

LITERALIA: TOWARDS DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL MATURITY ONLINE

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The European Union funded LITERALIA project connected adult language learners from four countries with the help of an online workspace and supported visits. The project was based on Tandem principles, whereby learners of different languages support one another in learning one another's language and culture, in turn taking on the roles of learners and expert informants. This article analyses project participants' intercultural learning and shows their development of intercultural maturity online. Qualitative data collected through observation, feedback and interviews are analysed and used to present a description of adults' experiences in intercultural learning.

The study focuses on adult learning, drawing in particular on Mezirow's concept of "perspective transformation" (Mezirow, 1981), a concept applied to intercultural experiences by Taylor (1994). Three different models of intercultural learning—all of them multidimensional and multifaceted—have influenced our research: (a) intercultural competency (Taylor, 1994); (b) intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997); and (c) intercultural maturity (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). However, few studies have been conducted in this area that integrate online interaction in non-formal learning settings as our study attempts.

INTRODUCTION

This article grew out of our interest in researching adult intercultural learning in an online environment. We see the qualitative research practices we engaged in as an interpretive *bricolage* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 5), resulting in a "pieced-together set of representations" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 5) of the developing intercultural maturity of adults learning in a multicultural online space.

LITERALIA, Learning in Tandem to Encourage Reciprocal Autonomous Learning in Adults, was a project funded by the European Union from 2006 to 2008. Following successful e-mail Tandem exchanges between learners of English and learners of German at two institutions (Lewis & Stickler, 2007; Stickler, 2004; Stickler & Lewis, 2008), the project was extended to involve five adult education organizations.¹ The main aim of the project was to facilitate authentic communication between mature learners with partners of similar ages, backgrounds, experiences, and skills in four target languages: English, German, Italian, and Polish. The project involved institutions in four countries establishing a multinational and multicultural network of learners to further intercultural maturity. All participants were adults learning voluntarily in non-formal and informal settings (Stickler & Emke, 2011). In addition to the traditional language courses which learners were following, they used LITERALIA to correspond via e-mail with a native speaker of their target language and engaged in online exchanges.²

An online platform was set up for adult learners to collaborate on topics of mutual interest and to support one another in the acquisition of intercultural, social and learning competence (<http://creet.open.ac.uk/projects/literalia/>). For this, the Virtual Learning Environment, Moodle, an open source application designed according to constructivist principles of learning (Brandl, 2005; Dougiamas, 1998; Dougiamas & Taylor, 2003), was used. The workspace had separate areas for organisers and for learners; both areas offered forums, wikis, an online calendar and links to online resources. In the learners' area, five chatrooms (four in the target languages and one for mixed language use) were established to allow synchronous written communication (see Stickler, 2008). During the project some of the Tandem learners

had the opportunity to meet their Tandem partner(s) at four organised face-to-face meetings. The ongoing learning exchanges, however, took place online and the online space became a platform for socialising, technical support and advice and for intercultural and multicultural³ discoveries.

This paper will focus on the intercultural aspect of online learning for adult learners in a multi-participant online space and the themes emerging from an investigation of our observations.

The third section of the paper will situate the research in the context of adult learning, socio-constructivist learning, online language learning, and the development of intercultural maturity specifically in adults. The fourth section will present a brief overview of how the data were collected throughout the project. In the fifth, essential project elements will be presented using entries on the workspace, reflections from users and contributions to semi-structured interviews with selected participants. The final section will deal with the interpretation of our findings and conclusions drawn by the researchers.

BACKGROUND

We believe that learning—especially in adults—is a social and collaborative process. The project was thereby anchored in socio-constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992) while influenced by four additional factors: (a) all our learners were adults; (b) language learning processes in adult learners exemplify the socio-constructivist learning model; (c) communication was mediated by CMC tools in a mainly unguided online workspace with the platform chosen (Moodle) itself designed for constructivist learning; and (d) a focus on intercultural learning and intercultural maturity, specifically within the online workspace which allowed for multicultural encounters.

Adult Learning

That adults learn differently from children can scarcely be contested: their learning starts with the reconstruction and the reassessment of an already existing individual “database” of knowledge and experience. While Vygotsky and his followers mainly describe child development, Mezirow (1981) adapts the constructivist view of learning to adult learning in his “Critical Theory of Adult Learning and Education,” which is also called “Transformation Theory” (1994): “The theory’s assumptions are constructivist, an orientation which holds that the way learners interpret and reinterpret their sense experience is, [sic] central to making meaning and hence learning.” (Mezirow, 1994, p. 222).

Learning is seen as a social process by which new or revised interpretation of one’s experience is achieved (Mezirow, 1997). In his theory the author employs three “areas of cognitive interest,” originally differentiated by Jürgen Habermas, the German philosopher and sociologist, as “work,” “practical,” and “emancipatory.” Mezirow’s particular interest is in the last of these categories or “learning domains” that he sees as a synonym for his concept of “perspective transformation.” Perspective transformation is:

the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings. It is the process by which adults come to recognize their culturally induced dependency roles and relationships and the reasons for them to take action to overcome them. (Mezirow, 1981, pp. 6-7, emphasis in original)

Whereas “work” and “practical” learning can help the individual to adapt to an environment, only “emancipatory” forms of learning can truly lead to maturity and a form of self-determination.⁴

Socio-constructivist Learning in Language Learning Processes

From socio-cultural and socio-constructivist perspectives, learning does not follow the “transmission model” of knowledge being passed from an expert to a novice, but rather seeks to establish a temporary balance between the perceived environment or sensory impressions and internal, mediated representations

(Glaserfeld, 1983/2007).

The interest in socio-cultural learning based on Vygotsky's theories (Prawat & Floden, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992) marks a shift of focus towards the social dimension of learning. Basing pedagogy on a theory of socio-cultural learning means that collaborative learning becomes essential as each learner advances through his/her Zone of Proximal Development, "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (Vygotsky 1978, p. 86). Socio-constructivism (Rüschhoff & Ritter, 2001) emphasises the active engagement of learners, creating their own version of a "reality" that is constantly tested against and adapted to versions reflected by others. This fits the conception of learning supported by the computer as a tool (Levy, 1998). Vygotsky particularly emphasises the role of language as a "psychological tool" that mediates our mental processes and our interaction with the environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 2007). The tools provided in our project workspace, namely the wiki, the forum and the chat, can be seen as artifacts, or means of mediation that influence not only the way learners communicate but also shape their language use.⁵

Online Language Learning

The use of ICT in language learning is not new and in recent years research into language learning and teaching with ICT has abounded. In the 1990s, for example, Chun (1994), Warschauer (1997, 1999), and Felix (1998, 1999) give accounts of the use of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) to support language learning (for historical overviews see Bax, 2003; Stockwell, 2007; and Liu, Moore, Graham & Shinwoong, 2003), and in recent years the benefits of CMC for intercultural learning have become increasingly obvious. Additional examples are the European Tandem project (e.g., Brammerts & Kleppin, 2001; Lewis & Walker, 2003); transatlantic collaborative projects (Kötter, 2002); group-based intercultural exchanges (Belz, 2002; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006); and other forms of Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language exchanges (Thorne, 2005).

The LITERALIA project drew on experience and research in the area of one-to-one e-mail and face-to-face Tandem learning (Lewis, Woodin & St. John, 1996; Stickler, 2001; Stickler & Lewis, 2003) and the Open University's expertise in "mixed mode" or blended teaching and learning (Hampel, 2003; Lewis, 2006; Stickler & Hampel, 2010; Stickler & Hauck, 2006). Based on this background, a learning environment was developed that integrated face-to-face with virtual encounters, one-to-one with one-to-many communication, and autonomous learning with teacher-led instruction.

Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL)

Following Roschelle and Teasley's (1995) definition of collaboration in computer supported learning, Dillenbourg (1999) distinguishes between cooperative learning and collaborative learning and stresses that collaborative learning requires the partners to "do the work together" (Dillenbourg, 1999, p. 37). Stahl, Koschmann and Suthers (2006) point out that Computer-supported Collaborative Learning, or CSCL, "stresses collaboration among the students, so that they are not simply reacting in isolation to posted materials. The learning takes place largely through interactions among students" (p. 2). Hence learning is seen as a fundamentally social process that takes place both at individual and group levels. Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb (1999) also maintain that CSCL is based on ideas derived from Vygotsky and Piaget, they emphasise the benefits of the Web for social learning. "By enabling social interactions via an electronic medium, unrestrained by space, time and pace, Web technologies actually expand and transform the social interaction space of collaborative learning" (p. 2).

Our project illustrates the continuum described by White (2003), from guided online interactions (e.g., forum responses) to independent collaboration (e.g., spontaneous multiparticipant chats) between learners.

Constructivist Learning with CMC

Computer-mediated activities fit well with a constructivist theory of learning (Warschauer, 1997; Felix, 2002): not only does the de-centralisation of learning spaces allow for more learner-centred activities and encourage active participation, the permanence of language production on the Web can also be used to encourage a sense of ownership by the learner.

Although there was originally some concern about the “thinness” of the medium or a reduced social dimension (Coverdale-Jones, 1998; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), CMC has been shown to allow for rich and personalised learning environments (Sclater, 2008) and for “social presence” (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). Video-conferencing can add yet another layer and the addition of images can “affect the perceived similarity to a real setting” (Yamada & Akahori, 2009, p. 19). Even if there is a perceived lack of “intimacy” due to the absence of eye contact and facial expressions, this is counterbalanced by the richness of access. The increasing use of the internet and CMC also makes communication via these media more natural and socially rich for the generation of “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001) who are growing up with ubiquitous computing.

Developing Intercultural Competence and Intercultural Maturity

Our investigation also draws on established and developing concepts of intercultural (communicative) competence. As Vogt (2006) points out, the terminology is by no means clear nor comparable internationally. However, rather than starting with a clear definition, we attempted to extract relevant concepts directly from our data, linking the development of our learners to similar or parallel developments described in the literature.

We use Byram’s model⁶ for teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997), in which five *savoirs* are interlinked. Our paper draws on Byram’s categorisation to distinguish between different levels of communicative competence that our participants achieved. However, Byram’s context is formal education of young people, whereas our project centres on adult learners in non-formal settings. Therefore the term “intercultural maturity” was adopted, a term that has been used mainly in US college education (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010) often in the context of civic participation (Smith & DeFrates-Densch, 2009, p. 653). King and Baxter Magolda (2005) provide a developmental model of intercultural maturity which they define as “multidimensional and consisting of a range of attributes, including understanding (the cognitive dimension), sensitivity to others (the interpersonal dimension) and a sense of oneself that enables one to listen to and learn (intrapersonal dimension)” (p. 574).

The US educationalist, Taylor (1994), applies Mezirow’s Theory of Perspective Transformation to intercultural contexts. His learning model describes five stages of becoming interculturally competent: from participants’ prior experience (Setting the Stage), a phase of Cultural Disequilibrium necessitates development. The subsequent stage consists of Cognitive Orientations which in Taylor’s view can be reflective or non-reflective, or even unconscious (Taylor, 1997). In a non-reflective mode, participants do not question their prior values and assumptions but utilise old models of learning and reacting. The cognitive phase is followed by Behavioral Learning Strategies, and finally by the stage of Evolving Intercultural Identity. This final stage is the scene of change in values and in perspective.

For our research all three models proved useful: Byram’s theory describes the interlinking of different *savoirs* contributing to intercultural communicative competence. King and Baxter Magolda’s approach provides a developmental model of intercultural maturity in three dimensions (cognitive, intra- and interpersonal); and Taylor’s theory emphasises the effect of a “cultural disequilibrium” which can trigger learning processes in adults.

In the LITERALIA project intercultural encounters happened in an informal context, in different modes and with varying intensity: from multilateral face-to-face meetings to one-to-one e-mail exchanges,

interaction with the target culture was shaped mainly by the participants' preferences and their readiness for new experiences. In view of the diversity of the exchanges we decided to integrate the aforementioned three theoretical models to guide a description of the development of intercultural maturity in adults through online multilingual, multimodal interactions. Intercultural exchange here means any exchange of information or experience, mediated online or face-to-face that the learner experiences consciously as an encounter beyond her/his home culture.

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

The LITERALIA project began in September, 2006, opened the online workspace to learners in March, 2007 and completed its two-year cycle in July, 2008. Overall the project matched 229 learners in six language combinations. To pair learners with a suitable Tandem partner, we asked learners to complete a questionnaire at the start of the project. However, as project participation was entirely voluntary, not every learner returned the questionnaire. The following numbers are based on the 193 questionnaires received.

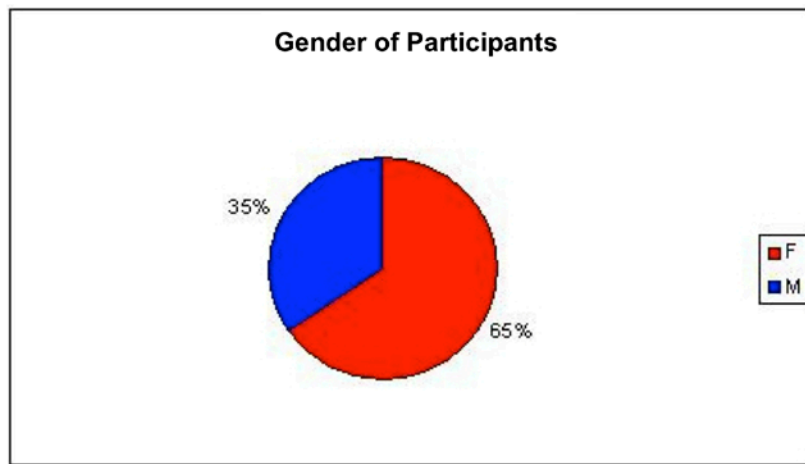


Figure 1. Gender of participants.

Two thirds of the participants were female with the largest number in the age range of 41-50.

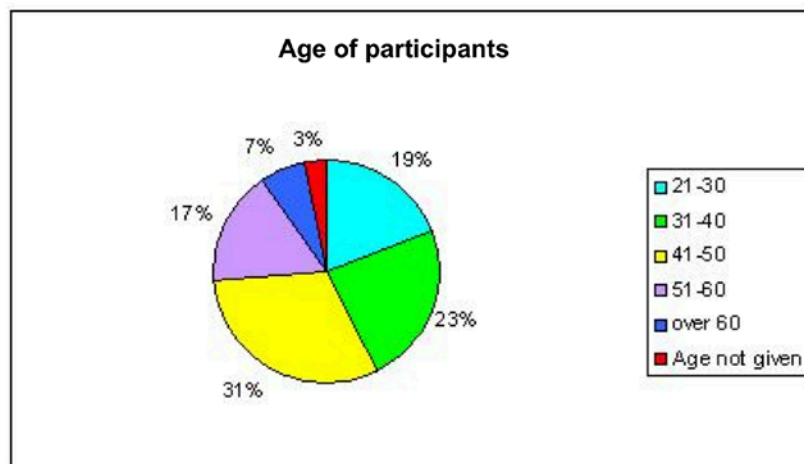


Figure 2. Age of participants.

The LITERALIA project supported learning in four languages: English, German, Italian, and Polish. The majority of learners wanted to improve their English (83), the second most chosen language was German (60), with Italian following closely (53). Polish was a less popular language (3 selections), and one learner chose to work on Spanish although the project did not support this language explicitly. Some learners worked on more than one target language (which accounts for the difference in numbers) and had more than one Tandem partner.

The LITERALIA project was aimed at mature adult learners. To date, their experience of intercultural learning has been little studied. For this reason, it was decided that our exploration of intercultural maturity would take the form not of an experimental intervention generating quantitative data, but by means of exploratory, ethnographic observation (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) of naturally occurring learning in a multinational, multilingual and multimodal project.

Material for our investigation was collected in a number of different ways. As participant observers (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994), we both actively contributed to the fashioning of the mixed-mode environment and introduced novice users to it, functioning as guides. We also reflected on our experience and participation with each other and our peers (other organisers, teachers) throughout the project.

As the workspace was a central focus for the multilateral work, scripts of users' contributions, for example in forums or chat sessions, were collected as evidence of interaction and development (Thomsen, Straubhaar & Bolyard, 1998). Learners were encouraged to provide reflective evaluation of the learning experience in the form of feedback messages, informal contributions to the workspace, and responses to a short questionnaire.⁷

To triangulate the data collected through participant and indirect observation, and to gain more reflective insights into the experience of our learners, we interviewed selected participants after the end of the project. Eight learners were interviewed about their participation in the project so that we could offer representations of the essential elements of the project via exemplary cases. Semi-structured interviews were held in English or German, and based on a series of questions (see [Appendix B](#)). We transcribed one another's interviews⁸ and analysed them using a thematic analysis approach (Aronson, 1994; Boyatzis, 1998) to focus on salient data and to generate a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of participant learning. We jointly discussed and selected relevant extracts. During the interpreting and analysis phase we maintained a continuing critical discussion of the collaborative process, considering our own participation in the project and each other's views and findings.

Emergence of themes in these data was not linear. Central themes first emerged in discussion with organisers during the design of the project: adult learning in general and ICT supported learning in particular. These themes crystallised in the course of the collection and sifting of data for the evaluation of the project and were further elaborated in discussions between the two researchers. These discussions led to the emergence of the final two themes, intercultural learning and intercultural maturity, and the analysis of the data produced clusters of comments in the following six categories:

1. An existing attitude of curiosity and openness
2. Reflective or non-reflective cognitive orientation
3. The influence of a virtual environment
4. The role of a Tandem partner
5. Bilateral versus multilateral encounters
6. The role of the teacher in online intercultural learning.

In our qualitative research investigating the pedagogical aims was closely interlinked with analysis and representation. The participants in the project were involved throughout the collection of the data. They

could contribute via feedback activities, via e-mail, or by responding to questionnaires. The interview questions were developed based on the study's three frames: theory of adult learning (Mezirow), established models of intercultural competence (Taylor and Byram), and the concept of intercultural maturity (King and Baxter Magolda). The content of these interviews was then reviewed by participants for their comments.

Essential Project Elements

In this section of the paper we present our findings as a *bricolage* of essential elements of the project that emerged throughout our investigative interpretation of the data.

An Existing Attitude of Curiosity and Openness

Both Taylor and Byram emphasize that learners who are successful in their intercultural interactions bring a certain kind of attitude, a pre-disposition to the process of intercultural learning. Taylor reports that the learners involved in his study “had an array of prior experiences reflected in former critical events, personal goals, education and previous intercultural experiences” that led to a “context of learning readiness” (1994, p. 161). Byram defines this pre-disposition as “attitudes of curiosity and openness, of readiness to suspend disbelief and judgement with respect to others’ meanings, beliefs and behaviours” (1997, p. 34). Both in the interviews and in various discussions our participants expressed an interest in making contact with people in the project, not only with their Tandem partner. The following sample from a post-project interview with two Polish participants suggests that they had already had very positive attitudes towards other cultures:

Lara:⁹ [...] LITERALIANs are like, you know, international...well, maybe not jet-set (*laughs*), but you know, a community.

[...]

Lara: Because ...the same, open-minded and wanting to meet somebody else, and, you know...quite tolerant as well...

[...]

Basilia: Only this kind of people can participate in international...eh, contacts, and programmes like this...only this kind of people. If you are not communicative, not...eh, outgoing...not, I don't know....curious, interested in other people's lives....you don't participate, you are not willing to...enter this kind of project.

U.S.: Did you make yourself...did you make a conscious effort to be open and curious about anything, or...?

Basilia: No, no, it comes...it's something in make...yes, it comes just...out...of me.

Basilia's choice of the words “curiosity,” “communicative” and “outgoing” shows which dispositions she sees as essential in this “attitude.” This impression was confirmed by interviews with other learners who also mentioned “flexibility” and “re-evaluation of opinions.” This seems to suggest that learners with an already existing interest in other cultures and an attitude of openness found the LITERALIA project to their liking.

Lara describes “LITERALIANs” as being open-minded and tolerant, a mindset mirrored in the intrapersonal dimension of intercultural maturity (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005).

A Non-reflective or Reflective Cognitive Orientation

A cognitive dimension is an essential element of all descriptions of intercultural maturity. For King and Baxter Magolda (2005), this is knowing, understanding and accepting cultural differences. At the highest level of “intercultural maturity” this dimension is “marked by the shift to knowledge as constructed and as

grounded in context” (p. 576).

Taylor claims that a “cultural disequilibrium is the catalyst for change” (1994, p. 161). In our project the cultural disequilibrium encountered by the learners was twofold: they faced the challenge of dealing with dissonances between the unfamiliar culture and their primary culture and the challenges of communicating in an online environment. That the “cultural disequilibrium” can be triggered by an online environment and by the unfamiliarity of working with ICT is evident in the comments of some participants who were less familiar with online learning, for example, Lara:

Lara: I mean for me, the very first meeting was quite successful, because it was...well, all of a sudden, and I was put in the position that I was...you know...put in front of a computer...and there was this some part of something going on on the screen I didn't understand...and I was so sad because it was so formal...and there was Jarek saying me, "Just click on this one" ...and then he was saying, "Oh, no, no, no tell them this!"...and I just switched off...and because it was some kind of conference where we did something...I didn't know what was going on ...so I thought "Jesus, where am I? I want to go home".

In Taylor's description of the intercultural development process, learners can respond to this disequilibrium either in a non-reflective or in a reflective way. Lara's adverse emotional reaction "I want to go home" is a non-reflective reaction to the challenge she had to deal with, a reaction that could lead to avoidance rather than cognitive development.

Ulla, a German learner, reacted to the challenge of the unfamiliar online environment in a reflective way:

Ulla: Also das habe ich zum Beispiel durch LITERALIA gelernt, auch da die Hemmungen abzubauen und zu sagen, ach, naja das tut gar nicht weh und da kann man ruhig reingehen und da passiert auch nichts.
(Translation: *Well, I learned through LITERALIA, for example, to overcome inhibitions, to say, well, yes, it doesn't really hurt, does it? One can go in [to the chat, U.S.] and nothing bad happens.*)

Data include examples of reflective and non-reflective cognitive development balancing out the cultural disequilibrium experienced during the project. The strategy chosen by each learner depended on the situation, namely, whether the intercultural impact was of a more practical nature where the learner could “plunge ahead, relying on prior learning and thoughtful action without critical reflection” (Taylor 1994, p. 164) or whether the actual situation led the learner to a “reflective orientation,” leading to a “change towards competency itself in an effort to rectify the imbalance in their life.” (Taylor 1994, pp. 164-165).

Mature intercultural learners develop the ability to reflect on their own perspective and relativise it.

Susanne: Wir haben absolut untypische Polen kennen gelernt und absolut typisch, typische Polen. Das fand ich, zumindest was man so mit den Voreinstellungen hatte. In der Zwischenzeit hatte ich ein sehr nettes Buch über Polen gelesen und über die Mentalität, und insofern kann ich mir jetzt im Nachhinein einiges gut erklären und würde beim nächsten Mal auch ganz anders damit umgehen können.
(Translation: *We met absolutely atypical Polish people and fairly typical ones. That's what I thought, at least, with my pre-set ideas. In the meantime, I've read a book about Poland and about the mentality of Polish people. So now I can explain some things in retrospect. And next time I would be able to deal with it differently.*)

This exemplifies King and Baxter Magolda's (2005) mature phase of the intercultural cognitive

dimension:

The ability to consciously shift perspectives emerges because judgments derive from personal experience, evidence from other sources, and others' experience. The ability to entertain multiple perspectives in multiple contexts leads to the ability to use multiple cultural frames. (p. 576)

In her statement Susanne not only reflects on past experiences but also evaluates them in view of newly acquired knowledge with the perspective of a future change in behaviour.

The Influence of a Virtual Environment

Participants were digital immigrants (adults who acquire digital skills later in life) as opposed to digital natives (Prensky, 2001) or "digital residents." This digital migration can be viewed as a form of cultural migration: the newcomer to a culture will often feel less skilled, less competent and more awkward than the native or resident in negotiating communication. The culture of online communication is no different in that it demands a new set of skills and competencies. In our project, those more facile with online communication skillfully combined the tools and modes and made the best use of what means of communication were available to them.

In the chats it became evident that only a few learners were familiar with chat-specific language features such as the use of emoticons or abbreviations, for instance, LOL (laughing out loud). Even if the learners already possessed the necessary skills and experience to use different online tools, they did not always demonstrate a mature or reflective use of the tools as reflected by Susanne's comment on some participants' "cultural clumsiness":

Susanne: Was ich erstaunlich fand, <...> bei einigen der Lerner, war, dass ich aeh, spannenderweise bei denen oft nicht diese Reflexion gesehen habe, dass ihnen gegenueber jetzt ein Nicht-Muttersprachler sitzt, wenn sie in ihrer eigenen Sprache geschrieben haben. Also, so zum Beispiel so der Umgang mit Ironie an einigen Stellen. (Translation: *What I found surprising <...> in the case of some learners was that, uhm, interestingly, I often could not see this reflectivity in them, the reflection that when they are writing in their own mother tongue, opposite them is a non-native speaker. For example, the use of irony in some places.*)

The data indicate that two modes of communication (online and face-to-face) often influenced each other: topics from one area were taken up in the other context, learners referred to experience online in their face-to-face meeting, and vice versa. That borders between physical and virtual encounters became somewhat blurred within the project is evidenced in Pam's remarks about contact with "real people." Pam was one of the participants who did not travel abroad to the multicultural meetings, although she did participate for one day in the meeting in England. Her comments here refer to meeting people online:

Pam: It makes it personal because you're talking to real people. It's not like you're reading something in the newspaper. So you're finding out about the sort of real life, the real situations. So that makes it personal to you, I think. And you're getting people's own opinion on things...and how it's affecting them.

Carola: Yeah, I agree.

Pam liked online communication for its dynamic quality. However, she emphasised that some of the specific cultural dimensions, namely body language, space and proximity, get lost in online textchats.

Perhaps without even realising it, our more active participants learned to navigate the "intercultural waters" between online and face-to-face communication, between mono-modal (e-mail) and multimodal (workspace) communication, and between group communication and one-to-one encounters online.

The Role of a Tandem Partner

Learning as a form of change can be experienced as disruptive and frightening as well as potentially fruitful. In a traditional learning situation, the potential disruption is one-sided: the teacher is the centre of activity, the “sage on the stage”, the secure and balanced adult, whereas the learner is placed in a child position, the person of lesser power and knowledge, the person in “disequilibrium” (Taylor, 1994). Tandem learning offers a more equal power system through reciprocity (Brammerts, 2002; Brammerts & Calvert, 2001): the expert in one language becomes the novice in the other language, and scaffolding (Schwienhorst, 2002) can be employed by all.

In our project learners were faced with the dual challenge of cultural exchanges taking place in an online environment; under these circumstances some learners clearly preferred to resort to their Tandem partner as their main source of information, their cultural informant, their personal guide to the foreign culture and their scaffold.

Personal contacts were seen as central, information came from “a person that you trust”, “a friend”. This seemed to be more important than just gathering facts, whether this person was their own Tandem partner or another person they met through the project:

Carola: Well, I would prefer to...to ask Pam, than to...to look into the Internet, or...just...a person, not...ehem...books or the Internet.

Although our learners were not “sojourners” (to use Byram’s term) in the foreign culture, they actively sought contact with it and were trying to learn and expand their horizons. They have already achieved the intrapersonal development stage described by King and Baxter Magolda as “the simultaneous examination of one’s experiences in one’s own cultural contexts and an examination of that culture in broader social contexts” (2005, p. 578). At a yet higher level of intercultural maturity, we would expect our learners to rely not only on their Tandem partner, but to venture outside their comfort zone and interact in a culturally inquisitive and sensitive way with the wider online community in the project, as exemplified by this forum message from Duncan:

Forum Tandem Learners (10 June 2008)

[...] Lehrte¹⁰ was a magical experience for me. One which has given me so much! [...] The next time I come to Germany I'll do so much yapping... until then I put my pictures together in a little film. Have a look in <http://uk.youtube.com/user/Duncan71> you may even like my banjo music!

Bilateral versus Multilateral Encounters

The learners’ workspace provided opportunities for multilateral intercultural exchanges but for reasons outlined previously, some learners preferred bilateral, mainly e-mail based collaboration, with their Tandem partner. Overall 70 learners participated in the workspace, some of them regularly. Occasionally, the forum was used for gathering information (see Byram’s *Knowledge savoir*, 1997, p. 34):

Forum Tandem Learners (13 April 2008)

Mona: I came across an interesting question but I don't know the answer. Are there any languages that have rhyming slang, other than English? e.g. Apples and pears = stairs. Trouble and strife = wife.

Multilingual, multiparticipant chat sessions also provided opportunity to “interpret and relate” (Byram’s *savoir comprendre*, 1997, p.34) between the different cultures online. In the following example, two chat participants included the Polish participant as cultural and linguistic informant:

Learners' chat (9 April 2008)

20:41 Pam: I think it would be very useful to be able to speak Polish in England at the moment

20:41 Uschi: @Laram, what does "Z seren" mean?

20:41 Pam: Lots of local authorities are looking for Polish speakers

20:41 Lara: @Uschi I was trying to make out if it was a piece of German or Polish bit: with cheese

Of all the tools provided in the workspace the chat proved the most popular:

Dora: Das Chatten, das war oder ist immer sehr ah interessant, und wo hast du die Möglichkeit mit Italien, mit Polen und mit Engländern mhm quasi zur gleichen Zeit äh Kontakt aufzunehmen.

(Translation: *Chatting, that was or is always very interesting, I mean, where do you have the opportunity to get in contact with Italy, with Poland, and with English people, more or less at the same time.*)

Another learner proposed using the same tool for language learning practice and suggested introducing a regular chat evening. The wiki and forum were also used for multilateral communication.

The skills and preferences of learners influenced how they used the learning opportunities of online multilateral exchanges. Cultural information (*savoirs*) was gathered via the online tools; on a communication level learners engaged in the online culture practising multilateral communication. At the highest level of intercultural maturity learners had not just developed a critical intercultural awareness and reflective attitude but were also able to select the different online tools to best fit their communication intentions.

The Role of the Teacher in Online Intercultural Learning

Tandem learning, the principal form of learning employed in the LITERALIA project, is an autonomous form of learning (Brammerts, 2001). As such, the teachers did not take an active role in the actual exchanges. However, teachers can influence online exchanges in different ways by placing greater emphasis on the social or on the cognitive aspects of the online encounter (Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999). The influence of LITERALIA teachers and project organisers manifests itself in a number of ways: the workspace training of learners, the pairing of Tandem partners, the set-up and structure of the workspace, the provision of worksheets,¹¹ and the unobtrusive support offered throughout the project. Providing scaffolds was the most significant role of the teacher:

M.E.: Also das heisst, ihr habt am Anfang eures Austausches schon an die Empfehlungen, die wir in dem Kurs gegeben haben, so ein bisschen gehalten.

(Translation: *So that means that—at the beginning of your exchange—you stuck to the recommendations we gave for the course, at least a little.*)

Ulla: Ja, genau. Ja, das war uns auch wichtig, also um sich auch kennen zu lernen, das hat auch Sicherheit gegeben

(Translation: *Yes, exactly. Yes, and that was important for us, for getting to know each other. It gave us a sense of security.*)

The teacher as someone in the background, available on an as-needed basis, seems to be the preferred role in a course that relies on learner autonomy, peer-support, and multilateral exchanges.

CONCLUSION

Approaching intercultural maturity from both the literature and our own data, we can now arrive at a description of interculturally mature adult learners. As a first condition they already possess a disposition of openness and curiosity (“attitude”). “LITERALIAans” (to use the term coined by Lara) are special people, they not only engage in intercultural encounters openly and with curiosity, they also know that group cohesion takes work and building a community of trust and mutual respect can happen with the necessary investment. Adult learners are in a better position to achieve this developmental complexity (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005, p. 572) that allows them positive acceptance of others in personal development and openness to different cultures on the highest level of intercultural maturity.

In addition to attitudinal and social dimensions, learning in Tandem or in a multicultural online space has a cognitive focus on learning and finding out specific information. The cognitive dimension can remain non-reflective (a focus on the gathering of knowledge, language practice, an adaptation to the new environment without deliberate change of perspective); it can become reflective (rectifying the disequilibrium, evaluating and choosing the risks one takes) and it can be mature (consciously shifting and transforming perspectives, planning change in future behaviour).

As far as the interpersonal dimension of such encounters is concerned, the personal learning partner emerged as a central figure from our data; in some cases the intercultural exchange was not as important as developing friendships. The issue of trust proved of central importance for most participants; the Tandem partner was the trusted source of information, the scaffold for intercultural exploration, and sometimes the partner in a discovery of different online tools. The help of a trusted Tandem partner allowed learners to venture further into a potentially uncomfortable zone of intrapersonal development, examining and accepting their own and other cultures in context. Development towards intercultural maturity depends on social interaction, either in the group or in bilateral exchanges.

In the course of the project we observed that the adult participants seemed to treat the online communication environment as a culture in its own right with cultural disequilibrium, cultural learning, digital natives and digital immigrants as essential components. King and Baxter Magolda (2005, p. 580) claim that “[t]he mature level of the interpersonal dimension is characterized by heightened awareness and capacity to engage in intercultural interactions that are interdependent, respectful, informed by cultural understanding, and mutually negotiated.” In the online culture of multilingual computer-mediated communication, successful digital immigrants can negotiate the medium and mode with their partners, select the best tool for the task, and experience the interpersonal interactions “as enhancing one's identity and role as a member of society” (p. 580), which in this case is the online community.

Mature intercultural learners are aware of the limitations of the different media, not only with respect to differences between face-to-face versus online communication, but also with respect to the advantages and disadvantages of different online tools. They are aware of their own limitations as learners at a certain point in time.¹² As was expected in a learning format that relies heavily on reciprocity and autonomy, on peer learning and mutual support, the role of the teacher moved to the background. However, our research has shown that the teacher's role is still important when it comes to preparation of the learning environment and to providing unobtrusive aid in the background.

The aim of intercultural maturity is not a change in personality or a radical change in lifestyle but an integration of new perspectives into the everyday life of the mature intercultural learner. It can be triggered not only through cognition but also through emotional, affective, social, and sensual experiences.

During our research, we developed alongside our learners and shared their reflections and developmental processes. We are aware that our study has limitations. The first of these is that developing online intercultural maturity in the kind of setting we employed already presupposes a certain maturity. Adults' cognitive development, as well as their life experience can help them to achieve a maturity in intercultural exchanges that is not easily replicable for young learners. A study involving only young adults might lead to different results. Another interesting question would be whether the adult learners in our study would have felt confident to engage in their intercultural encounters without the feeling of security and support provided by a teacher. Our research does not measure intercultural competence or intercultural maturity in any quantifiable way. Instead, our exploratory study attempts to describe adult learners in an online multicultural environment and how their interactions shaped and developed their intercultural competencies. We have focused on examples of intercultural maturity development and not on the reasons for failed development. We hope that our account resonates with the experience of others in the field and might lead to a better understanding of intercultural learning processes online and of favourable learning conditions.

For the future, we are convinced that longer term observations of intercultural development of our learners would be most interesting. For example, re-visiting ex-LITERALIAans and asking them about the long-term influence of their intercultural encounters during the project.

NOTES

1. The Volkshochschule (VHS) Ostkreis Hannover, Germany, the Department of Languages of the Open University, UK, the Bildungszentrum Wolfsburg, Germany, the Centro Territoriale Permanente per l'Educazione degli Adulti di Pontedera (CTP), Italy, and the Wyższa Szkoła Bankowości i Finansów w Bielsku-Białej (School of Banking and Finance) in Bielsko-Biała, Poland.
2. For a more detailed project description see Stickler and Emke (2011).
3. In our context we will use “intercultural” where the emphasis is on enhancing understanding between two or more cultures (“mediating”), and “multicultural” where the context shows the presence of different cultures but not necessarily an attempt at mediating between them.
4. For an overview see Taylor (2006). In their book “Konstruktivistische Erwachsenenbildung” (A constructivist theory of adult education), Arnold and Siebert (2006) explicitly merge the foundations of constructivism with a theory of learning in the mature mind.
5. Although Activity Theory (Engeström, 2000) has recently been increasingly used in language learning research, our investigation did not employ this method as either the basis for setting up an experimental learning situation or the framework of analysis. Activity Theory emphasises the interplay between different aspects in a more conflictual way (Engeström, 2009) than we observed within our project.
6. For the context of European educational settings Byram's theory of intercultural communicative competence seemed the most appropriate. Although other approaches such as Kramsch's concepts of a “third place” (Kramsch, 1993) or a “multilingual subject” (Kramsch, 2006) were considered, the focus on literary understanding and highly advanced language learners made the concepts less fitting for our research.
7. Some quantitative data was collected during the project (Moodle workspace logs, questionnaire responses); however, the focus of this research is on observation and qualitative data. A feedback questionnaire sent out to all participants in the project via the workspace received only a minimal number of responses and has subsequently not been included as a data source.
8. Although we used content transcription rather than the more detailed conversation analysis convention,

transcribing interview data can be a first step towards analysing data (Silverman, 2001).

9. All participants' names were anonymised.

10. The venue of the face-to-face meeting in Germany.

11. One of the organisers responsible for the online workspace observed that learners only used worksheets in the very initial stages of their learning.

12. An extract from the interview with Ulla shows this clearly:

M.E.: Wärest du lieber in der Lage gewesen, aktiver zu sein, oder hat es dir genügt, passiver im Workspace zu sein?

(Translation: *Would you have preferred to be more active, or were you satisfied with being more passive in the workspace?*)

Ulla: Ne, das fand ich für mich genau passend. Also das war jetzt zu dem Zeitpunkt genau das was ich gerade gebraucht hatte, um da also meinen Lernrythmus und so weiter zu haben. [...] im Moment hat sich das fuer mich genau richtig angefühlt.

(Translation: *No, that was exactly right for me. I mean, at that point in time it was exactly what I needed, to get into my own rhythm of learning and so. [...] at that moment it felt exactly right for me.*)

APPENDIX A. Questionnaire

In order to find a suitable Tandem partner for you, please provide us with some details about yourself.

Dear Tandem learners,

The more detail you provide, the easier it will be to find a matching Tandem partner for you.

Name:

E-mail-address:

First Language: Other languages:

Target language / Target culture

English German Italian Polish

Level of competence in the target language (if applicable)

Elementary Intermediate Advanced

Age

- 18 to 20 years 21-30 31-40
 41-50 51-60 over 60 years

Where does your interest in the language/culture you want to study originate?

Please write down five things you like or five activities you enjoy doing

What should your Tandem partner be like?

What are your goals in Tandem learning? What do you hope to gain by the end of this Tandem project

What support do you expect your Tandem partner to offer?

Do you have any previous experience with learning partnerships? Please provide details

Please give an estimate of your computing skills

| | very good | good | reasonable | sufficient |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| word processing | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Internet use | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| E-mail | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Forums | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Chats | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| other... (please provide details) | | | | |
| ... | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| ... | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| ... | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

How often do you use a computer per week?

- daily 2-3 times per week fewer than 2-3 times per week

Any further comments?

Please return the completed questionnaire to Uschi: U.Stickler@open.ac.uk

APPENDIX B. Interview Questions

Semi-structured interview with LITERALIA participants

A) Questions about motivation for taking part in the project and expectations with regard to the outcome:

- Why did you take part in the LITERALIA project?
- What were your expectations at the beginning?

B) Questions about the Tandem exchange and use of the workspace:

- What was your favourite tool on the LITERALIA workspace?
- What was your favourite activity on the LITERALIA workspace?
- What was your favourite mode of communication, e.g. e-mail, workspace, f2f?
- How intense was your Tandem Partnership? (e.g., frequency of exchanges, length of e-mails / contact?)
- Which means of communication did you use mainly?

C) Questions about the “real” outcome for the participants (changes in attitude / learning behaviour?):

- Did you learn anything in the LITERALIA project? What exactly?
- What does learning mean for you in the context of the project?
- Did you think that LITERALIA was formal learning or informal learning for you?
- Did you notice a shift from formal to informal or v.v.?
- How did you experience learning in LITERALIA compared to learning on a course <"institution"- "language"-course> (e.g., *VHS-Englischkurs*)?
- Did you notice a shift in your attitude to learning online / learning with peers / learning without a tutor / etc.?

Mezirow spiral

- Did you notice a shift in reflectivity / Did you become more reflective in your attitude? (e.g., did you start noticing how you perceived other people on the workspace, in the project?)
- Did you start noticing / reflecting on your feelings about other people / contributions?
- Did you think about the judgements you made about other people / other people’s contributions?
- Did you become more critical towards your own attitude(s)? (“*selbstkritisch*”?) (e.g., did you start doubting your own perceptions of other people / people’s representation in the workspace / e-mails / messages?)
- Did you start questioning your own habits / your usual ways of thinking about other people / people’s representation in the workspace / e-mails / messages?

- Did your way of thinking start to change? Did you realise that you started to think differently about the world? What were your most “philosophical thoughts” in connection with the LITERALIA project? Has your “*weltanschauung*” changed as a result of the project? Could you see an impact of the project on your normal life or attitudes towards your surroundings / your life / etc. Can you say that LITERALIA has changed your life in any way? [only ask this last question if previous answers lead up to it]

D) Questions about intercultural experience:

- Thinking back on LITERALIA, did your contact with your Tandem Partner or other LITERALIANs change your ideas about Italy / UK / Germany/Poland?
- Questions concerning Byram categories:
- Has your knowledge about UK/G/I/P increased? (e.g., Do you know when important holidays in UK/G/I/P are? What people like to eat in UK/G/I/P?, etc.)
[savoir]
- Have your skills in dealing with people from UK/G/I/P improved (e.g., do you feel more confident that you can communicate with people from UK/G/I/P without offending them?)
[savoir faire]
- Have you developed new ideas on how to improve / expand your cultural knowledge or understanding of UK/G/I/P?
[savoir apprendre]
- Has your awareness of cultural differences and similarities between your own culture and UK/G/I/P increased? (e.g., would you notice when someone from UK/G/I/P finds a situation difficult / disconcerting? Do you realise what behaviours better to avoid when visiting UK/G/I/P?)
[savoir comprendre]
- Has your engagement with the UK/G/I/P culture changed in any significant way? (e.g., do you feel you want to participate in political demonstrations, engage in debates about UK/G/I/P.)
- Has your attitude to UK/G/I/P changed in any way? (e.g., Do you feel more / less interested in visiting UK/G/I/P? Do you feel more / less positive towards visitors / guestworkers from UK/G/I/P? Do you feel you have developed or reduced stereotypes about UK/G/I/P or people from UK/G/I/P)
[savoir s'engager]
- Can you pinpoint one particular tool or mode of communication that helped to bring about this shift in attitude?
- Did you notice a shift in attitude towards other cultures (i.e., **NOT** UK/G/I/P)? If you now visited a new / unknown country, would you have a different attitude towards the culture than before your experience with LITERALIA?

E) Questions about personal background and previous learning experience:

- Male / female / age / profession?

- Highest level of schooling / education? University degree?
 - What feelings do you have about your past school life?
 - What foreign languages do you speak? How long have you learned FL? (formal / informal learning?)
 - What feelings do you have about learning FL in school?
 - How often do you use a computer? Which software programmes do you use (or what do you use a computer for)?
 - Do you enjoy using a computer?
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