

## **In Search of a Truly Global Network: The Opportunities and Challenges of On-line Intercultural Communication**

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### **Abstract**

There can be little doubt that the rise of the Internet in the past decade had led to a dramatic increase in intercultural contact and communication. However, it has been suggested that the reduced social dimension of the medium will lead to more balanced and effective interaction between members of different cultures and that its multicultural character will naturally produce a more tolerant, intercultural environment. This paper questions these views by looking at various aspects of cultural difference and examining how these may pose problems for on-line intercultural communication. Consequences for foreign language education are considered.

### **Introduction: How intercultural is the Internet?**

The Internet can, at times, appear to be a medium that facilitates communication between cultures and which makes the world a smaller, perhaps even more heterogeneous place to live in. The constant use of terms such as "World Wide Web", "Global Computer Networks" and "Global Village" can give the initiated an impression of people from all over the world working and communicating together in a harmonious environment where cultural background, skin colour, religion, and gender mean very little. This paper sets out to highlight the stark difference between on-line cross-cultural contact and successful on-line intercultural communication. The former may be an inevitable consequence of the Internet, but the latter is a goal which requires "...the acquisition of abilities to understand different modes of thinking and living ...and to reconcile or mediate between different modes present in any specific interaction (Byram & Flemming, 1998:12)."

There is, of course, truth in the view that the Internet is (statistically, at least) a global, multicultural network. Research shows that although the USA still has the biggest number of Internet users, this is now less than half of the world's total online population (280 million) (Computer Industry Almanac, 2000). In language terms, other sources show that the percentage of English speakers on-line is now slightly less than that of non-English speakers (48% v. 52%) (Global Reach, 2000) and that, even though in 1996, 82% of the Internet's web pages were in English, this is likely to fall to 40% over the next decade (Warschauer, in press).

Although there can be no disputing the multicultural profile of the Internet's population, this does not necessarily imply that this environment will lead to successful intercultural communication (Hart, 1998) and the development of multiculturalism - as has been suggested by others (Berlingeri et al., 1996 cited in Kim, 1998). It is my contention that on-line cross-cultural interaction brings with it the same challenges as its

face-to-face counterpart and, as Balle (1991) points out, the promising role of the Internet in the construction of a truly global village is far from guaranteed:

- Telecommunications, easier and more varied than ever, have given birth to the utopia of universal acquaintance and communication of each with all. And the dream of a universal and liberating communication nurtures, in the same proportion, the obsession with useless knowledge and abortive exchanges with our fellows (Cited in Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen, 1998:81).

There is a definite need to examine the challenges of intercultural communication on the Internet and other interactive multimedia networks and to identify the consequent challenges for foreign language education. First of all, however, attributes of the networked environment which could contribute to intercultural communication will be discussed.

### **On-line communication as a facilitator for intercultural interaction**

Various arguments have been put forward in the literature describing how characteristics of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and the Internet can facilitate and contribute to more successful intercultural communication. These fall into three categories.

Firstly, CMC is described as having a reduced social dimension (Coverdale-Jones, 1998) where aspects of peoples' identities such as their race, gender, social class, and accent are hidden in the text-based environment of email and synchronous chat programmes. This has been seen to encourage those who may normally feel held-back or intimidated in face-to-face interaction. Warschauer (1997) gives the example of Japanese school children who are usually expected in their culture to take a passive rather than an active role in class and therefore tend not to participate in class discussions. CMC, he claims, offers these students an opportunity to contribute to a discussion without going against this cultural norm. Warschauer goes on to suggest that the absence of non-verbal cues such as frowning and hesitating also contributes to making CMC a less intimidating environment and thereby encourages those individuals or cultures which are less dominant to play a greater role in the interaction.

Simmons (1998) and Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen (1998) also highlight the anonymity of online communication and, as a consequence, its ability to increase the participation levels of those who may be likely to bear the brunt of racism or sexism or some other form of discrimination in face-to-face intercultural contact. Simons (1998: 14) summarises this particular advantage of working in a virtual intercultural environment in the following way:

- Skin colours and other biases based on visual factors will be minimised. Individuals who by ethnicity or personality are less outspoken in face-to-face situations may contribute more abundantly to newsgroups and forums that provide off-line time to prepare a response, or where they enjoy anonymity or less exposure.

However, one must question the value of intercultural interaction which comes about through the disguising or hiding of aspects of one's identity and the consequent avoidance of bias and prejudice, rather than through a constructive dialogue which deals with these problems directly and honestly. Tella & Mononen-Aaltonens' (1998) definition of dialogue, based on the work of Issacs (1996); Kramsch (1993a), and Vygotsky (1978), refers to the interaction between individuals or cultures which produces a genuine change or shift in their way of viewing the world.

They identify mutual respect as a vital element of dialogic interaction, yet they curiously go on to say the following:

- Different kinds of things connected to race, gender, religion, etc, can be powerful impediments to dialogism as well. An example of CMHC [Computer Mediated Human Communication] that does away with various artifacts is email, which lets people communicate across age, gender, geographical barriers, etc. (1998:91).

Is the implication here that email sometimes facilitates dialogue because the participants may be unaware of aspects of each other's identity? If so, then I would suggest that mutual respect never really becomes an issue and true intercultural dialogue is never really achieved. The real challenge of intercultural interaction, on-line or face-to-face, is to come to terms with the differences found in the other culture which one may initially wish to reject. If these differences remain hidden in the on-line environment (with the help of text-based communication and invented personas) then true dialogue, authentic intercultural communication, and the consequent changes in the interlocutors' perspective are never likely to come about.

A second, more convincing reason given for the Internet facilitating intercultural communication is its capability to present and share information through multimedia and an interconnected system of hyperlinks. Warschauer, in his ethnographic study of web exploitation in Hawaiian language classes, refers to many native Hawaiian students who "...found Internet-based communication and learning consistent with Hawaiian ways of interacting and learning (in press: 7)." The author explains that in traditional Hawaiian modes of learning great importance is contributed to having a social network where information is shared for the common good rather than being kept by the individual. He also reports that Hawaiians tend to learn and pass on knowledge through various media, such as chanting, hula, and hands-on activities, rather than simply through texts. One can therefore easily imagine how a multimedia-based network of shared information such as the Internet would lend itself to Hawaiian learning styles.

The third argument put forward in the literature is that the Internet's international profile and the consequent cross-cultural contact which it brings about will, in some way, lead eventually towards an idyllic multicultural community where smaller minority cultures can maintain their identity and where nationalities cohabit in an environment of respect and understanding. Kim (1998:9) refers to the Internet as "...a tool for the preservation and celebration of culture" and goes on to claim, "Rather than advancing the cause of American cultural imperialism, the Internet may be better suited to sustaining multiculturalism (1998:9)."

Such beliefs can also be found in second language learning literature. Lixl-Purcell (1995a), writing on the possibilities for integrating the Internet and email into the language classroom, suggests:

- As we cast our communicative nets wider, searching for contacts to foreign cultures across the globe, the spectrum of voices from otherwise obscure individuals helps us learn tolerance for differences as well as similarities (1995a:1).

However, the assumption that intercultural contact (whether virtual or face-to-face) will lead to productive intercultural communication and tolerance cannot be taken for granted. The influential social-psychologist Gordon Allport (1979) looked at the value of contact for reducing prejudices and warned that contact in itself was no guarantee of improved attitudes to other groups. The outcome of contact, he claimed, depended on the type of encounter and the type of people involved. He went on to list 30 variables that he saw as influential, including frequency and duration of contact, the status of the interlocutors, and the competitive or co-operative nature of their roles.

Allport also looked at a technique used in progressive schools in the USA called “social travelling” which involved bringing groups that held negative stereotypes of each other into contact together. The example he mentions involved middle-class students spending time with Afro-American families in Harlem. He concluded that the key to the success of such educational programmes was that both groups needed to be brought together to pursue a common objective:

- The nub of the matter seems to be that contact must reach below the surface in order to be effective in altering prejudice. Only the type of contact that leads people to do things together is likely to result in changed attitudes (*my italics*) (1979:276).

This approach, later to become known as “contact theory”, has been adapted and added to by other writers. Apitzch & Dittmar (1987) reported on a project in Berlin which brought together German and Turkish youths to discuss stereotypes which both groups held about each other. More recently, Stephan, Diaz-Loving, and Duran (2000) researched the effects of American-Mexican contact on the two groups' attitudes towards each other. They found that to produce positive attitudes, the groups involved in contact together needed to be of equal status, they should be participating voluntarily, and the contact should be composed of positive, co-operative and individualised activities. Contact, therefore, may contribute to reducing prejudice, improving attitudes, and allowing the correction of stereotypes about the target culture. However, the research reminds us that success should not be considered inevitable and that the type of contact which takes place is very important. For this reason, researchers in second language learning methodology have called for pedagogically sound approaches to intercultural email exchanges which incorporate the activities fully into the curriculum as opposed to treating them as superficial pen-pal exercises (Cummins & Sayers, 1995; Kern, 1996; Roberts, 1994).

## **CMC and impediments for intercultural interaction**

Although her work focuses primarily on gender differences in online communication, Coverdale-Jones (1998) asserts that “...communicative style on-line is affected by cultural factors just as is any face-to-face, telephone or written fields of communication (1998:46).”

Although this is no doubt true, it would appear that not only communicative style but also attitudes to the Internet environment are subject to cultural influence. Levels of satisfaction with email and other online tools as a medium for communication may depend, for example, on whether one comes from an individualistic or collective nature. Scollon & Scollon (1995) differentiate between the two types of cultures, describing the communicative style in individualistic society in the following way:

- ...the ways of speaking to others are much more similar from situation to situation since in each case the relationships are being negotiated and developed right within the situation of the discourse.

Meanwhile, collectivist societies are said to have "...special forms of discourse which carefully preserve the boundaries between those who are inside members of the group and all others who are not members of the group (1995:134)."

For this reason, the informal and friendly style which characterises much of the interaction on the Internet - in newsgroups, in mailing lists and personal email correspondence - may prove disturbing or insulting for unprepared members of a collectivist culture. Simmons (1998) points out that individualistic cultures, such as the USA and Northern European countries, may also operate happily with short, to the point email messages which may be lacking greetings, background etc. Collective cultures, on the other hand, may feel they need to know about the context of the message, the status of the sender, etc. before actually responding.

Chen (1999) looks at the key differences between high and low context cultures and how this may affect attitudes to on-line interaction. He describes low context cultures as valuing a direct verbal style, fluency, and confident self-expression. High context cultures (such as Japan and China) tend toward a more indirect verbal style, use of ambiguous language, and silence in interaction as well as talking around the point. He suggests that high context cultures will, therefore, be less likely to be satisfied with relationship building processes and maintenance via CMC. Probably, they will also find it unsuitable for expressing their feelings. Low context cultures, on the other hand, are likely to find CMC useful for its short, direct style.

A further example of cultural difference that may lead to difficulties in on-line intercultural communication is the monochronic - polychronic cultural division. This differentiates between different cultures such as the USA and northern Europe (the so-called monochronic cultures) which tend to be highly task-oriented and which insist on scheduling activities one at a time, and polychronic cultures (such as countries from the Mediterranean and the Middle East) which prefer to combine activities and consider deadlines merely as possible objectives rather than as anything definite (Taylor, 2000). Although these are only general tendencies, contact between cultures with such different attitudes to timekeeping and organisation may quickly break down if a member of a polychronic culture does not answer emails quickly enough or does not show sufficient interest in agreeing on a suitable time for a synchronous meeting via the Internet or videoconferencing. Similarly, someone from a monochronic culture is liable to give an impression of being over-demanding or curt to their partner as they push to get things organised as quickly as possible.

Differences over the continuums of collective - individualistic, low context - high context and monochronic - polychronic cultures are realities in all forms of intercultural

communication and CMC has been shown here to be no exception. While computer networks may reduce social context clues (Sproul & Kiesler, 1991 cited in Warschauer, 1997) cultural difference continues to show itself in the attitudes and behaviour of individuals on the Internet. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this but problems and misunderstandings arise when those involved in on-line interaction make judgements about the behaviour of others using their own cultural norms and values.

Wierzbicka (1991) recognised this tendency in intercultural communication in general and highlighted the need for a new cross-cultural pragmatic approach which would take into account the various communicative styles of different cultures and the differing values and priorities that these styles were based on. Drawing on the example of how white Australians reacted negatively to what they saw as the loud, dogmatic behaviour of immigrants, Wierzbicka maintained that better intercultural understanding could be developed if such communicative behaviour was explained as a difference between two cultures in their hierarchy of values:

- If strange and possibly offensive behaviour of this kind can be explained and made sense of in terms of independently understandable cultural values, serious social and interpersonal problems can be resolved, and serious conflicts prevented or alleviated (1991:69).

What appears to be necessary for on-line communicators working in the multicultural environment of the Internet is a combination of certain knowledge, skills and attitudes. Knowledge and understanding of alternative cultural values must be accompanied by an ability to identify how and when these values are showing themselves in on-line intercultural interaction. This, in turn, must be supplemented by a readiness to engage in interaction in a sensitive manner and to tolerate behaviour and opinions which may be different to one's own. These needs seem to reflect much of what is meant by terms such as "intercultural communicative competence" (Byram, 1997), "cross-cultural capability" (Killick, 1998), and "dialogism" (Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen, 1998).

## **Conclusion: Challenges for Foreign Language Education**

This paper set out to examine the gap between on-line intercultural contact and successful on-line intercultural communication. It appears clear that one most definitely does not imply the other. The consequences of this for foreign language teaching in our global village I see as two-fold.

Firstly, both teachers and students need to be trained on how to use communication technologies effectively and appropriately. To achieve this, Shetzer & Warschauer's electronic literary approach (1999) puts forward a useful framework that integrates electronic literacy into the language learning classroom. This framework is divided into three key areas: communication, construction, and research. Communication refers to the skills of contacting individuals and groups on the net and participating in collaborative projects on-line. Construction covers the creation, maintenance, and marketing of web-sites, and finally, the research looks at the learner's ability to find information on the web and to consequently evaluate its value and determine the authority of its author.

Unfortunately, the framework does not make explicit reference to intercultural aspects of the three areas even though many of the skills mentioned, including participating in collaborative projects, employing netiquette and the marketing of web

sites all require intercultural knowledge and skills. (See Sheridan & Simons (2000) for an interesting account on the cultural pitfalls of developing web sites.)

Therefore, I would see the second challenge for teachers is to help develop their students' ability to interact with sensitivity, insight, and tolerance with people from other cultures - whether that be in an on-line, face-to-face or written environment. Hollet (1997) sums this up nicely:

- ...learners need to be conservative in what they send, so their messages can be easily understood across cultural boundaries. But at the same time they must be liberal in what they receive, being both able and willing to understand the discourse of other cultures (1997:19).

There are many possible activities that can be used in a networked classroom to highlight and develop intercultural communicative skills. Teachers could ask their students to analyse extracts from chat-pages where communication has broken down due to a cultural faux-pas or misunderstanding and various websites could be looked at and analysed for their level of cultural sensitivity. Collaborative projects which bring students together from different cultures are also a powerful tool for sensitising students to the minefield of cross-cultural communication. However, such exchanges need to involve students doing more than simply exchanging facts and describing superficial differences between cultures. Instead, learners need to be encouraged to engage in dialogue which brings about self-reflection and critical enquiry.

These are no doubt major challenges for foreign language educators, but they are challenges that must be confronted if learners are going to use their foreign language skills on the Internet effectively and contribute to what should be a truly global network.

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