

Telecollaborative desktop-videoconferencing exchange: The case of Mark

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Abstract. This presentation is a case study of the Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) development of Mark, one of ten American students engaged in a desktop-videoconferencing telecollaborative exchange with a class of French students. Due in part to its inherent complexity, this context has not been widely researched. To observe ICC development, I used a combination of a priori categories based on the “Attitude” component of Byram’s (1997) model, that is, the willingness to show value to one’s partner or relativize one’s self, and a set of emerging themes (Boyatzis, 1998) gathered from the data. The video-recorded sessions are analyzed in conjunction with data from background surveys, autobiographies, journal entries, and email exchanges. This methodology sheds light on the behavioral choices of a participant who, despite a high level of engagement and motivation, does not appear to take advantage of the exchange for the purpose of ICC development, a behavior that I noticed in other members of his class. While linguistic development can be observed, there is little display of “self-relativizing” and “valuing others” (Byram, 1997, p. 34). These results raise the question of how the methodology could be modified to better foster ICC development in students like Mark, or whether it is even possible to reach this goal within such a mediated environment.

Keywords: telecollaboration, intercultural communicative competence, desktop-videoconferencing.

1. Introduction

This presentation reports on the case of Mark, an American student majoring in French, who was enrolled in a fifth semester French conversation course, when

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he took part with his classmates in a semester-long telecollaborative exchange. The overall objective was to investigate if and how students were able to take advantage of the online mediated multimodal environment to engage in a learning and socialization process with a French partner and show evidence of intercultural communicative development. Mark was paired with a French student who he had expressed an interest in working with to complete a collaborative project. Personal information shared at the beginning of the study indicated that he intended to become a French teacher and that he had an extensive travel experience and some Francophone ancestry (Haitian grandfather). He also declared himself “interested” and “curious” in knowing more about Francophone cultures and “very interested” in the opportunity to speak with native French students.

Students engaged in a series of one-on-one desktop videoconferencing sessions in the course of the exchange. This complex and less researched learning environment was selected because it provides both the immediacy of authentic interaction with access to many channels to support it (visual, audio, chat, online access to dictionaries and sites, etc.), and constitutes a good platform to support meaningful and personal intercultural exchanges. This choice of technology was not without risks. Indeed, the potential for tensions and conflict linked to video-based intercultural interaction had been raised previously (O’Dowd, 2006). However, in this exploratory study, the intention was not to avoid possible miscommunication or conflict; they were viewed rather as natural occurrences and possible learning moments in these exchanges. Still, measures were taken to foster a comfortable intercultural learning environment, such as in and out of class preparatory work with the participants and a careful pairing process.

2. Method

2.1. Study procedure

The study spanned the entire French conversation course and included three phases: 1) preparation for the exchange with in-class readings and discussions on intercultural variation and information exchanges between the transatlantic partners; 2) online collaborative sessions in the lab with written contacts between sessions; and 3) presentations and debates in class.

The study adopted a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Two tasks were assigned during the online sessions: an elective introductory questionnaire and a required collaborative debate preparation with a PowerPoint presentation. In addition, students completed background surveys, wrote autobiographies, and

kept journals in which they wrote reflectively about the sessions and their own presentations. These instruments were selected to generate and collect data over the course of the semester that could provide an in-depth look at the intercultural exchange.

2.2. Data analysis

In order to investigate intercultural communicative development, the “Attitude” factor from [Byram’s \(1997\)](#) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence was chosen. A hybrid method of analysis was then employed to examine the data. It was comprised of [Byram’s \(1997\)](#) a priori list of attitudinal objectives as well as categories aligned with the goal of “relativizing self” and “valuing others” (p. 34), gathered through a process of emerging themes ([Boyatzis, 1998](#)) based on the students’ recorded interactions. This methodological choice, which sets this study apart from others, was made in an effort to determine and clarify what could count as observable attributes of “Attitudes” in this multimodal telecollaborative exchange, and consequently to reflect more closely the actual mediated processes in the data with regard to ICC learning.

Mark was one of three participants selected for this in-depth study through a process of qualitative sampling. [Byram’s \(1997\)](#) attitude objectives and the data-driven themes were used to code his three recorded and transcribed online sessions. This analytic process provided an in-depth picture of his interaction with his partner and in particular, his willingness to show value to him or relativize himself as well as his unwillingness to show these behaviors, coded as “lack of” or absence of “Attitudes”, over the course of the exchange.

3. Discussion

A close analysis of Mark’s recordings triangulated with other data sources yielded a markedly different picture than the one that initially emerged from the field notes. The data gathered from the survey, Mark’s verbal comments and written reflections as well as my observations of the sessions, first suggested that he was eager to participate, to improve his language skills, and to interact with a French discussion partner. As a serious student and experienced traveler, he appeared well poised to take advantage of the intercultural learning environment. However, the combing of the recorded sessions for displays of attitudes of curiosity and openness through “self-relativizing” and “valuing others” ([Byram, 1997](#), p. 34), as first steps towards “decentering” ([Byram, 1997](#)), indicated otherwise. His overall production of attitudes during the three sessions was limited both in number and in type of attitudes

produced: only five of the ten coded categories were present in his discourse. In the first two sessions, he also displayed a strong tendency to self-prioritize, evidenced by the higher presence of coded instances of “lack of value” for his partner. The main collaborative task work did not fulfill its mediational function, in the sense that Mark flouted the guidelines and did not produce any of the attitudes which were specifically targeted by this task. It is also telling that he chose to skip the initial task which was not mandatory, but still strongly recommended, in which he was meant to gather information about his partner and help develop a more personal connection, something he was not especially interested in.

4. Conclusions

The general evolution of the exchange did not show significant signs of development in Mark’s ability to show openness and curiosity towards his partner or a greater ability to relate to him as person as opposed to a task partner. Unlike other participants who successfully used the online mediated environment and collaborative task work to develop their intercultural communicative competence, the choice of methodology did not lead to development and therefore does not seem to be a good choice in the case of Mark.

Despite his high level of motivation, engagement and stated enjoyment of the exchange, the data indicates that his sole goal seemed to be the opportunity to practice his language skills with a native speaker and improve his level of proficiency. This observation highlights the effect of students’ agencies, that is, of their personal interests, experiences and motives and goals when engaging in these exchanges and how these affect their intercultural learning potential. Addressing these issues and strengthening the pre-exchange preparatory work in order to better clarify the goals of telecollaborative exchanges might be a good way to assist participants like Mark.

Finally, despite the lack of “Attitudes” in Mark’s discourse, he was able to develop both culture-specific interactional conventions and remedial strategies to avoid conversation breakdowns, convey meaning and adjust to his partner’s mediation both in French and in English. This indicated that he was able to develop “skills of discovery and interaction”, another factor of [Byram’s \(1997, p. 33\)](#) models of ICC.

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