

A Chinese-French Case Study of English Language Learning via Wikispaces, Animoto and Skype

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Abstract. This paper reports on the learning experience of Chinese and French students participating in a computer mediated communication (CMC) collaboration conducted in English and supported by Wikispaces, Animoto, and Skype. Several studies have investigated CMC contexts in which at least some participants were native speakers. Here, we address the linguistic and cultural challenges that students face when language code-switching is impossible. Twenty-five French students enrolled in their final semester of an undergraduate program in Sports Management and 40 Chinese students enrolled in their second year of undergraduate program in Business completed individual and group projects related to tourism in Europe based on information gathered through communication in English with their foreign partners. Data from students' written and oral productions were complemented by students' self-reflective evaluations. This study illustrates that mastering new technologies and interacting with an authentic audience motivated student learning. Some students also benefitted from the possibility of improving speaking skills through recording and listening to their own voices.

Keywords: computer mediated collaboration, oral skills, cross-cultural, audience, recording.

1. Introduction

This paper reports on the impact of technology and cross-cultural communication among Chinese and French students during a computer mediated communication (CMC) collaboration over a one semester course in English. Studies investigating

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CMC contexts in which some students were native speakers of the target language have highlighted student involvement and motivation, as well as challenges of cross-cultural communication (Jauregi & Bañados, 2010; Mangenot & Tanaka, 2008), the importance of organizational considerations (Cloke, 2010; Fratter & Helm, 2010), cultural differences in giving feedback (Guth & Marini-Maio, 2010), and positive impact on social register use (Cunningham & Vyatkina, 2012). Here, we address the linguistic and cultural challenges that participants negotiate when language code-switching is impossible as neither group speaks the first language of their partners. Neither the Chinese nor the French students or instructors spoke the language or possessed an in-depth knowledge of the other community's culture. However, a desire to become better acquainted with the "other" culture and to participate in projects outside of the standard curriculum piqued the interest of the students.

The results of this study echo notions that can be found in other contexts related to second language production, such as first-language influence, a lack of an appropriate range of vocabulary and the preference of many students for written over oral communication. Here, we will specifically address issues related to the mediation by computers linking two historically distinct communities. These issues comprise technical considerations and the presence of an authentic public.

2. Context

2.1. Population

Between January and April 2013, 25 French students enrolled in their final year of an undergraduate program in Sports Management and 40 Chinese students enrolled in their second year of undergraduate program in Business communicated via a Wikispaces platform, which integrated technical tutorials and on-line resources, instructions on individual and group assignments, publication of those assignments for class viewing and written interaction. To ensure international inter-student contact, each of the 25 French students was assigned to two of the twelve sub-groups. Then, each of the 40 Chinese students joined one sub-group. Each of the twelve sub-groups had a dedicated page on the Wikispaces platform on to which all of the students posted a one-paragraph presentation of themselves. Many students illustrated their page with pictures of local scenery, sports events or maps.

2.2. Assignments

The first project was a group-constructed 30-second Animoto project about their country of origin incorporating both images of students' choice in the form of a

slide show and an oral document. All French students began by uploading pictures found on the Internet before writing a text and then recording it using Audacity software. As the semester in China began four weeks after the French semester, the Animoto projects were produced in two waves. In contrast to the French projects, the Chinese students included many personal pictures of themselves visiting famous sites in China or participating in artistic or athletic events. The French students expressed their enthusiasm concerning what they interpreted as the Chinese students' overall outgoing and friendly manner. This positive reception became a continuing motivating factor for the French students over the semester.

For the second project, students were required to communicate via Skype in gathering information about the other culture. The Chinese students were to organize a trip within Europe originating in Liverpool and budgeted at 700 pounds. Many of these students were motivated by a possible year of study abroad in Liverpool the following year. The French students were to create a flyer and a corresponding oral document concerning a three-day, sport-oriented trip in France that would particularly target a Chinese audience.

2.3. Technology

The use of technology was supported by publicly-available and teacher-made on-line tutorials, both integrated into Wikispaces, Audacity, Animoto, Skype or Skype recordings. The Chinese instructor had Instructional Technology staff and students equipped with laptops, iPads or mobile telephones equipped with Skype. The French students worked in a computer lab with Internet connection, but had no technical assistance.

3. Method

The qualitative data for this study were collected from the students' work deposited on Wikispaces and from a French self-reflective assignment comprised of three open-ended questions in English related to participation, learning and challenges.

4. Results

Despite varied levels of English skills, all students actively participated in the different activities. The number of contributions per group page ranged from 41 to 162, with a mean of 90.9. Five of the 12 groups posted from one to 12 images on their page. Furthermore, the page for depositing and viewing the French flyers and oral documents recorded 45 comments from both Chinese and French students.

The comments appear to refer only to the flyers and not to the oral documents. The written expression was clearly addressed to the other students and often incorporated emoticons or comments such as “Hello and welcome to our place!”, “Teamwork is the key of the success”, “I’m glad to meet all of you” or “Sorry, I did not do it very well”.

4.1. Skype

Students also participated in Skype communication either through written or oral modes. Many students either submitted copies of written Skype communication or commented on their oral communications. Although the Chinese students were accustomed to Skype, this was only true for about one-third of the French. Some French students used Google Translate simultaneously with Skype in order to verify meaning and prepare written answers. Class projects were generally discussed via written Skype, while more general topics such as driving, family life, vacations and food were discussed orally. On several occasions, Skype conferences of three or more students also took place. Students were more at ease with written communication when communicating cross-culturally. French students also used Skype to record discussions in English among themselves, which they then posted on Wikispaces.

4.2. Authentic audience

The context of an authentic audience motivated genuine conversation as noted in the self-reflective student reports. French students commented on the excellent level of English of the Chinese students, which motivated them to produce work at the upper limits of their capacities. One student commented “Correspondents were really friendly and always eager to speak to us, that made the task easier” and a second explained “The most stimulating aspects of this project were to be able to speak in English with foreigners and to be able to give them some information about our country and to help them to improve their trip”. There were also clear indications of a *division of labor* among students, for example the creation of written rules to “keep this page clear and understandable” (See [Blin, 2012](#) on Cultural Historical Activity Theory).

4.3. Listening to one’s own speaking

Recording oral documents via Audacity and Skype permitted students to listen to each other despite the time lag. An unexpected outcome to these technical options was the capacity for students to listen to their own voice. For the recorded individual

and group projects, students wrote out the script first while checking dictionaries for richer vocabulary or consulting the instructor about syntax. Students also took advantage of the capacity to record repeatedly and to edit using Audacity software. Some students preferred recording at home, either because of the noise level in class or out of shyness as they felt more at ease in a private setting. One student concluded “This may sound strange but I loved working on an oral recording”; this allows one to reflect on pronunciation and encourages self-correction.

5. Discussion

This study highlights the contrasting apprehensions that students bring to written and oral communication and how computer mediation offers new approaches to dealing with these apprehensions. The instructors implemented student projects that, with the integration of CMC, centered the attention towards student production in a positive socio-affective environment (see [Develotte, 2009](#)). The student productions incorporated images, voice and text, but moreover they incorporated the desire to communicate well with people at a distance. In other words, it was not the technology in itself that led to moments of tension or breakdown, but the occasional difficulty to contact a foreign partner due to time lag and conflicting schedules. Although technology was a central piece of this project, it was the human “presence” that drove the level of student participation.

Finally, the technology used in these projects allowed students to slow down the oral production process into a series of steps, a method of production more often associated with writing production. Here, the multiple steps of recording oral documents – brainstorming on content, pre-recording script preparation, evaluation of one’s own pronunciation and prosody, comparison with other student projects, modification of the final product – permitted students to reflect on their oral production. This led to reduced anxiety and increased confidence over the semester, however, direct oral communication via Skype often remained a source of stress for some students.

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Resources

Animoto: <http://animoto.com/>

Audacity: <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

Google Translate: <http://translate.google.com/>

Skype: <http://www.skype.com/fr/download-skype/skype-for-computer/>

Skype Record: <http://www.skype-rec.com/>

Wikispaces: <https://www.wikispaces.com/>

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