Assessment of interculturality in online interactions: methodological considerations

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Abstract. In this paper, methodological issues in tracing the evidence of Intercultural Competences (IC) in online intercultural exchanges or telecollaboration are examined. The possibilities and limitations of methods for analyzing IC occurrences are explored. By considering the complementarity of methods, the study contributes to advance the methodological reflections on identifying interculturality and intercultural learning processes in technology-mediated interactions.

Keywords: intercultural competence, online intercultural exchanges, telecollaboration, methodology.

1. Introduction

Despite the increased interest in IC in telecollaborative learning, few studies actually tackle the assessment of interculturality in interaction (O'Dowd, 2019). The assessment of IC is still problematic. First, IC as a concept is not transparent and universally understood. Second, there are two basic ways for examining intercultural learning in online settings: either exploring evidence of IC in post-online interaction reporting (i.e. diaries, portfolios, essays) or observing, examining, and tracking IC *in vivo* (i.e. chats or blog entries, Dervin, 2007).

This paper explores the possibilities and limitations of various methods for analyzing IC occurrences and intercultural learning in telecollaboration. Examples of written online exolingual interactions among Danish and French students are used. The aim is to go beyond the existing research methodology for interculturality in online intercultural exchanges. The study offers new insights to the field of IC

through telecollaboration by going beyond Byram's (2000) omnipresent categories and guidelines for assessment of IC.

2.   Analysis of intercultural discourse

We adapted Byram's (2000) and Dervin's (2007) guidelines for assessment of the IC to our context of online intercultural encounters and we developed them further by incorporating the criticisms addressed to Byram's work and postmodern thoughts (Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2010; Kramsch, 1993). The guidelines are the following (please refer to Kanareva-Dimitrovska, 2018, pp. 168-199, for additional information):

- Savoir-faire I. Interest in other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others.

- Savoir-faire II. Knowledge about one's own and others' countries, states, and people.

- Savoir-faire III. Paying attention to discourses in the intercultural communication process.

- Savoir-réagir/agir I. Ability to take/shift perspective.

- Savoir-réagir/agir II. Ability to cope with living in another culture and with the interactions and reactions of people from other cultural communities in online context.

3.   Methods and discussion

The methodological framework is based on discourse analysis combined with qualitative content analysis. The triangulation of data (pre- and post-questionnaires, written entries from the blog, discussion groups, Facebook, Skype chats transcripts, interviews, and students' reflection essays) was the central approach. Triangulation is a process that involves comparing multiple perspectives of the same phenomenon to increase the validity of the qualitative approach (Creswell, 2009). The triangulation method seems to be quite appropriate to examine mediated learning situations. The weakness/bias of any of the methods or data sources can be compensated for by the strengths of another.

The methodology to trace IC in telecollaboration described in this study is partially based on previous studies combined with our experience. To explore the potential and the limitations of methods for analyzing IC occurrences, we propose to trace the evidence of students' IC using three methods.

3.1.   Showing evidence of IC

In the first stage of analysis, we tried to find traces of IC categories in all students' data. We provide below one example for illustration coded as *Savoir-faire I: (b) I know how to introduce my own culture to others*:

> "det er fordi at i Danmark der siger folk ikke deres mening, fordi de ikke vil fornærme nogen. Man taler ikke om politik, religion og samfundet med nogen man ikke kender rigtig godt. Selv min kæreste fortæller mig ikke hvilken politiker han stemmer på til valg. Det er meget privat. [That's because in Denmark people do not say their opinion because they don't want to offend anyone. You do not talk about politics, religion, and the society with someone you do not know really well. Even my boyfriend does not tell me which politician he is voting for at the election. It is very private]" (Danish student).

The potential of this approach to analyze online interactions is to identify the evidence of some or all components of IC. The main limitation is double coding, i.e. the difficulty of separation of IC components. All IC facets are strongly intertwined and sometimes coding in categories is artificial. The coding validity can be also problematic as very often only one researcher coded the data without having the possibility of consulting another opinion during the coding process. When one has to find traces of IC components, he/she does not necessarily have access to the context and consequently cannot be sure if some competences were developed before or are a result of that specific online interaction. One can also question the 'acquired' character of IC because, in our opinion, IC are not stable, and they are always closely linked to the situation. The last limitation is that this procedure does not provide the possibility of understanding how chronologically participants developed their IC or how categories are distributed per participants. Therefore, we combined this analysis procedure with the next described level of analysis.

3.2.   Recording frequency of IC evidence

The main potential of this procedure is to give a clear visualization of all IC categories. It helps to detect the most or least present categories and/or to compare

manifestations of IC traced in different groups of participants. Using both levels of data analysis was helpful to obtain a better insight into the relation between interculturality and the pedagogical scenario, i.e. given tasks and chosen computer-mediated communication tools (Kanareva-Dimitrovska, 2018).

There are several limitations with this analysis procedure: double coding, different interpretation of IC categories when several persons code the same data, and learning processes are not taken into account. To bridge these gaps, we have carried out a third level of analysis.

3.3. Microanalysis: tracking intercultural learning moments in interaction

Here we reconstructed interaction in chat-discussions as a rich source in terms of information exchange and meaningful negotiation. The microanalysis helped to identify evidence of intercultural learning processes. We suggest that the ability to take/shift perspective might be considered as a key performance able to reveal IC in interaction.

The potential of this procedure is that the analysis is based on processes and the researcher delivers a pure qualitative analysis to identify moments of intercultural learning. All entries are in a context. This procedure permits an analysis of students' communication strategies (e.g. conflict avoiding strategies) or a reconstruction of students' learning strategies. The most important limitation is the fact that the analysis and description are time-consuming. It is impossible to analyze all data and the researcher needs to select and focus the analysis on only a few sequences. The question that arises then is to what extent this analysis is only an exemplification or global understanding of the phenomena. Therefore, we need to be prudent without generalizing findings. The last limitation is whether sequences important in the researcher's eyes are the same that students considered important for intercultural learning.

In summary, these methods could be applied separately, but the potential of our approach lies in the complementarity of the various analytical methods.

4. Conclusions

This paper attempted to move beyond the methodological challenges in tracing evidence of IC and intercultural learning in online interactions by combining three

analysis procedures. The significance of the study probably lies in the potential of analyzing interculturality as a complex construct by complementing methods, data, and theories. Future studies might consider the applicability and efficiency of our methodological approach. The results call for more extensive work on the issue of 'renewed' interculturality in (online) language education.

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Edited by Fanny Meunier, Julie Van de Vyver, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouësny