

Chapter 4

Assessing Willingness to Communicate for Academically, Culturally, and Linguistically Different Language Learners: Can English Become a Virtual Lingua Franca via Electronic Text-Based Chat?

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ABSTRACT

Synchronous electronic communication has provided opportunities for language learners in different locales to have meaningful dialogue with one another and highlighted the importance of English even in the context of EFL settings. In this chapter, the authors designed an intercultural electronic chat task to see if students from different cultural backgrounds, with different English language abilities, with different L1s, and who have different academic interests would be willing to communicate using English. Sixteen Taiwanese university students, who were marine science majors (lower proficiency group), chatted electronically in small groups with 27 Japanese university students, who had been studying English for two years (higher proficiency group). Student commentary to a broad-based questionnaire revealed that all participants were willing to communicate in English and did so. Even the lower proficiency group found the task meaningful, pointing out that chat gave them the opportunity to participate fully in the discussion, learn from their peers, and gain confidence, all of which motivated them.

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INTRODUCTION

The popularity and advancement of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology has provided unprecedented opportunities to enhance interactions between learners in ways that can free them from the boundaries of classroom walls (Blake, 2016). CMC tools, both synchronous such as text/voice-based chat, and asynchronous such as video postings, have bridged the time and space gaps to open up new possibilities for EFL learners to engage in real communication. With these new tools, EFL learners can be linked to global communities and are able to express themselves freely, while exchanging their viewpoints quickly and easily. This can help students to view the world differently and opens the door to the world outside of the four-walled classroom. In an increasingly globalized society, practitioners and researchers need to turn to the affordances of new technologies to develop EFL learners' linguistic competencies and intercultural knowledge. Such affordances are especially precious in EFL contexts like Taiwan and Japan where students have relatively few chances to use the language outside of regular classrooms (Freiermuth & Huang, 2012; 2015; Huang, 2015; Hung, 2011; Sun, 2009; Wu & Marek, 2016). In our case, by employing electronic chat, we have opened a window of opportunity for intercultural language learning and affiliation between two very different groups of learners.

BACKGROUND

Collaborative Tasks in CMC

The success of a telecollaboration project, such as the one at hand, depends on the wise design of tasks. To make intercultural tasks attractive to students, teachers need to design them in a way that will foster student engagement using real communication. According to Skehan (1996, p. 20),

...tasks are activities which have meaning as their primary focus. Success in tasks is evaluated in terms of achievement of an outcome, and tasks generally bear some resemblance to real-life language use.

While engaged in such tasks, learners can receive comprehensible input and modified output, which are central to second language acquisition. The basic rationale for task-based language teaching is based on SLA research. As examples, (1) tasks should provide both input and output processing, (2) task activity and achievement can be motivational as tasks should engage learners in meaningful communication, (3) learning difficulties during task activities can be negotiated and fine-tuned for particular pedagogical purposes, and (4) learners can acquire grammar as a by-product of fulfilling tasks, as tasks can drive second language acquisition (Brown, 2001, p. 229).

In addition, O'Dowd and Ware (2009) reviewed 40 studies on intercultural exchanges and concluded that 12 general types of tasks utilized in the classroom are primarily composed of three categories: information exchange, comparison/analysis, and collaboration/product creation. Common tasks include: introductions, comparisons, analyzing parallel texts, questionnaires, critical reflection, and discussions (online and in-class).

These studies also contribute to the understanding of intercultural learning from CMC and cultural interaction perspectives as well. For example, using online programs has the positive potential of developing intercultural awareness; online programs facilitate negotiation of meaning and focus on inter-

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