The Digital World and the Elements in Digital Communication and FL Learning

Levent Uzun
Uludag University, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

The rapid improvement in the field of technology and particularly the invention of the computer(s) and the Internet has ended up in a new era, namely the Information Age (IA). The innovative artifacts of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have facilitated and accelerated the processing and dissemination of knowledge throughout the world, meanwhile creating a huge network coverage that also took the globalization and intercultural communication (IC) to an upgraded dimension. IC has been a hot issue for a considerable time that has increased its importance during the last three decades (Ware, 2013; Yoshida et al., 2013; Holliday et al., 2010; Ess & Dudweeks, 2005, etc.). The need for more and better IC has been stressed in almost every international platform as a call for global dialogue, respect, and tolerance. The development of the infrastructure, that is, the physical equipments and conditions as well as the opportunities for these equipments and services to be accessed and/or afforded by more and more people has resulted in a sustainable digitalized world which is quite much open to improvement, and offers plenty of advantages, but also requires careful attention and regulations for management. Notwithstanding current gaps in law and potentials for conflict among individuals that might rise in this new world of IA, there are not any universal rules and regulations set and validated for the entire digital world (DW). This is so partially because the DW comprises too broad spectrum of social, political, economic, etc. groups that each has its own cultural elements and management traditions to be regarded. Although the unique societies share the same platform and are a part of the same virtual world, in the physical world they still have their own boarders to protect, laws to obey, culture and traditions to follow, etc. Moreover, the spoken languages are also varied and diverse that poses an obstacle for a smooth communication and conformity. Therefore, unifying the world and validating universal rules and regulations to follow and obey in the DW does not seem as easy as it is creating the DW or involving individuals in it. Nevertheless, if we accept that progress is not impossible but just a matter of time, there is no reason for not being optimistic and hopeful about the future. There is much to research and know about beginning from human psychology, cyber crime issues, and software management to online processes, foreign languages, cultural elements, etc. in order to gain a good insight of the big picture and establish a solid connection among all the factors involved in the matter.

The artifacts of ICT such as smart phones, computers, related software, etc. have been proliferated, and the fact that the Internet has become significantly more widespread in the world, have created opportunities for people to become accustomed to different cultures, languages, and environments where people of various social, cultural, and educational levels meet, share information, and/or become involved in bilateral projects, activities, discussions, etc. However, although this is encouraged and desired by the authorities that rule or govern cities or countries, there is also a risk that conflicts or even deliberate hatred for foreigners might appear and spread through the communities. This possibility is serious and cannot be ignored, and thus should be examined in detail, so that the friendly call for global dialogue will not cultivate undesired results, or results that do not match or meet the purpose of the call. The present study reviews the literature related to online communication, cultural dimensions, and the role of English in IC that takes place in virtual environments (VEs) enhanced by ICTs. The study also delves into the differences in the pragmatic systems and linguistic tendencies of Eastern and Western as well as Northern and Southern cultures within the scope of the 'high-context' (HC) and 'low-context' (LC) framework proposed by Hall (1976). The study also discusses the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5888-2.ch203

pedagogical possibilities that the DW offers in support of foreign language (FL) -particularly English- learning and teaching, in the light of innovative educational philosophies and approaches to FL education.

BACKGROUND

The Digital World and Intercultural Communication

The DW is a huge virtual environment that represents elements as rich as the physical world itself. Nonetheless, whenever talking about the VEs, there is need to stress the importance of the Internet as the very pushing force that enlarges opportunities and functions that VEs provide. It might be quite assertive but correct postulation that without the Internet the digital environments would be like people without arms and legs, or tongues and ears. Today, the Internet is the most powerful and useful tool of ICTs that enables fast and easy IC communication. Uzun et al. (2012) proposed as follows:

… it would be helpful to realize that we have a fully functional 'vehicle' the body of which is the PCs or smart phones (for the time being), the fuel is the Internet, the steering wheel is the software, and seats are the websites or weblogs.

Therefore, without fuel it would be hard to travel and see different places and people, and increase and facilitate IC. Today, Internet mediated communication and/or learning (IMC/L) is very popular tendency, especially among the youth. Moreover, the quick and rapid developments in ICTs have already raised the necessity to replace the popular term CAL (computer assisted learning) with IAL (Internet assisted learning) because computers, although still used widely, are no more the most favorite equipments not only for IC but also for other operations that could be done in the DW. The attack of mobile technologies has triggered not only different forms of IC but also quite different habits and styles to use the artifacts of technology. Nowadays, we can do almost everything with smart phones that we could do with computers. What is more, we have begun to prefer mobile phones to computers. It is almost impossible to observe any person (talking for age over 16, in developed countries) who would not possess a mobile phone, whereas related to possessing a PC the opposite might be quite possible. Having noticed this reality, most companies (mostly in the business sector) have adapted to the changes in the DW by updating and/or upgrading their websites and software to meet and take advantage of the emerging tendencies of the era. However, it would be hard to suggest the same for the education sector. This might be the main reason of the fact that IC is mostly used and utilized for trade and less for bilateral educational collaborations. It seems obvious that the educators have had difficulties in catching up with the emergencies and developments in the ICTs, and thus, are not as effective as they should be in integrating digital environments in their courses (Becker, 2007; Uzun et al., 2013), in providing students with examples, anecdotes, experiences, etc. related to IC. Therefore, there is a significant difference between the vision, habits, interests, and strategies of the students and teachers of our era. Uzun et al. (2013) contended that in order to be able to assist and guide students in the IA, teachers should be involved in the same VEs with their students.

IC should be understood as global communication which is much complicated compared to local communication or communication in the native language with people of the same culture. Therefore, the newcomers of the current era will certainly need information not only about the physical conditions that technology provides but also about the cultural elements they might be confronted with while being involved in the digital platforms and IC.

The Digital Platforms and Differences between Societies and Cultures

The digital platforms are like arenas where individuals need to be ready before stepping in. Otherwise, it might be quite an unpleasant experience or a complete disappointment that might prevent individuals from further engagement in the VEs, or withdraw them from the desire of becoming a member of the DW and contributor to IC. Therefore, users need to be equipped with both knowledge of the technology they are attempting to use, and knowledge of the pragmatic and cultural aspects of the communities they will interact with.