

17 Interactional dimension of online asynchronous exchange in an asymmetric telecollaboration

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Abstract

The telecollaborative project under study involves, on the one hand, Masters students who are studying to become teachers and who design the tasks as well as tutor them, and, on the other hand, French language students. The relationship in this type of telecollaboration has been shown to be both asymmetric and symmetric. The hypothesis this paper seeks to examine is that designing tasks and providing corrective feedback by the ‘native’ partners tends to take precedence over less formal exchanges. We thus analyse the patterns of communicative exchange between tutors and learners in the forum and we examine if there are less formal episodes between them. We are interested in the conditions under which they appear.

Keywords: forum exchanges, informal communication, IRF pattern, telecollaboration.

1. Introduction

As stated by Ware (2005), “research has shown that telecollaboration does not automatically promote the kinds of language learning that educators often anticipate” (p. 64). As in many other projects, one of the aims of the

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telecollaboration which will be analysed in this article is to offer university learners of French a greater variety of language practices than what is usually the case in textbooks or in the language classroom (Mangenot & Salam, 2010). But the telecollaborative project we are analysing here has a specific feature: it involves, on the one hand, Masters students who are studying to become teachers and who design the tasks as well as tutor them, and, on the other hand, French language students. The relationship in this type of telecollaboration has been shown to be both asymmetric and symmetric: tutors are in a teacher as well as a peer/interlocutor role (Dejean & Mangenot, 2006; Mangenot & Salam, 2010). Hence our research questions: which one of these two roles tends to prevail in this particular context? Which patterns of communicative exchange between tutors and learners appear in the forums? Under which conditions do less formal episodes appear?

2. Methodology

2.1. A task-based approach within forums

We take as a premise the fact that a task-based approach is necessary in order to elicit the communicative process. In our case, pedagogical scenarios composed of two or three pre-tasks and a final task were designed and tutored by four future language teachers from Grenoble University (Masters students, hence ‘tutors’), and carried out by 15 students of French from the University of Cyprus (‘learners’) on a weekly basis with a new topic each week. Moodle forums were the main communication tool. As a result, there are 14 scenarios and the ten week exchange led to 35 tasks (21 pre-tasks, 14 final tasks), all requiring verbal production³. Our data set consists in task instructions and forum online interaction between the tutors and the learners.

3. As we are studying the communication patterns, we eliminated from our corpus the six pre-tasks which did not require any production.

2.2. Analysis of communicative patterns

Our analysis relies on a comparison with the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern, long ago described by classroom interaction researchers (British Council, n.d.). As shown by Celik and Mangenot (2004), who studied forum exchanges resulting from tasks assigned by the course instructor, an IRF structure can be observed in most cases: Task instruction/Student answers/Instructor feedback. But some important differences with IRF structure in face to face situations should be noted: there is less time pressure to react, there may be a quasi-unlimited number of responses, the tutor feedback may be given either for each message or globally, and peers may also react to some productions.

Another factor which influences the communicative pattern in forums is the possibility of creating discussion threads (Kear, 2001; Mangenot, 2008). Moodle allows different types of forums, some with a single discussion thread, some with predefined threads (which the learners cannot modify), and some which allow learners to create new threads.

We built a table of all pre- and final tasks, with the number of threads and messages they contained. A short version of this table is given below. Thanks to this table, we could infer some quantitative results, and identify for a qualitative analysis exchanges where the structure differed from the IRF pattern. We will examine the conditions in which these exchanges appear and question the degree and type of interactivity they present.

3. Results

We used a bottom-up/top-down approach to classify the 617 forum messages into three patterns (see Table 1). The first striking observation is the high proportion of *feedback patterns* (66.9% of the messages, 66.7% of the threads). We find most of these IRF patterns in the forums dedicated to the final productions.

A second observation is the low number of *independent messages* (n=41, 6.6%), which shows a certain degree of interactivity.

A third finding is the very high number of threads (n=186); a thread contains on average 3.3 messages (617: 186), which is a low value, especially if a discussion is expected. According to Ware (2005), “the online medium itself supports a range of avoidance strategies that would not otherwise be available to students communicating face to face” (p. 64). The overuse of thread creation by the learners could be interpreted as an avoidance strategy.

A final observation regards the distribution of the *non IRF* threads (n=37): these are mainly (81%) to be found in the pre-task phase.

Table 1. Classification of the forum messages

Exchange pattern	Forums			Discussion threads			Messages (in threads)		
	pre	final	total	pre	final	total	pre	final	total
Independent messages	9	3	12	21	4	25	37	4	41
Feedback (IRF)	7	15	22	39	85	124	90	323	413
Non IRF	9	1	10	30	7	37	146	17	163
Total	25	19	44	90	96	186	273	344	617

Regarding the qualitative analysis of *non IRF* exchanges, we selected one *non IRF* exchange from our corpus. The task topic deals with stereotypes about love; the forum under study corresponds to a pre-task in which learners were asked about the difference between a French and a Cypriot lover and requested to post their respective opinion in a new discussion thread.

In this forum, threads created by the learners contain a one to one exchange learner/tutor. The learners reply to their tutors’ task instructions. Their messages deal with the topic, but there is no reference to other messages posted in the other threads and no explicit addressee in their messages (as if the recipient was obviously their tutor). Then, a tutor replies; the tutors do not give any evaluative feedback, but they build on the learners’ contributions (see Figure 1). After the

tutors' comments, we observed that the learners reply by also building on their response (see [Figure 2](#)).

Figure 1. Tutor's response

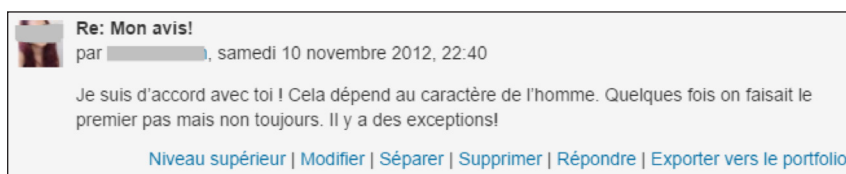


Re: Mon avis!
par [redacted], jeudi 8 novembre 2012, 09:42

C'est vrai qu'en France c'est plutôt les hommes qui font le premier pas. C'est surprenant de voir que ce n'est pas pareil à Chypre! Alors c'est toi qui fait le premier pas ?!!
En France, il y a aussi des hommes timides mais peut-être moins que chez vous...
Mais attention, tous les français ne sont pas très romantiques ! Cela dépend !! Il y a de tout ! Certains sont très gentils et romantiques et d'autre beaucoup moins...

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Figure 2. Learner's response



Re: Mon avis!
par [redacted], samedi 10 novembre 2012, 22:40

Je suis d'accord avec toi ! Cela dépend au caractère de l'homme. Quelques fois on faisait le premier pas mais non toujours. Il y a des exceptions!

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4. Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative analysis above reveals some conditions under which the exchange structure differs from the IRF pattern. First, pre-tasks seem to elicit more casual exchanges. Second, some topics seem to foster a more symmetric relationship. In the forum presented above, the beginning of the exchange structure is close to the IRF pattern, but there is no feedback from the tutors and the exchange is a symmetric one.

Globally, we observed that there is more interactivity between the learners when they are asked to contribute to the same discussion thread as opposed to creating a new one, and that the greatest interactivity between peers is reached when instructions require a collaborative interaction in order to accomplish the task.

There was one such task in our corpus; collaboration showed nevertheless to remain incomplete and thus unsatisfactory, due to the rapid (weekly) succession of the tasks and the slow rhythm of forum interaction. Therefore, we assume that proposing meaningful and relevant tasks is not sufficient to lead to an interactive and more symmetric exchange; the learning scenario should also take into consideration the way tools are used, as well technically (thread management) as chronologically (deadlines, interaction rhythm).

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we studied exchanges in an asymmetric telecollaboration and examined the conditions under which less formal exchanges appear; in addition to the factors we discussed here, we consider that the interactional dimension in an asymmetric telecollaboration depends on a wider array of interrelated factors: environmental factors (class atmosphere, time pressure etc.) and personal factors (motivation, participants' personalities, etc.), which could be studied in a future research.

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Edited by Sake Jager, Malgorzata Kurek, and Breffni O'Rourke

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