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 & Warshauer, 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.

The networking and the cooperation of the three partner classes involved the completion of seven projects, each one of which included two main stages. In the first stage the learners of each class, who worked in groups of 3-4 members, had to collaborate and agree on the information they would transmit to the groups of learners of the partner classes overseas, while in the second stage they had to process the information they had received from their European partners to compose texts which they published in "The Euro e-pals" Web site. For example, during the period February 2005-March 2005, the groups worked on a project named "Providing an ending to a story," in which the learners of each class selected a folk story from their country, which they narrated in the English language and sent to their European partners overseas. However, they did not include the ending of the story in their narration; they asked from their partners to brainstorm and provide an ending themselves. The Greek learners selected a story titled "The mouse and His Daughter," the Spanish narrated the story "The Magpie and the Chickens," and the Finish narrated the story "The Raspberry Worm." The five groups of Greek learners created five different endings for the Spanish story, the six groups of the Finnish learners created six new endings for the Greek story, and the six groups of the Spanish learners created six endings for the Finnish story.

From the reports of the participating teachers, who observed and documented the learning procedure, we concluded that "The Euro e-pals" learners used both their native language (L1) and the English language (L2), while transferring the folk story of their country from L1 to L2. Furthermore, they used both L1 and L2 while working out the open ended stories they had received from their partners overseas and while putting their ideas in the computer and composing their texts, which were finally written in L2. So far research has shown that students use mainly L1 while collaborating with their fellows in face-to-face interactions within the borders of individual classes on a local level (Legenhausen & Wolff, 1992; Papaefthimiou-Lytra, 1990; Warschauer, 1997b). The data we collected from our research suggest that "The Euro e-pals" learners used both L1 and L2 to communicate among each other on a local level and L2 to communicate with their partners from the other European schools on a cross cultural level. In other words, they usually went through an L1 and L2 brainstorming stage, which acted as a transition period, before they moved to the L2 production

or the text synthesis stage. In the brainstorming stage they resorted to both languages to make semantic and morphological comparisons across L1 and L2. In the text synthesis stage, based on the comparisons they had attempted in the brainstorming stage, they composed texts which mediated and brought into contact their people, language, culture, and civilization with their partners' cultures, ways of life, and native languages.

Furthermore, analysing the data we collected, we concluded that while collaborating on a local level, "The Euro e-pals" learners took into serious consideration the cultural and linguistic otherness of their interlocutors. Specifically, as all the participating teachers confirm, thanks to systematic online collaboration, their learners soon got used to keeping in mind the fact that the readers of the texts they composed originated from diverse cultural and national backgrounds, had been brought up in dissimilar natural environments, spoke different L1s and, therefore, had disparate perceptions of the world. In the composing and revising phases of the text synthesis stage their learners progressively became aware of the fact that they could make language mistakes, while expressing themselves in L2, and misled by the syntactical patterns, the word order, the notions and the functions of their L1s. The Spanish teacher, who participated in our scheme and research made the following comments, which support the above mentioned arguments:

They (her learners) have realized that they have to be analytic and provide details so that they will be more easily understood. One can understand this if she observes their conversations while they are trying to decide what to include in their texts and how to write it. They wonder whether what they write is enough, or if they would have to add more explanations.

About the language, in some occasions, they ask themselves if, for example the bird (the main character of our tale), the magpie exists in Greece and in Finland.

I have explained to them that the Spanish word order is different from the English and since the Greek and the Finnish learners might not be familiar with our word order, they may not be able to understand the texts we produce if some sentences of our texts follow the Spanish syntactical patterns. ...As a result, my students try to avoid making mistakes of this kind keeping in mind that their European partners might not be able to understand our texts if there are mistakes of this kind.

Focusing our attention to the interrelation between L1 and L2, which in our case was the English language, we can, therefore, support that the learners, who had the role of the "writers" and were composing texts, paid particular attention to expression in L2, keeping always in mind the distinctive characteristics of their L1 and L2. More importantly, it is worth noticing that the writers' sensitivity towards their accuracy in expression in L2 mainly sprang from the fact that the intended readers spoke a mother tongue other than the writers' L1. This could confuse the readers further in case the communicating texts, which were written in L2, included grammatical and syntactical patterns that the readers had never met in their mother tongue and the English language (L2).
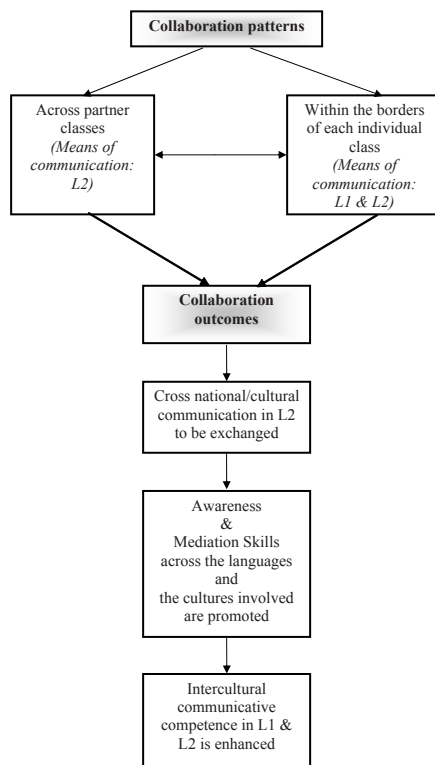
From the data we collected, it follows that cross cultural online collaboration not only exhorted the participating learners to delve into the linguistic systems of L1 and L2 and observe their functions, but also motivated them to speculate the systems of the native languages of their partners overseas in order that, as writers, they could be effective in intercultural communication. The Greek teacher who participated in our research commented that while selecting a folk story to narrate to their European partners, the Greek learners communicated with their interlocutors abroad and investigated whether in the Finnish language nouns have gender suffixes, as they do in the Greek language. The Greek learners had chosen to narrate a folk story in which a female mouse was getting married to the sun. However, in the process of the story selection, they were inhibited by the thought that if the noun "the sun" in Finnish was female, then their interlocutors might be confused while decoding the Greek story. In other words, the Greek learners had formed "working hypotheses" (Papaefthimiou-Lytra, 2001) regarding the linguistic system of their interlocutors' mother tongue. When they communicated with the learners and the teacher of the Finnish class, the Greek children learned that in Finnish nouns do not have gender suffixes, that is to say, they tested their working hypotheses through the act of communication and, therefore, they could proceed with the specific story they had selected. It can, thus, be supported that when cross cultural online collaboration is systematically integrated in the foreign language program of a class, it may create the necessary and appropriate learning conditions which encourage students to develop awareness across their mother tongue and culture, the target language and its culture, and their interlocutors' native languages and cultures.

In addition, from a sociolinguistic point of view, the teachers' comments prove that learners formed working hypotheses concerning not only the linguistic systems of their interlocutors' mother tongues but also the appropriate use of social and linguistic codes and norms that were common and acceptable in the cultures and the communities in which the intended readers belonged to. In the process of cross cultural online collaboration learners explored these hypotheses and expanded them, forming new ones. Specifically, it has been reported by the participating teachers that their learners wondered what kind of genres, text types, and register they would have to use to facilitate communication, taking into serious consideration the fact that inappropriate selections could cause misunderstandings. They compared genres and linguistic and social codes across L1 and L2 and they wondered what genres and codes would be used in their interlocutors' mother tongues and languages. There were instances in the learning process, when the children resorted to texts they had received from their interlocutors in the past and examined factors such as the register, the formality of the language, and the genre. Their aim was to compose texts that would be smoothly decoded and processed by the intended readers. When the texts were published in "The Euro e-pals" Web site and replies were received, learners used to hold discussions in the classroom regarding the suitability of their selections and would make plans as concerns future texts they would compose. In other words, they used their interlocutors' replying texts as feedback, which they reflected on to explore their working hypotheses further and create new ones. Hence, it can be asserted that the participating learners established cross cultural mediation skills, which let them take into account the intended readers' cultural and linguistic background and the specific context in which intercultural interaction took place in order to select the suitable linguistic codes and channels of communication that would facilitate them in their mediation across cultures and languages.

To sum up, in this discussion it has been endorsed that learners' regular online collaboration across partner classes and systematic cooperation within the borders of each individual class enhance awareness across their mother tongue and culture, the target language, and culture and their interlocutors' native languages and cultures. It has also been put forward that they foster

Figure 1. Collaboration patterns and outcomes in a cross-cultural CMC learning environment

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                    ┌──────────────────────┐
                    │ Collaboration patterns│
                    └──────────────────────┘
           ┌──────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────┐
           │ Across partner   │◄────►│ Within the borders│
           │ classes          │      │ of each individual│
           │ (Means of        │      │ class            │
           │ communication:   │      │ (Means of        │
           │ L2)              │      │ communication:   │
           │                  │      │ L1 & L2)         │
           └──────────────────┘      └──────────────────┘
                    ┌──────────────────────┐
                    │ Collaboration        │
                    │ outcomes             │
                    └──────────────────────┘
                    ┌──────────────────────┐
                    │ Cross national/cultural│
                    │ communication in L2   │
                    │ to be exchanged       │
                    └──────────────────────┘
                    ┌──────────────────────┐
                    │ Awareness             │
                    │ &                     │
                    │ Mediation Skills      │
                    │ across the languages  │
                    │ and                   │
                    │ the cultures involved │
                    │ are promoted          │
                    └──────────────────────┘
                    ┌──────────────────────┐
                    │ Intercultural         │
                    │ communicative         │
                    │ competence in L1 &    │
                    │ L2 is enhanced        │
                    └──────────────────────┘
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the development of cross cultural mediation skills, which enable learners to transfer texts and information from their native language into the target one and, consequently, allow their interlocutors to get to know their culture and civilization. As it has already been stated and is diagrammatically represented in Figure 1, awareness across languages and cultures and cross cultural mediation skills, among other elements, constitute the construct of intercultural communicative competence. The specific construct, which is made up of a number of other constituent elements (such as learning skills and strategies that are beyond the scope of this article), constitutes the ultimate goal of the intercultural communicative approach to foreign language teaching/learning.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

In the context of the expanding European Union, where a European dimension in education has emerged (Byram & Risager, 1999; Papaefthimiou-Lytra, 2004), the intercultural communicative approach in foreign language learning is gaining ground. The compilation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and the efforts of the Council of Europe to promote foreign language learning have sprang from the need of the European citizens for peaceful coexistence, seminal communication, and commercial conciliation. In this context, intercultural communicative language learning is being developed and continuously expanded in European schools. Our research has proved that through regular online collaboration students from different European countries can use and consolidate a common target language in their effort to exchange cultural elements and learn to appreciate the otherness and the value of other European cultures. We believe that it is worthwhile expanding intercultural foreign language research outside the European borders to embrace cultures and students who have completely different frames of linguistic, social, and religious reference. Extensive research of this type may prove that international languages and information communication technologies are probably meant to bring national languages and cultures in contact since modern communication systems are progressively "shrinking" our world and are bringing people closer to each other.

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KEY TERMS

Applied Linguistics: The scientific field that studies foreign language teaching and learning.

Asynchronous Online Networking: The type of communication between individual learners or groups of learners who use "not simultaneous" modes of communication, such as the e-mail, to share messages and lengthy texts in the context of collaboration and interaction.

Bipolar Online Interaction: The interaction between students of a foreign language and native speakers of the specific language.

Cross Cultural Mediation Skills: The skills which allow learners to take into account a) their interlocutors' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and b) the specific context of communication in order that they can select the appropriate linguistic codes that will facilitate them in transferring texts and information from their native language into the target one in an effective way.

Cross Cultural Online Networking: The online communication and interaction among discourse communities of learners, each one of which is originated in a discrete cultural and linguistic environment.

Discourse Community of Learners: A group of learners, who communicate with another group via the computer, discuss, and exchange ideas and information on various issues.

Multipolar Online Interaction: The interaction between students of a foreign language not only with native speakers of the target language but also with people whose mother tongue and cultures are other than the target one.

Sociocognitive Perspective in CALL: The perspective according to which students may learn a foreign language through communication via the computer. Proponents of the sociocognitive perspective in CALL propose applications such as the e-mail, the Internet relay chats, the MOOs, audio and video conferencing, and so forth.