-collaborative approaches to teaching and learning are replacing communicative ones, and debates about pedagogy now center on aspects of learner autonomy, collaborative project design, and appropriate assessment practices." (p. 624)

THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF LANGUAGE LEARNING: CULTURE

When considering language learning, we traditionally think of its grammatical dimension: new linguistic forms and their meanings, and how FL learners need to "unlearn" how they say things in their native language, and re-learn how to communicate them using a different system. But what makes this system so unique is that pragmatic and sociocultural aspects play an important role as well, giving the new linguistic code a broader, more complex dimension, but also placing it within the context of the target culture. Languages are learned so that their speakers (native or not) are able to communicate within social contexts. Therefore, "there exists not only the awesome task of mastering the grammatical system of the language, but also the job of learning how to utilize this system appropriately and effectively when actually communicating in real-life situations." (Barkhuizen, 2004, p. 552).

Whereas linguistic theories about the relationship between language and culture are as old as the 19th century, recent advances in fields such as Cognitive Linguistics and Sociocultural Theory at the end of the 20th century have returned to considering this relationship as crucial, and therefore more relevant for language teaching methodologies, which in turn have incorporated culture as a key portion of the curriculum. Kramsch (2004, p. 235) states that it is worth focusing on "the hypothesis that language both expresses and creates categories of thought that are shared by members of a social group and that language is, in part, responsible for the attitudes and beliefs that constitute what we call 'culture'". In other words, it is necessary to consider language as much more than a field of study to be taught by itself,

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