

E .mail Writing as a cross-cultural learning experience

Abstract:

This study looks into the cultural dimension involved in the e-mail correspondence between EFL students in Algeria and English students in Britain. E .mail entries were analysed to yield insights into the cross- cultural communication process. The data analysis focussed on the types of cultural information transmitted and effects of cultural assumptions and values on communication effectiveness. The findings revealed fundamental characteristics of both.

Algerian and British cultures by the two groups of participants. It was also found that curiosity toward the other culture was a motivating factor for on-going correspondence but cultural presumptions were sometimes a hindrance for communication. Moreover, positive interpretations of cultural differences and empathy were key factors contributing to the removal of communication obstacles. Cross-cultural e. mail correspondence sensitized the participants to cultural differences and served as a learning experience for cross-cultural understanding.

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ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التبادل الثقافي والعلمي بين الطلبة الجزائريين للغة الإنجليزية والطلبة الإنجليز في بريطانيا على موقع البريد الإلكتروني لإظهار الاتصال والتواصل الحاصل في الميدان. النتائج أظهرت مميزات أساسية مشتركة للثقافة الجزائرية والبريطانية خلال تجمع المشاركين للتطلع إلى الأفضل وإزالة الغموض الحاصل خلال الاتصال والتواصل. والتبادل على موقع البريد الإلكتروني يساعد على كسب الخبرة في ميدان التعليم والتعلم وتبادل الآراء البناءة قصد تحقيق الأفضل.

skills that may be objectified

It is generally believed that the learning of foreign languages can serve the purpose of ‘cultivating international understanding, responsibility and effective participation in a global age Kramsch (6) . A foreign language course which disregards culture can produce students who may know how to use the correct linguistic forms of the language to convey meaning but such a course is sterile. The study of culture, therefore, must be an integral part of the foreign language study if students are to derive lasting benefits from their foreign language learning experience.

Robert stuart and Nocon (11) categorize the different theoretical perspectives regarding how culture is acquired in a foreign language classroom as the following: Culture as an automatic outcome of language instruction Culture as knowledge or

1) Culture as a meaning making process.

The first and probably the more traditional view assumes that language study itself can automatically lead to cross-cultural understanding, even without any specific treatments

designed to promote intercultural understanding and instruction, language study and performance per se will automatically open the door to another culture. This assumption however, is not supported by research and bears little pedagogical significance in the teaching and learning of culture in foreign language classrooms.

The second view defines culture as facts to be learned and stored, culture is regarded as a list of facts to be cognitively consumed in the development of a knowledge base.

Again educators of foreign languages find such an approach futile. Learning culture by amassing bits of information is ineffective because it does not adequately prepare students to recognize and understand cultural change over time and may actually encourage stereotypes rather than diminish them.

The third perspective and the most recent one, views culture as a way of perceiving interpreting, feeling, wanting to smile, loving, hating and relating to where one is and who one meets. In other words, this view asserts that culture is not only located in cultural products and forms but in the active lives of those who share those forms.

It is this view that has the most impact on the current endeavor of helping foreign language students acquire cultural proficiency.

Since the 1960's there has been growing attention from foreign language teachers to help their students develop the proficiency that would enable them to communicate effectively and appropriately with target language speakers in various social settings and circumstances.

The study of culture became an important aspect of foreign language teaching that is oriented toward communicative proficiency. Furthermore, the goal of foreign language instruction is framed as communication between cultures and cultural representatives as opposed to the acquisition of knowledge or a scholarly skill, as well as the process of creating shared meaning in interpersonal interaction is primary.

As the views on culture learning and teaching progress from defining culture to everything in human life, foreign educators propose more interactive approaches to facilitate culture acquisition in the classroom.

Learning about the lived culture of actual target language speakers as well as about one's own culture demands tools to assist foreign language learners in negotiating meaning and understanding the communicative and cultural contexts in which target languages are used.

Crawford- Lange and Lange (3) assert that cultural teaching processes should involve student discussions of cultural themes and personal relevance.

Omaggio (10) recommends lectures, native informants, audiotaped interviews, observational dialogues in order to reach culture in a purposeful integrative fashion in the foreign language classroom emphasizing on the importance of in-depth understanding of the target culture.

Robin-stuart and Nocon (11) advocate ethnographic interviewing techniques to help language learners to explore and understand cultural similarities and differences in different contexts. The idea is that learners have to actively participate in producing

negotiated meaning with representatives of the target culture. Moreover, the current direction in foreign language pedagogy reflects an increasing recognition of the importance of culture acquisition.

In accordance with this pedagogical trend, sophisticated multimedia has been brought into the foreign language classroom to provide virtual cross- cultural contact.

Recently, electronic mail (e.mail) has been increasingly used to promote language learning and cultural acquisition through international communication. Many foreign language teachers consider it particularly well suited to fostering cultural awareness among their students, by writing to foreign peers and reading their responses. In this way language learners can glimpse other ways of seeing the world because e.mail provides students with immediate ,direct and personal access to the perceptions of individuals currently living in the target culture.

With the increased accessibility of e.mail, students no longer need to depend exclusively on the second hand experience and cultural comparisons presented by their teachers and textbooks.

In the past decade, in various parts of the world, many cross-cultural e.mail projects have been implemented to take the advantage of what e.mail offers. Some projects for example Soh and Soon (13) linked EFL students in Singapore and ESL students in Quebec using e.mail for exchanging information. Meskill and Rangelova (8) report a long distance collaborative apprenticeship between Bulgarian students and graduate students in the USA. The Bulgarians used e.mail to consult with American students over both linguistic and cultural issues that came up in the reading of contemporary American short stories. Galloway (5) helped Japanese EFL students to become more aware of cultural relativity by key palting with students in Los Angeles. The students gave positive responses.

Among the aforementioned cross-cultural e.mail writings some focused on fostering cultural learning; some used the approach to facilitate not only cultural awareness but also linguistic proficiency and historical understanding. The use of internet, especially e.mail writing has certainly brought together students of different languages and cultures to interact with one another in ways that were not possible before.

Context and purpose of the study :

Although, like foreign language (FL) teachers all over the world, many Algerian teachers recognize the need to include cultural learning in their classes in order to strengthen learners' communicative competence. Furthermore, teaching students about culture remains one of the greatest challenges facing EFL teachers in Algeria.

Students in Algeria are likely to have a superficial familiarity with certain aspects of British culture, their teachers have tried different methods to expand the boundaries of the EFL classroom but nothing in the past has offered the potential of the internet to end the cultural isolation of the EFL students. Moreover, in learning foreign languages and cultures, there seems to be no substitute for personal contact and this is what e.mail offers students.

Method:

The participants were ten EFL students from Tizi-Ouzou university (Algeria) which were paired with the same number of English students at Colchester university (England). The students participated in the experiment voluntarily. Once they took part in the experiment, they are responsible for keeping regular contact with their e.mail partners.

As for the procedure, prior to e.mail communication between students, we familiarized the participants with the functions of computer networks. As most of the participating students did not have prior e-mail experience, training sessions were held. The students were trained to use the e-mail application and were asked to send short messages to each other during the training sessions.

In Britain, similar training sessions were conducted and participants from both countries sent and receive short messages. The topics were left to the students to decide.

The students had to keep the correspondence in their electronic files in order to be analysed later. We should note that special attention was given to communication Difficulties that seemed to have occurred due to cultural assumptions or differences.

Findings:

By focussing on topics of familiarity such as holidays, home towns, school lives , hobbies, the students on both sides transmitted and received considerable cultural information.

To most participants, it was their first intensive contact with someone from a different culture . To take advantage of the opportunity, the students explored a wide range of topics. The most common cultural themes occurring in the correspondence included geographical information, holiday celebrations, school systems, languages ,religions , interpersonal relationships and current events

Effects of cultural assumptions and values on communication effectiveness:

Cultural perspectives sometimes converge and sometimes diverge in unexpected ways. Most of the students in the two countries had similar hobbies due to the fact that they were all university students. Some partners found it very easy to relate to each other because they shared similar life experience and seemed to think in the same wavelenght. Nevertheless, not all communications went smoothly because cultural misunderstanding could sometimes be painful. Cultural differences sometimes hindered effective communication ,at other times they caused the participants to strive for the means to bridge the gaps.

The students from both countries valued the opportunity to establish international friendships. Even when there was confusion or miscommunications,they demonstrated a high degree of consideration and sensitivity by either avoiding a sensitive topic or making a positive interpretation. The cross- cultural communication might not have been always effective, but the students maintained a spirit of cultural courtesy.

Discussion and conclusions :

The cross- cultural e.mail approach enabled the participating students to form their own cultural images of the target culture through on-going interpersonal interaction. An analysis of the e.mail entries revealed the overall cultural images and the process in which these images were formed. The cultural themes that occurred in the exchanges included geographical information, holiday celebrations, school systems, names , history, languages, religions, interpersonal relationships and current events. The students started with general information and then moved on to personal events. Furthermore, cross –cultural e.mail correspondence was a viable approach for learners to explore the various aspects of the target culture.

In recent years, much effort has been made to show the inter-relatedness between language acquisition and cultural understanding. Byram (1), Mc Laughlin (7), Tang (14). One of the major concerns of the foreign language profession today is to find a way to promote better cross-cultural understanding while continuing to develop linguistic skills. Evans and Gonzalez (4). In facing this challenge, it is necessary to teach language and culture in an integrated fashion, and this integration has been achieved by using the cross- cultural e.mail exchange approach. For many of the participating students e.mail exchange has provided them with a less threatening medium than face-to-face meetings would have been. It was an authentic context in which they not only learned about the target culture but also received significant language practice. As the EFL students interacted with representatives of the target language culture, they became aware of the process of culture in very real and personal ways. Being cultural informants EFL students were free from being tied to the traditional “do as the teacher does” or “do as you see and hear native speakers doing”.

It should be pointed out that the major purpose of the exchange is to cultivate a deep appreciation of other countries, their cultures and their people. This implies a fundamental change in how students perceive others and what they believe about other cultures. The Algerian EFL students were sensitized to the cultural factors in the communication process. They have realized that lacking linguistic proficiency is not the sole reason for miscommunication. Cultural acquisition and the awareness of the cultural subtleties when communicating with native speakers of English are just as important as linguistic competence, if not more important. Some preexisting stereotypes of British people and culture were challenged and a more realistic image of the British culture and people emerged. The students were surprised by the similarities between the two countries but struck by the deviations from previously held beliefs.

Conclusion:

This study has looked closely into the process and results of the cross-cultural e.mail correspondence. Although challenges multiplied during the implementation, the effort has proved worthwhile and the results were quite fruitful. The effect might not have been as good as a live-in experience but, to a certain extent, e.mail writing does make personal cultural contact possible and cultural learning contextualized. With proper planning, the EFL teachers can take full advantage of this modern day technology to change the way culture has been instructed in the classroom.

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