28 Communication strategies in a telecollaboration project with a focus on Latin American history

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Abstract

This paper will present and discuss the linguistic challenges that Argentinian university students of history and Danish university students of Spanish met during the course of a telecollaboration project based on synchronous communication in Skype. The purpose of this discussion is to identify linguistic pitfalls and the solutions adopted by both native and non-native participants in order to keep the conversations going in spite of misunderstandings, vocabulary limitations and other breaches in communication. The purpose of the discussion is to detect areas of strategic competence that need to be addressed in class, particularly for the benefit of the non-native speakers.

Keywords: telecollaboration, communication strategies, native/non-native communication, strategy training.

1. Introduction

The overall object of the telecollaboration project – for literature on telecollaboration and its role in language learning see e.g. O'Dowd (2007) – presented in this paper has been the acquisition of intercultural competence, with

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particular focus on the learning and teaching of Argentinian regional history, by a group of Argentinian pre-service history teachers and a group of Danish university students of Spanish (a number of them pre-service Spanish teachers). The project[2] and its results regarding the acquisition of intercultural awareness have been described in detail in Fernández and Pozzo (2015, in preparation). In the present discussion, the focus will be narrowed to linguistic aspects of this very particular kind of asymmetrical telecollaboration in Spanish, where Native Speakers (NS) of Spanish were coupled with Non-Native Speakers (NNS) of Spanish with a level no higher than B1 in most cases. Although the project included several forms of collaboration (e-mail communication, production and exchange of teaching materials and Skype conversations), the present paper focuses on the Communication Strategies (CS) applied by both groups in their Skype conversations.

The selected focus on CS relies on the conviction – reaffirmed in the language pedagogical literature (e.g. Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Griffiths, 2013) – that teaching learning strategies in the foreign language classroom (including CS, i.e. strategies that allow the learners to engage in communication despite the lack of sufficient linguistic resources) promotes both language learning and facilitates communication in the target language. As many telecollaboration projects nowadays include internet-mediated synchronous communication, the discussion presented in this paper aims at contributing to generally more successful exchanges by bringing attention to the necessary preparation work that should be done in order to exploit online communication to its full extent.

2.   Methodology

In the present project, several data collection tools were employed (demographic questionnaires, e-mails, evaluation forms, reflection essays, interviews and audio recordings of Skype conversations), but only transcribed recordings of Skype

conversations will be used in this paper in order to examine the use of CS. Out of 21 Skype conversations held by seven groups of students (each group consisting of around 4-5 Danish students and 1-2 Argentinian students), ten conversations have been retrieved[3], amounting a total of 25,860 words.

The analysis of this material, qualitative in nature, has the purpose of identifying

- different types of CS used by the NS and NNS groups of participants;

- aspects of CS use that need to be trained prior to a new edition of the project (potentially also applicable to other telecollaboration projects with synchronous communication between NS and NNS).

In order to identify CS, the threefold classification of functions provided by Jamshidnejad (2011) – "promoting meaning transfer in communication, promoting the accuracy of language in communication, keeping the interaction going" (p. 3762) – was adopted, and the individual strategies were labelled based on Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) classical taxonomy, with additions by Jamshidnejad (2011) and this researcher.

3.   Results

As regards the NS group (the Argentinian participants), two groups of CS are salient: strategies for promoting meaning transfer and strategies for keeping the conversation going. Among the former, the material presents multiple examples of comprehension checks (*Do you understand?*[4]), self-rephrasing (*Are you at the faculty? At the* **university**?), self-repetition, syllable spelling *(dic-ta-tor-ship)*, definition and other-repair (i.e. correcting the interlocutor)*,* all of which are to be expected, as the NNS interlocutors show clear problems of comprehension

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3. In spite of careful instruction on how to record the conversations, the remaining 11 conversations did not get recorded due to technical problems or forgetfulness on the side of the participants.

4. Because of space constraints, only a few examples will be provided, directly in own translation into English from the original Spanish source.

and self-expression. The interesting fact about the NS group and its strategy use is that there are clear personal differences, with some participants being skillful in the use of strategies and extremely attentive to the needs of their NNS interlocutors and other participants being oblivious to this or even impatient.

The second group of strategies exhibited by the NS group, aimed at keeping the conversation going, includes three types of strategies: continuers (*Have you noted something that we can discuss?*), change of topic/introduction of a new topic (*And in Denmark? Tell us something about Denmark! / Another thing that we had planned to talk with you about is…*), and the most extreme one, ending the conversation because of lack of understanding (*Eh, we will do the following because we are not understanding each other: I will talk to the coordinator and we plan another encounter*). Probably because of their linguistic superiority, the NS group is clearly in charge of the development and direction of the conversation and in several cases it is clear that the very frequent strategy of changing topic has the result of keeping the conversation at a very superficial level.

As for the NNS (the Danish participants), apart from the expected strategies aiming at overcoming their lack of understanding[5] (asking for repetitions, confirmation requests, expressing non-understanding, using translation for understanding) or their lack of linguistic resources (word coinage, self-repair and retrieval), the most interesting group of strategies exhibited by this group can be labeled as 'L1-based intragroup strategies for keeping the conversation going'. They are all about engaging in interactions in Danish with other Danish members of the group while the Argentinian interlocutors, still online, remain out of the conversation. These strategies include co-construction, translating to each other for understanding, intragroup comprehension checks, intragroup other-repair, choosing the best L2 speaker in the group as unwilling spokesperson, and making different kinds of intragroup comments. Up to 17 consecutive turns of intragroup conversation in Danish have been counted in the material, which can be seen as a major interruption to the natural flow of conversation across the telecollaborating partners.

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5. A couple of examples seem to fall into the category 'promoting accuracy' as some self-repairs by NNS do not seem to be motivated by problems in promoting meaning transfer.

4.   Discussion and conclusion

Based on the communication problems observed in the material presented above, the following suggestions for CS training might help improve online synchronous communication in new editions of this or similar projects:

- making NS aware of possible NNS language challenges;

- scripting the conversations in bigger detail so that NNS are better prepared to both ask and answer questions;

- assigning different roles/tasks to different group members;

- training students to use CS in the target language so that NNS rely less on help from the intragroup;

- teaching students how to pose elaboration questions in order to avoid too rapid topic changes.

Although the two groups of interlocutors exhibited a number of CS that in different ways contributed to the completion of the communication task, it is clear from this brief analysis that not all these strategies are equally suited and not all participants are skillful enough at choosing the most adequate strategies at any given moment. Focusing on CS and on possible language challenges prior to the telecollaboration task could pave the way for a more fluent communication between native and non-native participants.

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