Impact of Native-Nonnative Speaker Interaction Through Video Communication and Second Life on Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence

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Abstract. One of the key concerns of educators is to come to know what works in language teaching and under which conditions (Intercultural) Communicative Competence can be furthered. This concern is even bigger among professionals experimenting or willing to experiment with new media. Following socio-constructivist theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and interactionist theories within SLA (Mackey & Polio, 2009) that put interaction at the heart of the learning process, we present the results of a case study in which interaction patterns and cultural and language related episodes (Swain & Lapkin, 1995) conducive to intercultural language learning are analysed in three research conditions: (1) foreign language learners (FLLs) interacting with native speakers through video communication; (2) FLLs interacting with native speakers through Second Life; and (3) FLLs interacting with each other in the classroom setting. The study analyses the impact that (1) bringing native speakers into the foreign language course through new media and (2) the use of different voiced synchronous tools (video communication v. Second Life) have on interaction patterns conducive to rich learning contexts.

Keywords: SCMC, second life, videocommunication, intercultural communication, negotiation of meaning.

1. Introduction

For some years now and within the NIFLAR project[**] we have been designing and evaluating innovative e-learning tasks for synchronous interaction for their potential to create authentic contexts that make possible interactions with native speakers and

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that may support the development of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997) in foreign language learning contexts.

The interaction tasks are carried out with native speakers (student teachers) in two different environments: *Second Life*, a well known 3D virtual world environment, and a video-web communication platform, Adobe-Connect.

This paper examines evidence from a case study that analyses the impact that (1) bringing native speakers into the foreign language course through new media and (2) the use of different voiced synchronous tools (video communication vs Second Life) have on interaction patterns conducive to rich learning contexts.

2. Method

In order to address these objectives we analyzed interaction sequences of three small groups during online task performance, focusing on negotiation sequences (Swain & Lapkin, 1995) during which meaning related episodes are overtly discussed and some information gap or non-understanding is dispelled during task completion.

We had two experimental triads composed each of two L1 Dutch students of Spanish from Utrecht University and one L1 Spanish student teacher from the University of Valencia, Spain. In the control group a group of four students carried out the same tasks face-to-face in the classroom with no presence of a native speaker.

The three groups carried out the same five tasks (see Table 1) at intervals of once a week but adapted to the specific context: (1) *Second Life* (SL), (2) the video communication (VC) platform Adobe-Connect and (3) the classroom setting.

The Spanish language course at B1 level for both VC and SL groups was blended learning, as each group met twice a week face to face with their teacher (the same one for all three groups) whereas the third meeting was computer-mediated with the native speaker.

Table 1.   Description of tasks developed

Tasks	Description
Session 1: *Cool people*	Students: (1) visit an apartment they are meant to share (2) talk about themselves and exchange cultural information triggered by pictures & (3) choose an outing option (go to the cinema, to a museum or to walk in the city).
Session 2: *People & adventure*	Participants plan a holiday and reflect on past holiday experiences
Session 3: *Movie celebrity people*	Participants have to play different roles given the indications of a brief script
Session 4: *People with heart*	Participants impersonate different characters and experience the reactions caused on others
Session 5: *People & cultures*	Students participate in a cultural television-game style contest between a Dutch and a Spanish team.

3. Results

3.1. Negotiation of meaning

Most of the qualitative analysis of interactions across conditions come particularly from the second task, *People & adventure*. In the analysis of the recordings observed, we found instances of negotiation in all groups (see Table 2), although there was a substantial difference between the number of negotiations encountered when the task was performed by the experimental groups (VC: 23; SL: 27) as compared to the control group (C: 2).

Table 2.   Number of negotiations per group – task 2

Group	Task duration	Negotiations
Second Life (SL)	01:15:01	27
video communication (VC)	01:20:04	23
control (C)	00:41:00	2

Analysis of the recordings reveals that lexical difficulties appear to be the principal triggers conducing to side-sequences of negotiations (see Table 3).

Table 3.   Summary of negotiations with classification of triggers SL – Second Life group; VC – Video Communication group; C – Control group.

	SL	VC	C
Negotiations	27	23	2
Trigger (word)	27	23	2
• word recognition	16	17	
• misuse/misunderstanding	10	2	2
• pronunciation	1	1	

3.2. Negotiation of cultural misunderstanding

Further observation of the recordings of other tasks confirmed that negotiations occurred in all of them but that they were not always triggered at a word level. Task 5 (*People & cultures*) was seeded with overt triggers at a sociocultural level. Here there was again a higher level of negotiation in the VC and SL experimental groups than that registered in the control group (see Table 4).

Table 4.   Number of negotiations per group – task 5

Group	Task duration	Negotiations
Second Life (SL)	01:46:08	26
video communication (VC)	01:05:33	24
control (C)	00:41:00	12

The task generated a high level of curiosity towards many aspects of the other culture and participants engaged in rich exchanges as can be observed in Table 5. This example

had a photograph of a rucksack hanging from a flag as trigger, a well-known custom in The Netherlands meaning that the child living there has passed the state exams at secondary educational level. The Spanish team had to guess its meaning during the quiz. In the negotiation sequence the Dutch team provides the explanation.

Table 5.   Example – VC task 5*

NNS1: cuando has terminado el instituto/ ¿sí? hay una fiesta y ponemos nuestras mochilas fuera/ con la bandera de Holanda y / y es como una fiesta que todo el mundo sabe que has hmm terminado el instituto bien NS: ¡Ah! ¿y entonces se quedan ahí las mochilas? NNS1 : sí/ fuera/ por dos semanas o así (risas) NS: ¡Ah! NNS1: porque es la idea que nunca tenemos que usar la mochila (risas) NS: ¡Ah! ¡qué originales!	NNS1: when you have finished your secondary educationcuando / yes? there is a party and we put our rucksacks outside/ with the Dutch flag and / and it is like a party that everybody knows that you have hmm finished your secondary education well NS: Ah! and then the rucksacks stay there? NNS1: yes/ outside/ for two weeks or so (laughter) NS: Ah! NNS1: because the idea is that we don't have to use the rucksack anymore (laughter) NS: Ah! how original!

This was possible not only due to the setting of the task, but also to the fact that the language learners' interlocutor was a native speaker (Jauregi, Canto, de Graaff, Koenraad, & Moonen, 2011).

In the control group the dynamics were different: there was no contrasting of opinions between the members of the team to reach an agreement over the correct answer and even when their answers were wrong not much curiosity was detected to find out more about the topic.

3.3.   Differences according to the specific environment

As to the environments, *Second Life*, appeared to elicit a high degree of rich participation triggered by elements of the world. For example when the avatars were teleported to the pizzeria to discuss the holiday options they chatted about the movie posters hanging on the walls and whether they had seen or not the movies, and they even attempted to pay for the food; being able to drive a boat once they had reached their holiday destination prompted conversations about seatbelts and drivers' licences (*"ponte el cinturón que vamos muy rápido - ¿tú tienes el carné de conducir?/ wear your seatbelt we're going very fast – do you have a driver's licence?"*); and visiting the hotel where they were meant to be staying during the holidays made possible the transaction of booking the room. The interactions from the VC group and control group were characterized by a more descriptive language limited by the photographs being used. In *Second Life* actions triggered conversations and there was more topic switching enabled by world elements.

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*   NS: Native Speaker; NNS: Non-Native Speaker

4. Conclusions

The results of our qualitative analysis show that the opportunities offered for SCMC via VC and SL are much richer than those offered by the traditional educational setting, control group, where students have no opportunities to engage in group interactions with native peers.

The results indicate that this type of environment not only provides access to a wide range of interlocutors (including native speakers) but that it may also enhance cross-cultural understanding and knowledge of the target language; that the electronic medium seems to afford more opportunities for active participation, particularly SL, and that it also provides a forum where participants can engage in negotiation of meaning at their own pace.

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