

## LEARNER INTERPRETATIONS OF SHARED SPACE IN MULTILATERAL ENGLISH BLOGGING

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This qualitative study aims to understand how English learners interpret shared space in an online multilateral English blogging context and how their interpretations of shared space contribute to their multilateral exchange experience. Twenty-four Asian learners of English from two different universities—one in Japan and one in Taiwan—participated in this study. These learners worked on their individual blogs and interacted on both their own blogs and on those of their partners. Data sources include surveys, online interaction records, class assignments, reflective journals, and interviews.

Guided by Kramsch's (2009c) analogy of the mindsets of the structuralist and post-structuralist approaches in culture and communication, this study reported that students in this multilateral English blogging project interpreted shared space from two perspectives (a) commonality, and (b) relativity. While students who interpreted shared space from the perspective of commonality valued pre-existing shared personal interests, mutual understanding, and similar personal experiences as a prerequisite for inter-class blogging, students who interpreted shared space from the perspective of relativity tended to draw relative positions from a dialogue between their and their inter-class peers' historicity or cultural memories through re-contextualization and re-positioning. This study suggests that although students who interpreted shared space from the commonality perspective were able to engage in inter-class blogging, they faced difficulties in exploring other possibilities in relating to the blog content, the blog discussions, and the bloggers, when commonality was absent. However, for students who interpreted shared space from the relativity perspective, they were able to form relationships of possibility in mediating encounters through uses of heterogeneous semiotic resources. Future research on what barriers can hinder students' development due to interpretation of shared space and how students develop uses of symbolic resources can contribute to understanding students' construction of shared space for communication.

### INTRODUCTION

Studies in digitally mediated communication have explored how language learners co-construct and co-mediate with each other in telecollaboration or online exchange projects. On what common ground and conditions they can work together successfully is of concern in these studies (Basharina, 2007, 2009; Belz, 2002; Hauck, 2007; Lee, 2008; O'Dowd, 2005; 2006; Ware, 2005; Ware & Kramsch, 2005; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). The importance of shared space has frequently been suggested (Darhower, 2007; Schneider & von der Emde, 2006; Ware & Kramsch, 2005). The term, *shared space* is not taken literally in this paper; it does not refer to a physical space (e.g., an online platform or blogosphere) in which the participants gather together to carry out a task. Rather, it is viewed as a metaphorical space where human beings sense their relations with others in the act of communication. Thus, exploring how language learners interpret and approach shared space can assist researchers in gaining insight into how language learners create relationships between themselves and others for co-construction and co-mediation in digitally mediated communication.

The purpose of this study is to explore English language learners' interpretation of shared space in an online multilateral context and to examine how their interpretations of shared space contribute to their online experience. It aims to expand the current perspective on shared space in which commonality and sharing are emphasized through probing language learners' perspectives.

## Theoretical Groundings of Shared Space

The concept of shared space originates from discussions of language, thought and communication. To describe how interlocutors coordinate the act of communication, Rommetveit (1974, 1979) coined the notion of *intersubjectivity*, describing it as a communication achievement that interlocutors attain on the basis of their original shared presuppositions (i.e., state of intersubjectivity). Wertsch (1984, 1985) discusses the notion of *situation definition* in relation to intersubjectivity, explaining how interlocutors sequentially bridge their differences by defining objects and recognizing significant behaviors of others. Wertsch bases his work on the Vygotskian concept of interpsychological functioning, highlighting three levels of intersubjectivity that interlocutors achieve in the process of assisting one another.

In studies of communication that involve speakers with diverse cultural backgrounds, theoretical groundings that guide the interpretations of shared space reside in cultural mindsets. Kramsch's discussions (2009c) about structuralist approaches and post-structuralist approaches in communication and culture can be useful in understanding how the interpretation of shared space is framed in the current literature.

Kramsch (2009c) argues that structuralist approaches consider culture as a stable, fixed, and bounded system, in which citizens of a nation or members of a speech community function with common linguistic codes, values, beliefs, and behaviors.<sup>1</sup> Rooted in the belief of "one language (or way of speaking) = one culture (or social background)" (Kramsch, 2009c, p. 242), each national culture or each speech community culture is considered to be homogenous and independent. Only monolingual and monocultural members can be found in that specific national culture or speech community. Thus, the dichotomous nature of cultures or speech communities is often highlighted in studies framed by structuralist approaches.

A structuralist approach to bounded speech communities (i.e., one culture, one language), guides researchers to approach their interpretation of shared space with an emphasis on misunderstanding and conflict due to cultural differences of the interlocutors. How language learners bridge and minimize the differences between their (self) and the target speakers' (other) cultural and speech communities is discussed within this tradition. Moreover, foreign language learners are often viewed as deficient in comparison to native speakers or language learners with greater language proficiency. The focus is on ameliorating language proficiency and minimizing differences between learners and the target speech community.

From the structuralist perspective, self and other are located in two separate private worlds. Consequently, engagement in peer collaboration and co-construction lies in overlapping *subjectivities* or prolepses, in which agreement and consensus of the members are attained (de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Rommetveit, 1979, 1985).<sup>2</sup> For example, in their study regarding corrective feedback, Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) highlight how a *collaborative frame* is formed for the tutor and the tutee to create mutually accepted conditions for error corrections when the tutor serves as a partner to the tutee. Rommetveit's (1979, 1985) notion of the *state of intersubjectivity* stresses the moment and the temporarily shared social world in which two persons are in sync or in tune with each other during a joint activity. Rommetveit believes that such a state of intersubjectivity is established when: (a) a here-and-now consensus about the topics, intentions, and goals of the joint activity; (b) a mutually agreed definition and perception of the situation; and (c) an allied anticipation of each others' reciprocal roles are achieved among interlocutors. In addition, Wegerif's (1998) proposal of *thresholds* highlights the initial engagement of an outsider who appropriates and approximates the discourse and beliefs of a community in order to become an insider in that community. Thus, from a structuralist perspective, shared space is viewed as a social accomplishment, in which knowledge, beliefs, or assumptions, are held in common and shared. Engagement in peer collaboration and co-construction lies at the establishment of shared space.

The overlapping subjectivities, or prolepses, however, are not often owned by the interlocutors in the first place. To establish such overlapping shared space, language learners have to negotiate and move from their own private worlds to others' in order to locate shared knowledge and some common ground (Rommetveit, 1979, 1985). De Guerrero and Villamil (2000) demonstrated how two college ESL students established and maintained intersubjectivity based on their shared common knowledge when one worked as a reader and the other as a writer during peer correction for their narrative texts. In this sense, the notion of self-other is viewed as part of binary relations (either-or), and the transcendence of the private worlds of self and others serves as a driving force for the formation of shared space.

Post-structuralist perspectives, however, problematize the notion of stable, fixed and bounded speech communities that emphasize monolingual and monocultural cultural practice (Blommaert, 2005; Pennycook, 2007; for a discussion, see Kramersch, 2009a, 2009c). The argument is that in the age of globalization where international communication, partnerships, migration, and networking increasingly take place, the practice of cultures is now hybridized, intermingled and pluriculturalized. Multilinguals and multiculturalists perform transcultural communication practice with the use of heterogeneous semiotic resources that are available to them across multiple global and local speech communities (Kramersch, 2009b; Lam, 2009b; Pennycook, 2007). The territorialized and monolingual view of culture may no longer reflect all the cultural practices in current society. Further, while "culture is seen as heterogeneous, fluid, conflictual, it is seen as a mode, not a place of belonging" (Kramersch 2009c, p. 247).

Post-structuralist perspectives guide researchers to frame their interpretation of shared space by exploring how learners serve as creative agents to mediate the connections between themselves and others through the use of heterogeneous semiotic resources while communicating. Bakhtin's dialogism often informs interpretation of shared space in that the self and other are viewed as dialogic (Iddings, Haught, & Devlin, 2005; Kramersch, 2009b; Kramersch & Whiteside, 2008). From the Bakhtinian view of simultaneity, Iddings et al. (2005) argue that the self and the other must not be viewed as absolute concepts with binary relations (either-or). Instead, the self and the other "are always relative to each other through simultaneous unity of differences in the event of an utterance" (Holquist, 1990, pp. 36, cited in Iddings, et al., 2005), and "the self cannot exist without the other; the other is what gives meaning to the self" (Iddings, et al., 2005, p. 36). Kramersch and Whiteside (2008) elaborate that the self is not unitary but pluralistic and multiple in that it contains the voices of the self as a subjective insider and of others as objective outsiders. Therefore, the utterance that one produces is always double-voiced as part of self-other dialogues. Thus, from a post-structuralist perspective, shared spaces exist in a form of relativity that speakers employ as contact zones.

How one "mediate(s) complex encounters among interlocutors with different capacities and cultural imaginations" (Kramersch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 646) in joint activities can serve as the focus for post-structuralist accounts of shared space. Kramersch and Whiteside (2008) discuss the notion of "relationships of possibility" (p. 668), highlighting the possible connectedness through historicity in multilingual environments. Examination of multilingual speakers demonstrates how moments of interaction can be intersected with their choice of languages (e.g., English, Spanish, Maya, and Chinese), in a way that may resonate with the cultural memories of those speakers. For example, when DF (the volunteer tour guide for the study) introduced Whiteside as his teacher to a Chinese clerk, the Chinese clerk chose to speak in English, a language that enacted his memories of learning English in the United States, together with his embodied interpretation of which languages should be learned by Maya-speaking immigrants from Yucatan, Mexico, living in San Francisco, California at the time of the study. The encounter was mediated by the fact that a relative shared space existed in part due to his past language learning experience and the other's current language learning situation. The clerk spoke in his limited English, assuming that Whiteside was teaching DF English, the predominant language in San Francisco, and attempted to create an English-only environment for DF's English learning through using his experience of learning English in the United States. Thus, the Chinese clerk's interpretation of what a "teacher" was

became embodied in his interpretation of what the Yucatan people would need for language learning. Together with his cultural memories of English learning, the Chinese clerk's perception of the word "teacher," his interpretation of Whiteside who was an Anglo, and DF as a Maya-Speaking immigrant from Yucatan, and his understanding of the English language as the predominant language in San Francisco were used as symbolic resources, assisting him in developing a relative shared space of the self-other dialogue. Kramersch and Whiteside's discussions of such processes imply that with the use of language as a symbolic resource, intersubjectivity does not usually exist in here-and-now utterances. It can be "found in the shared memories, connotations, projects, and inferences elicited by the various sign systems we use in concert with others" (Kramersch, 2009b, p. 19). Therefore, learners' recognition of relationships of possibility can enrich what they can achieve in their social practice.

In relation to the construction of relationships of possibility, van Lier's discussion of *affordance* (van Lier, 2004, p. 105) stresses the importance of a person's ability to interpret objects and their relative historicity when used as semiotic resources in social activities. In a social activity in which multilateral exchanges are involved, language learners' abilities to act as intercultural mediators (Byram, 2008) play an important role in approaching their multilateral partners and thus participating as a community. It is through their creation of cultural affordances that their and others' relative nature can emerge from their participation in a situational context. Thus, it is useful to understand how learners from different backgrounds work with others in a joint social activity as intercultural mediators to construct meanings of their relative shared spaces through the use of their and others' symbolic resources.

### **Shared Space in Internet-Mediated Communication via E-mails, Text Chats, Discussion Forums or Videoconferencing**

Many studies concerning digitally mediated communication in instructional settings have investigated shared space in the context of telecollaboration via e-mails (Belz, 2002; Thorne, 2003), text chats (Belz, 2002; Darhower, 2007, 2008; Lee, 2008; Schneider & von der Emde, 2006), discussion forums (Basharina, 2007, 2009; Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001; O'Dowd, 2005; Ware, 2005; Ware & Kramersch, 2005; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008), and videoconferencing (Hauck, 2007). These studies often examine the notion of shared space from a structuralist perspective. Tensions and conflicts that hinder the development and maintenance of the commonality and sharing of the participants are often viewed as dysfunctions and obstacles to successful communication in these studies. Clashes in linguistic convention, technological affordances, and interpretation of the content of discussions are reported as barriers to the development or maintenance of shared space.

Some studies suggest differences in learner perceptions of linguistic convention can lead to tensions in online communication (Basharina, 2007; Kramersch & Thorne, 2002; Ware, 2005). In her study of tridem learning via a WebCT bulletin board, Basharina (2007) indicated a *genre clash* (i.e., a difference in linguistic convention) as one source of intercultural miscommunication between students in Mexico, Japan, and Russia, leading to learner dissatisfaction regarding peer behaviors in joint communications. Kramersch and Thorne (2002) reported a similar genre clash in a French-American e-mail exchange project during which the French students employed factual and impersonal discourse, whereas the U.S. students implemented forms of personal socialization. They concluded that students' habitual genre norms, residing in their home institution, lead to their interpretations of what discourse genres are appropriate in online communication and in turn mediate their use of different discourse genres in online communication.

In terms of contradictions in technological affordances, Thorne (2003) and Basharina (2007) both discovered that different cultural interpretations of technological affordances (i.e., culture-of-use), can create tensions that hinder the development and maintenance of intercultural communication. In his e-mail study, Thorne (2003) concluded that in an online communicative activity, technology is no longer a neutral object for intercultural encounters. Participants interpreted it as a cultural tool for a specific context to which was assigned particular cultural meaning. Therefore, differences in cultural

interpretations of technological affordances can also hinder the development and establishment of intersubjectivity.

In terms of the possible dichotomies in linguistic meanings, Ware and Kramsch (2005) analyzed the misunderstanding that arose in German-US intercultural communication. They report how Rob (a U.S. student who was learning German), and Marie (a German student who was learning English), experienced conflicts in their discussions about the history of East-West German relations. Marie's misinterpretations of Rob's ambiguous questions in his first post led her to offer him in-depth explanations of the history of East-West German relations. Her use of the word "little" in her responses appeared to insult Rob who later withdrew from the discussions.

The above studies approached language learners' communication by emphasizing differences between cultural groups. Without mutually shared expectations, perceptions, or understanding of a situation or social activity, telecollaboration partners can often experience cultural contradictions and conflicts that lead to miscommunication or failed communication (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). However, as online language or cultural exchanges often attempt to involve diverse participants who reside in different geographical and regional locations, and come from distinct cultures and contexts, it may not be reasonable to presuppose that the participants always share common ground. Instead, it appears unavoidable for learners to experience tensions and conflicts in the process of intercultural communication. It may therefore be useful for researchers to view these conflicts and tensions as potential learning opportunities (Agar, 1994). However, little is known about how students can take advantage of such opportunities, find ways to relate to others in a specific situation, or coordinate the heterogeneous perspectives of culturally diverse groups online.

In their study of German-US synchronous text discussions, Schneider and von der Emde (2006) demonstrated how conflicts and disagreement can mediate productive dialogues in a joint discussion. In their discussions about gun control, the German students, Christina and Ingrid, suggested that Americans are too liberal with their guns, proposing that the U.S. should have stricter laws for gun control. The U.S. students, Felicity and Nora, challenged Christina and Ingrid to provide evidence about their claims rather than discussing this issue based on their assumptions. Schneider and von der Emde's study implied that conflicts and disagreements in online space may not necessarily be an obstacle to communication. If learners are able to seize the opportunity and exercise their agency in establishing affordances for conflict, disagreements can turn in to a mediational means for productive dialogue. Understanding how language learners succeed in doing this can shed light on the co-construction and co-mediation of shared space in online intercultural communications.

### **Shared Spaces in Internet-Mediated Communication via Blogs**

Different from e-mails, text chats, discussion forums, and videoconferencing, blogs, a type of Web 2.0 technology for Web publishing, can be used by language learners to develop personalized homepages with multiple entries displayed in reverse chronological order. Bloggers typically publicly post their opinions and ideas. Resources for blogging can include text, images, audio, videos, maps, hyperlinks, hypertexts, and so forth.

Feedback is usually welcomed on blogs. Blog visitors may react and respond to the blog entries created by the blog owners through the function of "comment" for discussions and social interaction. However, the interactions on blogs are typically viewed as one-to-many, as the comment button is only displayed at the bottom of each blog entry and the blog visitors tend to respond to blog owners only. In addition, the chronological displays of the comments and the absence of a threaded discussion format may reinforce the notion of one-to-many interaction on blogs. Thus, it is often perceived that blog visitors merely respond to the blog owner rather than to other blog visitors.

It is believed that blogging can enhance the ownership and responsibility of the writer, that is, the blog author (Oravec, 2003; Pinkman, 2005), facilitate self-expression and self-empowerment (Blood, 2002), encourage student participation in reading and writing activities (Godwin-Jones, 2006), promote self-reflection (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Lee, 2009), motivate community building (Lee, 2009), and expand socialization opportunities with authentic audiences beyond classroom settings (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Lee, 2009). These benefits have encouraged L2 instructors to utilize blogs for projects designed for intercultural exchange (Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Lee, 2009), cross-cultural understanding and awareness (Elola & Oskoz, 2008), creative and reflective writing (Murray & Hourigan, 2008), peer interaction around feedback (Dippold, 2009), writing reflections and peer interaction (Lee, 2010), and writing fluency (Bloch, 2007).

Few studies concerning telecollaboration (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Lee, 2009), however, are currently available on shared spaces in relation to blogs. Lee (2009) reported that students gained cultural understanding and had positive experiences when working within a Spanish-US intercultural exchange project via blogs and podcasts. Elola and Oskoz (2008) also cited growth of students' intercultural competence in a blogging exchange project composed of students abroad and at home on the basis of Byram's (2000) intercultural competence criteria. However, neither of their studies explained how students in the project worked with each other in relation to shared space. Ducate and Lomicka's (2008) study on a German-French blogging project of student-selected and teacher-assigned topics showed that blog readers found parallel interests and hobbies with their inter-class peers. Rather than focusing on the factual information presented in the blog, they read the blog entries of the inter-class peers to learn about the bloggers as people. Although the end-of-semester class research requirement of describing their blogger partner may have influenced their role as blog readers, this study sheds light on some possible connections on which blog readers may draw in relation to the blog owner. More studies are necessary to understand how students interpret shared space in blogging and how their interpretations relate to their blogging experience.

In sum, the notion of shared space is a potentially useful construct for research regarding joint activities. Whereas the structuralist perspective sees shared space as transcendence of the private world of self and that of others to attain agreement and consensus of a given situation, the post-structuralist perspective sees shared space as variable relative positioning of self and other, stressing the dynamic self-other dialogue.

This study attempts to explore learners' interpretation of shared space in an online multilateral context, and to examine how their reported interpretation of shared space contributes to their online multilateral exchange experience. Two research questions guided the design of this study:

1. How do English language learners interpret shared spaces in multilateral English blogging?
2. How do their interpretations of shared spaces contribute to their multilateral English blogging practice?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study followed the guidelines of ethnographic research. Ethnographic study is often used to explore how a particular group of people, such as English learners in an English multilateral blogging project, defines reality, what symbols and tools they use, how they work with other members in their group, and how their values and beliefs intersect with their behaviors (Fetterman, 1998). When participants have opportunities to undergo a new cultural experience or new cross-cultural communication, ethnographic study can be applied to capture the voices, struggles, and adaptations of the participants and to understand the forces of the cultures they have been in contact with. Because the goal of this study was to explore English learners' interpretations of shared space when blogging and how they worked with the multilateral partners through the shared space, the use of ethnographic research can assist the researcher

in developing understanding of the underlying forces of the blog interactions from the perspectives of the participants.

### **Research Context**

This nine-week partnership English blogging project was conducted throughout the spring semester of 2008 in two different courses in two different universities; one in southern Taiwan and one in northern Japan. The objective of the course in Taiwan, Freshman English Writing, was to develop students' writing skills in narrative genres. Through the English blogging project, the instructor aimed to develop students' awareness of readers in the process of their writing, motivate them to write, and encourage them to connect their writing experience with their personal interest in the theme that they had chosen. Students were asked to make their blog posts "discussable" and accessible to their readers. The course in Japan, Media and Society English Seminar, aimed to improve students' English skills while learning about media. Students were guided to use English to study about the media and how it impacts society and individuals. They also learned how to create their own contributions to the world through media. Thus, in the English blogging project the Japanese instructor attempted to help students understand the medium of blogging and how blogs are and can be used as media tools to connect with others.

Both courses included the English blogging project as a required course assignment. The blogging assignment was 20% of the course grade in the course in Taiwan (TW). The TW instructor assessed the students' blogging performance based on their efforts in making their blogs discussable and in reaching out to their inter-class peers. In the course in Japan (JP) this assignment was 15% of the course grade. The JP instructor evaluated students' blogging performance based on the regularity of their blog posts and their effort at commenting on the blogs of students in the partnership class (hereafter, inter-class) and the blogs of students in their own class (hereafter intra-class).

The researcher was the instructor of the course in Taiwan and was a friend of the instructor of the course in Japan. The researcher was a non-native speaker teacher of English and the instructor of the course in Japan was a native English speaker.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study included 24 learners of English who studied in these two different universities: 17 from the university in Taiwan and 7 from the university in Japan. Although the majority of the students in these two classes were Taiwanese ( $n = 16$ ) and Japanese ( $n = 5$ ), they also included students from Malaysia ( $n = 1$ ) and Mainland China ( $n = 1$ ), and a student who grew up in the US and moved to Taiwan with her family when she entered college (U.S. Immigrant) ( $n = 1$ ). Students in this project were all in their early 20s. The majors of the participants were diverse. Students in Taiwan (hereafter, TW students) were all first year English majors who enrolled in the class "English Writing" (required course) during the study. Students in Japan (hereafter, JP students), however, were non-English majors who studied in the medical school, the dental department, and the engineering department. Except for the student from China, all of them were second year students. They enrolled in the Media and Society English Seminar as an elective course.

The participants' online language experience varied. Prior to the project, the TW students had had experience writing in English blogs online as their course assignment the previous semester. However, except for one, none of the JP students had blogged in English in their previous classes or other contexts.

### **Procedures**

The entire project for TW students lasted approximately 12 weeks, from mid-March to mid-June. JP students, however, carried out the project for 10 weeks, from mid-April to the first week of July. The partnership exchange lasted approximately 9 weeks, from mid-April to the mid-June. Students in both classes underwent a preparation phase before working on their blogs in this project.

### ***Preparation Phase***

The preparation phase of the project lasted for approximately two weeks for each class. The TW class began to prepare for the project in mid-March while the JP class started out their preparation in mid-April due to differences in their school calendars. In order to help students understand how to approach English blogging, both TW students and JP students analyzed blogs of their own choice within their own class prior to the partnership exchange. In addition, students in both classes submitted a blog proposal for their English blogging project before they started to blog in English. Topics students selected included travel (backpacking, biking), tourism (foods, night markets, curry, restaurants, night clubs), astronomy, arts and entertainment (rock and roll music, music and drama, films, Japanese cartoons), sports (athletes, baseball), Shanghai daily life (interactions with foreign students, volunteer experience), dogs, and social issues (animal protection, human psychology and behaviors). Tutorials for building a blog site were also offered in both classes during the preparation phase.

Students in both classes selected the platform they would like to use for the blog project. Most of the students created their blogs with the use of Blogger, while a few blogged in Xanga, Pixnet, and MySpace. Although some students reported their interest in using e-mail or Microsoft Messenger (MSN), none of them connected with others through these tools.

### ***English Blogging Phase***

TW students started to work on their English blog at the end of March and ended the partnership exchange in the middle of June. JP students joined the project in the middle of April and completed the blogging project in the first week of July. The partnership exchange lasted approximately 9 weeks, from the middle of April to the middle of June. Due to the difference in the school schedules and national holidays, TW students started to develop their blogs and write their first blog post approximately three weeks prior to the JP students.

Each instructor designed a class Web site/blog for her own class. Links to students' blogs were provided for intra-class interaction and the partner class Web site was listed for inter-class interaction.

During the project students were asked to design and write their own blogs independently. The requirement on blog entries was 5 for TW students. No specific requirement was set for the JP students. In addition, because the purpose of the project was to motivate students to write English in their own style, neither of the instructors provided an explicit format or guideline for students to write their blogs. Neither instructor provided comments or error corrections to students' blog entries. However, intra-class peer reviews and students' reflective writing were often carried out in the TW class to encourage the students to examine their blogging progress and that of their partners.

Both the TW and the JP students were asked and encouraged to visit the blogs of their classmates and their partnership class and to post their comments and responses to others regularly. Students mainly worked on the project outside of class. However, both instructors took the students to the computer lab for blogging when their schedules allowed.

### ***Data Collection***

Data collection procedures and content of the data sources are listed in [Table 1](#). Due to the schedule of the JP students, I was unable to interview them. However, their final reflections and thoughts about the project were documented in Survey III. Some JP students filled in the survey in Japanese, and their survey was translated from Japanese to English. Class discussions and interviews of the TW class were recorded, transcribed in Chinese, and then translated into English.

**Table 1.** *Data Collection Procedures and Content of Data Sources*

Data Collection Procedures	Content of Data Sources	Taiwan		Japan	
		Data Source	Number	Data Source	Number
Beginning	Basic Information, Online Language Experience, and Cultural Experience	Survey I	17	Survey I	7
Middle	Ongoing Progress and Reflections of Experience in the Project	Reflective Journal Entries	75	Survey II	5
		Class Discussions	2		
		Class Assignment	17		
End	Final Reflections and Thoughts about Experience in the Project	Class Debriefing	1	Survey III	5
		Project Final Reflections	16		
		Individual/ Joint Interviews	8		
Throughout the Whole Process	Blog Writing and Student Interactions	Blog Posts	97	Blog Posts	28
		Weekly Blog Interaction Records on Their Own Blog	51	Weekly Blog Interaction Records on Their Own Blog	42
		Weekly Blog Interaction Records on Others' Blogs	179	Weekly Blog Interaction Records on Others' Blogs	19

### Data Analysis

Data analysis employed a constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and focused on learners' perspectives and experience of shared space. To understand how students interpreted and developed shared space, I first located their attempts at working with their partner class, tracing the patterns of their actions and signs of struggle (e.g., confusions, frustration and problems, and resistance in participation). Their attempts and behaviors were observed and understood with the use of students' blogs, weekly interaction records, class discussions, class assignments, surveys, and reflective journals supplemented by students' participation trends. For example, when students approached others in their blogs or reported their concerns about their partner class or when the amount of their comments changed, I listed these as potential key events (Fetterman, 1998). These key events were sorted and compared with each student and within student groups to locate students' recurrent actions and signs of struggle (Fetterman, 1998). The recurrent key events of the data analysis included eagerness to make friends, frustration with limited responses, excitement about shared interests, excitement about shared experience, use of languages or symbols other than English, content appropriation, accommodations made for students in partnership class, attempts of minimizing differences, insufficient background knowledge, inadequate familiarity with the topic, attempts of making inferences, inferences from cultural memories, and importance of historical events.

## FINDINGS

Participants in this study generated 125 blog posts and 291 blog comments or replies in total. Among these, the TW students developed 97 blog posts on their own blogs and 230 blog comments/replies on their own and their peers' blogs. The JP students developed 28 blog posts on their own blogs and 61 blog comments/replies on their own and their peers' blogs (See Table 2).

Table 2. *Participants' Overall Blog Contributions*

	Total		M	SD	M	SD
	Taiwan	Japan	Taiwan	Taiwan	Japan	Japan
Blog Posts	97	28	5.71	1.10	4.00	2.24
Blog Comments/Replies	230	61	13.53	8.39	8.71	9.27

Inter-class and intra-class interaction demonstrated that students in both groups had interacted both on their own blogs and on those of others (see Table 3). However, there was a difference between the TW students and the JP students in terms of the initiative they took in making comments on others' blogs. Whereas the TW students took the initiative to comment on the blogs of the JP students on 93 occasions ( $M = 5.47$ ;  $SD = 3.66$ ), the JP students only commented on the blogs of the students in Taiwan 8 times ( $M = 1.14$ ;  $SD = 1.35$ ). In addition, the TW students also initiated more interaction (TW-TW, 86 times,  $M = 5.06$ ;  $SD = 3.03$ ) than the JP students (JP-JP, 11 times,  $M = 1.57$ ,  $SD = 2.44$ ) on the blogs of students in their own class.

Moreover, it was found that most of the JP students remained on their own blogs when interacting with the TW students (See Table 3). 37 replies ( $M = 5.29$ ,  $SD = 6.29$ ) were discovered on their own blogs, while only 8 blog interactions ( $M = 1.14$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) were generated on the blogs of the TW students.

Table 3. *Participants' Blog Interaction with Interclass and Intraclass Peers*

		Commenting on Others' Blogs			Replying to Others in Own Blog		
		Total	M	SD	Total	M	SD
Taiwan	Taiwan-Taiwan	86	5.06	3.03	47	2.76	3.85
	Taiwan-Japan	93	5.47	3.66	4	0.24	0.56
	Combined total	179			51		
Japan	Japan-Taiwan	8	1.14	1.35	37	5.29	6.29
	Japan-Japan	11	1.57	2.44	5	0.71	0.95
	Combined total	19			42		

### Students' Interpretations of Shared Spaces in English Blogging

This study found that most of the students in this English blogging project tended to interpret shared spaces on the basis of commonality. Only two students reported their connections with their inter-class peers from the perspective of relativity.

### *Commonality Views on Shared Spaces*

Many students reported that they valued pre-existing shared personal interests, mutual understanding, and similar personal experiences as the prerequisite for making connections with inter-class peers. In their views, these three ingredients catalyzed the rapport between them and their inter-class peers, making them feel that they had something in common when they attempted to respond to the blog owners, or to make decisions about whose blogs to visit.

Students who regarded shared personal interests as the basis for peer connection reported that sharing served as common ground between them and their peers. Makoto (JP), a student who chose backpacking as the theme of his blog, indicated that he visited Ya-Lin's (TW) blog about traveling most frequently because "she is also interested in backpacking" (Makoto, Survey III). Such sharing inspired him to recognize his connection with Ya-Lin as a friend who held a similar interest to his. Cheng-Hong (TW) who constructed a blog around rock music, also reported a similar reason for visiting Jamal's (JP) World Athletes blog:

...I decided to pick this guy, Jamal, to be my partner of English blogging. We shared the same interest—sports. I'm kind of into football (soccer) and a few NBAs, and the former one was discussed in his first post. Although I have no idea whether if he would shake his head with the guitar riffs or not, at least there will always have one common point between us which will keep our conversations from dying out. (Cheng-Hong, class assignment, May 20, 2009).

Cheng-Hong (TW) realized that his interest in football (soccer) was shared by Jamal (JP, Malaysian) and that such sharing could serve as common ground for the development and continuation of their conversation.

In addition to having shared personal interests, some students believed that the intersubjectivity among them and their inter-class peers lay in pre-existing mutual understanding and shared knowledge. These students brought in information that they believed their inter-class peers were familiar with, attempting to demonstrate to their inter-class peers that no difference existed in what they understood or knew. Pei-Ling (TW), a student who included the content of a Japanese pet TV show in her blog about animal protection, explained the reasons behind her actions:

I was thinking that if I want to get them to leave a message for me, I'll need to accommodate their needs...we should write something they know to make them feel interested...I started to think about some possible ways...like the Japanese pet program [i.e., Pochitama ] I watched the show and the smart red panda in Japan-the kind of red panda that can stand still...I actually learned about it from the Japanese pet TV show and I know it is very famous [in Japan]. I think they [the Japanese] should all know about it...so at least they will tell me "I know it, too" or tell me other information about it... (Translated interview with Pei-Ling, June 19, 2009; researcher's clarification in brackets).

To Pei-Ling, her presentation about the red panda attempted to demonstrate to her inter-class peers that she held shared knowledge with them. She believed that such mutual understanding about the red panda could assist her in establishing a rapport between her and her inter-class peers, encouraging further interactions between them.

Xiao-Ting (TW) revealed a similar reason for mentioning Kobe Bryant in her response to Jamal's blog entry about Michael Jordan. Perceiving Jamal as a member who was knowledgeable about both the old and new generations of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) celebrities, she posted her question, "What do you think about Kobe Bryant? I wonder. :)" hoping to receive a response from Jamal. She believed that Jamal should be able to use his knowledge about the NBA's celebrities and respond to her questions without any difficulty. Thus, their pre-existing mutual understanding about the NBA was supposed to serve as the basis for their conversation. Unfortunately, Jamal did not respond to her comments.

Shared personal experience was also regarded as an ingredient of peer rapport for students who valued the commonality of shared spaces. Hui-Yu (TW) and Kengo (JP) revealed that their common personal experience and knowledge about the Japanese anime, *Doraemon* (see [Appendix A](#)) assisted them in developing a connection with each other. In his first blog entry, Kengo introduced the Japanese anime, *Doraemon*, which illustrated a blue round-faced robot cat named Doraemon who traveled back in time from the 22<sup>nd</sup> century to assist a boy, Nobita. Kengo stated that Doraemon was a well-known character in Japan ([Appendix A](#): Kengo's Blog Post). Hui-Yu echoed this in her response, stating that the same phenomenon also existed in Taiwan ([Appendix A](#): Turn 1: *Doraemon is well-known in Taiwan. It has been broadcast since my childhood. XD*) and highlighting her friend's positive attitudes towards Doraemon ([Appendix A](#): Turn 1: *I have a friend who like[s] Doraemon very much because of its chubby face and cute shape*). Kengo was excited to learn that Hui-Yu and her friend knew about Doraemon from the TV channels in Taiwan, and felt in tune with them ([Appendix A](#): Turn 2: *We may have watched [the] same cartoons at the same time :D Viewed in this light, I feel a bond with you!!!*). He illustrated Doraemon's face with the use of symbols in his comments, highlighting his excitement about finding a soul mate who knew about Doraemon by using capitals:

“DORAEMON:” ((≡ ° ♀ ° ≡)) (←DORAEMON!!)

The above examples demonstrate that the participants of this multilateral blogging project interpreted the presence of a pre-existing shared understanding or common knowledge as providing common ground for peer discussions. Through the sharing and commonality of personal interests, the mutual understanding of a subject, and shared personal experience, students felt that they were able to communicate and initiate interaction with their inter-class partners. However, some students' interpretation of the importance of the commonality of shared spaces brought about frustration and difficulties when they attempted to make connections with their inter-class peers. They often suggested that they had trouble locating the common ground with their inter-class peers, and did not feel in tune with each other when they started the conversation.

Difficulties in responding to others' blogs were commonly reported when common knowledge and experience were absent. Students discussed lack of knowledge and familiarity with the topic as two major reasons that hindered them from initiating interaction with their inter-class peers. Shu-Fen (TW) described her difficulties in leaving a comment on unfamiliar topics:

Leaving a comment sometimes could be difficult also. A good comment requires lot of materials. When I know very little about the theme, I can only say some shallow words, and that usually decreases my desire to leave a comment. Lots of really hard-working blog like Cheng-Hong's and Jamal's are great; however, due to my limited knowledge to rock music or sport celebrities, I didn't reply to them. Comments, then, can only be given in a restrained way. (Shu-Fen, class assignment, May 20, 2009).

Stacy also elaborated on how her unfamiliarity with the sports that Jamal (JP Class, Malaysian) blogged about constrained what she could say in her responses and discouraged her from making a connection with Jamal:

Interviewer: Why don't you like the sports blog?  
 Stacy: Because he only included...he only talked about baseball and running...I don't know. I just don't feel like visiting the site and commenting on it.  
 Interviewer: What types of sports do you like better?  
 Stacy: Basketball and football. That is more interesting. The rest are...  
 Interviewer: haha...so it has to be specific types of sports.

Stacy: Yes.

(Translated interview with Stacy, August 15, 2009)

Therefore, for students who interpreted shared space as a territory of commonality the difficulties in understanding content and familiarity with the content and topics between them and their inter-class partners were often regarded as barriers for discussion and engagement, leading them to abandon or skip the blogs they were visiting.

### *Relativity Views on Shared Spaces*

Two students reported that they relied on the relative positions with their inter-class peers when making connections with those peers. Such relative positions were often drawn from a dialogue between the historicity or cultural memories of the students themselves and the inter-class peers they were communicating with. For example, Tin-Jun (TW), a participant who was recognized as a distinguished member of the project for her successful connections to her inter-class partners by her peers, explained how she interpreted the connections between a Malaysian squash player and a Taiwanese baseball player:

In his second post, I found out that he comes from Malaysia. He mentioned that Malaysian squash player won the first prize in a world game. His sharing remind me of Wang,<sup>3</sup> I told him that it is really excited to our country people performed very well in the world. (Tin-Jun, class assignment, May 20, 2009).

Different from her peers who focused entirely on the facts or the events in their discussions she was able to approach a rather deeper issue by relating the cultural contexts that were meaningful to her with the messages behind Jamal's post (JP, originally from Malaysia). Her emphasis on national pride and glory in her connection with the athletes from Jamal's and her own country, demonstrated that she re-contextualized herself in the cultural memories of Wang, a baseball pitcher who performed very well for the New York Yankees in Major League Baseball in the United States during the time of the study, and that the Malaysian professional squash player, Nicol Ann David, who was ranked number one in the world in women's squash, as mentioned in Jamal's post, resonated with her. In this process of re-contextualization, Jamal's words were no longer viewed as linguistic codes within a closed structure or facts in universal contexts. Instead, Tin-Jun assigned meanings to the names of the athletes and treated them as semiotic signs in the relative shared space of this communication experience.

Tin-Jun's interpretations of shared space in regard to relativity afforded her the opportunity to create a relative space in dialogue with others during the discussions. Instead of simply removing herself from discussions of unfamiliar topics, Tin-Jun was constantly observed relating herself to her inter-class partners, even if commonality was absent. In a joint interview she explained how she approached the unfamiliar content in Jamal's (JP) blog of the world athletes:

Pei-Ling: I don't want to go to the site because after I read the posts, I still couldn't understand anything about the sports...I don't know how to ask for something as I don't always understand...so I didn't think of replying to him.

Tin-Jun: I didn't understand what he wrote about some of the sports, either, but I went ahead and looked them up, and then I figured...that's what he meant.

Pei-Ling: You worked so hard, you even researched about it?! (laughing).

Tin-Jun: That way we could have something to talk about...Otherwise, I couldn't come up with anything to say... (laughing).

Pei-Ling: Eh, I should have done that...haha...

(Translated joint interview with Pei-Ling and Tin-Jun, June 19, 2009)

Tin-Jun's own research about the sport squash and her ability to interpret some symbolic meaning in Jamal's message allowed her to sense a relative discussion space between her and Jamal. While others, such as Pei-Ling, tended to abandon discussions due to a lack of commonality and insufficient familiarity, Tin-Jun seemed to serve as an intercultural mediator to read the messages behind the linguistic codes and to relate her contexts to Jamal's. In fact, she was the only student who held discussions with Jamal about squash and sports in Taiwan (see [Appendix B](#)).

Besides Tin-Jun, Stacy (TW class, former U.S. immigrant who moved back to Taiwan) also approached her interpretation of shared space from the perspective of relativity. She demonstrated that her interpretation of shared spaces resided in the symbolic meaning of the historical events she had experienced in relation to how she perceived the experiences of the participants in Japan. She blended Japanese with English in her comments on Makoto's post "Eating in Vietnamese Market," describing his unforgettable experience in Vietnam of tasting a boiled egg containing a partially-developed chicken embryo:

Excerpt 1

- 1 Stacy to Makoto (June 05, 2009)  
I can't believe that you are dear to swallow that "alien". Seriously, what do you think before you put it in your mouth? *Kuwaii desuka?* But really, I am appreciated you are willing to try certain different dish.  
by Stacy
- 2 Makoto to Stacy (June, 10, 2009)  
Stacy!!!I ate that "alien". and that was *kowai* experience

Stacy used a polite form of the Japanese expression, *kuwaii desuka* [correct form: *kowai*] (English translation: *scary*), to express her shocked reaction to Makoto's post, being eager to know if he considered eating the "alien" unborn chick in an egg, as terrible an experience as she thought it might have been. Rather than viewing Japanese as linguistic codes or a shared language between her and Makoto, she in fact considered the Japanese language as a symbolic tool that could be used to create a context with specific meaning, resonating with what she had experienced as a U.S. immigrant. She reported that her attempt to include Japanese language in her comments to Makoto (JP) was to create a less foreign environment for her inter-class partners, because her experience as a U.S. immigrant signified this importance:

...When I first surrendered by the completed strange environment with indefinable language and faces; the extreme horror came upon me...that was the moment I felt foreign and scared in the United States. The conversation is surely a great issue for me so I can totally understand how difficult might be for the Japanese to work with foreigners like us, especially the clash of cultural differences which will affect the language we are used to say... I have been thinking to include some Japanese terms that I know which can help Makoto to have more understanding of what I am comment him for. At least we won't have problem of understanding each comment. Therefore we can move our conversation into more deeply and more interesting. (Stacy, Class Assignment, May 20, 2009).

Thus, Stacy's choice of the Japanese language, blending in sentences written in English, presented her relative position toward Makoto in the context of English blogging as a former immigrant who had been exposed to a context in which a foreign language intensified her feelings of hopelessness. Perceiving English blogs as foreign spaces that constituted English, it seems Stacy defined Makoto as a virtual immigrant in an English environment just as she had been in the US. For Stacy, the use of Japanese as part of her past experience provided her with a way to enter the conversation. Her use of the Japanese language in her comments made on Makoto's post were responded to (see Excerpt 1), although Makoto

(JP) approached her with a rather different focus, correcting her errors in the Japanese form *kuwaini* that Stacy included in her comment to *kwai*.

Both Tin-Jun and Stacy demonstrated their interpretation of shared space from the perspective of relativity. By re-contextualizing themselves and conceptualizing the symbolic meaning of the historicity of the self and the other they were able to draw inferences and make projections from their past memories and cultural imaginations in dialogues with others and sense a relative shared space during the discussions.

## DISCUSSION

### Patterns of Blogging Participation

It is interesting to note that this study reported that TW students took more initiative in commenting on both the blogs of their inter-class and intra-class peers in comparison to the JP students. Reasons for such a difference can be complex, particularly as the class instructors, assignment requirements, and students' English proficiency levels were not identical. However, the previous English blogging experience of the TW students and the number of students who participated in this English blogging project may have played an important role in this difference. Prior to this study, the TW students had had a semester-long English blogging experience in which they responded to their peers' English blogs in addition to working on their own English blogs. This experience may have provided them with some knowledge about how to leave messages on others' English blogs. However, as first-time English bloggers some JP students reported that they had difficulties leaving a comment on a TW student's blog. Kengo (JP) commented that, "I've tried hard to visit Taiwanese friends' blogs every week, but it was really hard to give feedback to their posts" (Kengo, Survey III). In this case, it was not surprising that only 4 JP students wrote comments on the blogs of TW students with 3 out of the 4 of them only contributing one comment.

The differences in the numbers of students who participated in this project may also play a role in the distinct numbers between inter-class comment initiatives. While there were 17 students from the university in Taiwan participating in the English blogging project, only 7 students from the university in Japan participated in this activity. Therefore, the number of comments that each JP student received tended to be much higher than the amount each TW students received. Makoto (JP), whose blog was popular among TW students, reported that he felt overwhelmed with the amount of comments he received from the TW students, "...many people gave me comments, and I was very glad, but it was too many, so I felt burden in this project" (Makoto, Survey III). Thus, it became less likely for JP students to take the initiative and comment on TW students' blogs, as much of their attention was given to the overwhelming comments received from the TW students.

### Student Interpretations of Shared Space

The results of this study showed that the students in this multilateral English blogging project reported that the presence of pre-existing shared interests, mutual understanding, or shared personal experience serves as common ground for peer discussions. Their interpretations of the importance of the commonality of shared space, guided them to acknowledge their inter-class peers in: (a) their consensus and agreement of topics (e.g., *the topics or content in your blog are also interesting or important to me*) or a given situation (e.g., *I had the same feelings as you did about what you described*); and (b) their identities as insiders of their inter-class members' community (e.g., *I have also experienced what you experienced before; What you are familiar with is something with which I am familiar*). For example, through her blog discussions of the red panda in the Japanese pet TV show, Pei-Ling (TW) worked to demonstrate that she had knowledge of Japanese culture and that she could therefore be considered a member of the Japanese community. While students in this study tended to interpret shared space from the perspective of commonality, it is not surprising that they recognized shared personal interests, mutual understanding, and shared personal experiences as common ground for inter-class connections.

This finding contributes to the literature of shared space of joint activities from a learner's perspective. It demonstrates that learners' interpretations of shared space tend to echo the commonality perspective of shared space, which emphasizes interlocutors' consensus about topics, intentions, and goals of a joint activity, as well as the mutually agreed definition of a situation (Rommetveit, 1979, 1985; Wegerif, 1998). However, it is important to note that some students in this study seemed to situate their interpretation of intersubjectivity in their remembered or imagined cultural contexts (Kramsch, 2009b) and were in dialogue with the encounters they experienced or imagined when interacting with their inter-class peers. For example, Pei-Ling's (TW) actions of including the cultural artifacts of the Japanese pet TV program, Pochitama, portrayed the inferences she had made from her imagined Japanese context, which was that she believed that all Japanese people knew about Pochitama. This finding does not echo Rommetveit's (1979, 1985) proposal of the here-and-now nature of intersubjectivity which emphasizes those messages delivered at the time of the speech. That is, when she brought in Pochitama in the blogging interaction, Pei-Ling may have been engaged in dialogue with her remembered or imagined encounters rather than in a reply to what a previous speaker had written. In this case, the commonality of shared space can be difficult to achieve.

### **The Search for Affinity Space**

This study demonstrated that many students took initiatives to connect with their inter-class peers through common interests or experiences after reading their inter-class peers' blogs. Similar to Ducate and Lomicka's (2008) blog study that encouraged German and French students to read and follow native speakers' blogs that the instructors selected for their blogger description research project in the first semester, students in this study also emphasized the interests, hobbies, or experiences parallel to their inter-class peers while browsing others' blogs. For example, Makoto (JP) highlighted his discovery of Ya-Lin (TW) and his shared interest in traveling and how this discovery encouraged him to visit Ya-Lin's blog frequently. Hui-Yu (TW) and Kengo (JP) were excited about their shared experience with Doraemon and stressed how it helped them to connect to each other. Thus, students' emphasis on common interests or experience for their blog connections can be seen as an important phenomenon in blogging communication. This conclusion is also supported by Guzzetti and Gamboa's (2005) study of youth blogging taking place in non-instructional settings.

This finding sheds light on the intentions of the students who participated in this multilateral English blogging project. Students' emphasis on shared personal interests, mutual understanding, and shared personal experiences as common ground hinted at their search for affiliated members who can gather around a common passion, interest, or endeavor (Gee, 2004, 2007) while blogging with their inter-class peers. Their use of specialist languages or symbols such as *Manchester United*, *MU*, *the red panda*, *Kobe Bryant*, *Doraemon*, and ((≡ ° ♀ ° ≡)) resonate with one important feature of Gee's (2004, 2007) notion of affinity space. Gee argued that in affinity space members bring in special knowledge and languages of a specialist domain (e.g., professional field, an interest or hobby), gained from their outside social experience, and utilize them to form social networks of attachment. Research exploring specific communities such as fan-fiction (Black, 2008; Thomas, 2007), animation and manga forums (Lam, 2009a), philosophy forums (Lam, 2009a), and video gaming (Gee, 2004; Steinkuehler, 2007) have discussed the specialist languages used in youth's affinity spaces of some special domains. However, in an open environment such as blogs in which the topics of interest and community endeavors are usually not pre-defined or pre-structured, to what extent students' search for affinity space can be fulfilled can be uncertain and challenging. More research needs to be done to understand the uncertainty and challenges experienced by bloggers who have or have not been a part of affinity spaces of a specific domain and their successful stories in searching for affinity spaces through blogging communication.

### **The Constraints of Learner Interpretation on the Commonality of Shared Space**

This study also found that students who regarded shared spaces from the perspectives of commonality only responded to those who held the same interests, understanding, and personal experience but not to

others with whom they felt no initial common rapport. This finding supports the previous literature on the rise of missed communication (Ware, 2005), failed communication (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006), or communication tensions (Basharina, 2007; Kramersch & Thorne, 2002; Ware & Kramersch, 2005) when commonality and sharing are absent. However, as Kramersch and Ware (2005) suggest, differences are unavoidable in cross-cultural or intercultural communication since such communication brings in interlocutors of historical, cultural, and educational varieties (Kramersch, 1995; Ware & Kramersch, 2005). It is through the varieties existing in cross-cultural or intercultural communication, however, that students can obtain the opportunity to experience unfamiliarity and embrace difference. It is for this reason that Lam (2009b) highlights the importance of encouraging students to develop diverse communicational links with people of different socio-cultural positions with the goal of assisting students in realizing diverse ideas, viewpoints, and knowledge in the current distributed society. Therefore, while the interpretation of shared spaces toward commonality can afford students who hold shared interests, experience, and knowledge a basis for interaction, it can also prevent them from exploring other opportunities for communication when they focus only on content. How to enable students who mainly value the commonality of shared space to establish alternative communicational relations with others is of importance for language teachers.

### **The Role of Symbolic Competence in Learner Interpretations of the Relativity of Shared Space**

Two students reported that they approached shared space from the perspective of relativity and relied on the relative positions between them and their inter-class peers when making connections with those peers in this study. Similar to Kramersch and Whiteside's (2008) research on multilingual speakers, students who interpreted shared space from the perspective of relativity in this study often drew relative positions from a dialogue between their and their inter-class peers' historicity or cultural memories through re-contextualization and re-positioning. For example, Tin-Jun (TW) demonstrated that she re-contextualized herself in the cultural memories of the national glory recognized in Taiwan, about her countryman, a professional baseball player (i.e., Wang), echoing the achievement of the Malaysian squash player mentioned in Jamal's post (JP class, originally from Malaysia). Stacy (TW class, the U.S. immigrant who moved back to Taiwan) presented her relative position toward Makoto (JP) by re-positioning Makoto (JP) as a virtual immigrant in an English environment, projecting her past memories as a U.S. immigrant.

However, it is important to note that only two students in this study approached shared space from the perspective of relativity and served as creative agents to mediate their and others' encounters in order to form relationships of possibility (Kramersch & Whiteside, 2008) or to create affordances (van Lier, 2004) with the use of heterogeneous semiotic resources in their repertoire. This finding hints at the importance of symbolic competence (Kramersch, 2006, 2008) in the exploration of the relationship of possibility from the perspective of the relativity of shared space. Kramersch (2008) argued that the relationship of possibility would be created only if the language learners could exercise symbolic competence as a frame of mind in the act of communication; that is, "they [language learners] learn to see themselves both through their own embodied history and subjectivity, and through the history and subjectivity of others" (p. 403). However, many language learners may not have the capacity to perceive the symbolic meanings of their and others' encounters and historicity (van Lier, 2004). Thus, how language teachers can best support language learners to learn to read people, situations, and events embedded in historicity and the cultural imagination in the self-other is important as learners try to construct relationships of possibility and create affordances (Kramersch, 2006, 2008) from the perspective of the relativity of shared space.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study investigated how learners interpret shared space in a multilateral English blogging project. It showed that most students in the project interpreted shared space from the perspective of commonality. Although such views can enable students who hold shared interests, experience, and knowledge to find

common ground for blog interactions, it can also constrain them from exploring other possibilities in relation to the blog content, the blog discussions, and the bloggers, when commonality is absent.

In this study, only two students reported that they relied on the relative positions between themselves and their inter-class peers in order to make connections with their inter-class peers. Such relative positions assisted them in applying objects and historicity as symbolic resources, and allowed them to mediate and develop an alternative communicative shared space while blogging. Their experience helped the researcher to achieve some understanding about the possible roles of intercultural mediators in intercultural communication. Embracing differences and finding relative positions between students and “others” can assist them in gaining cultural experience in multilateral English blogging projects so that they can then take advantage of the differences and unfamiliarity they experienced and therefore negotiate and co-construct meaning with their partners via multiple pathways.

Detailed empirical research is necessary to investigate how the abilities of perceiving the relativity of shared space are developed. As most English language learners in this project seemed unable to draw diverse views on shared space and to approach their partners with respect to those diverse views, it can be useful to understand the barriers in their development in relativity interpretation. In addition, case studies or narrative inquiries investigating students who have demonstrated a relativity view of shared space can be valuable in understanding how these students learned to perceive symbolic resources and to connect these resources to establish alternative communicational links with others.

Pedagogically, it may be useful for teachers to facilitate students’ understanding of the role of relativity in shared space, and thus enable them to locate possible relationships in such projects. For example, teachers can invite students with the relativity view of shared space to present how they develop connections with their inter-class peers. They may also brainstorm with the students about what they could do with inter-class interactions, when commonality between them and their inter-class peers is absent. This does not mean that instructors should force students to connect to something that they are not interested in or someone with whom they do not wish to interact. However, it is important to explain to students that abandoning or missing opportunities for intercultural communication due merely to a lack of commonality and familiarity can deprive them of the valuable opportunity of experiencing historical, cultural, and educational diversity.

## APPENDIX A. Excerpt 2: Interaction between Kengo (JP) and Hui-Yu (TW)

1 Kengo's Blog Post (May, 12, 2009)

**DORAEMON!!**

Do you know doraemon??

I think, *almost all of Japanese know what doraemon is.*

Doraemon is a blue robot which looks like a cat.

And he (it?) comes from 21th centry.

So he has a lot of funny [fun] inventions.

Most of the time, he uses these inventions to help Nobita.

Although most of these inventions are very very useful, Nobita can't command these inventions as Nobita likes.

Far from it, Nobita compounds problems by use of these useful inventions.

In these respects, 『DORAEMON』 is one of the most interesting cartoon.

2 Hui-Yu-->Kengo (May, 19, 2009)

Hello! I'm Hui-Yu from Taiwan. Nice to meet you! I am also fascinated by cartoons!! ...Our entertainment programs are affected by Japan deeply. Usually in dinner time, cartoons are broadcasted, and it also cultivates my habits of watching cartoons. ... I like to watch cartoons rather than read comic books, since I think animated films with sound effects are more realistic than reading comic book. By the way, do you like to watch cartoons rather than read comic books? *Besides, Doraemon is well-known in Taiwan. It has been broadcast since my childhood. XD I have a friend who like Doraemon very much because of its chubby face and cute shape.*

Ha ha... It seems that I express my opinion too much hoping you will not mind.

The following are my blog site --- <http://xxx.blogspot.com/> My theme of blog is university life. Although my blog is not relevant to yours totally, I still hope you can come to visit my blog and give me some opinion, and then I will thank you very much. I am willing to make friends with you and welcome your visit.^^

3 Kengo-->Hui-Yu (May, 21, 2009)

To Hui-Yu

Hello, Hui-Yu! I'm Kengo from Japan. Nice to meet you, too!! *I've heard that cartoons made in Japan like Doraemon are broadcasted in Taiwan*

*((≡ ° ♀ ° ≡)) (←DORAEMON!!) We may have watched same cartoons at the same time :D Viewed in this light, I feel a bond with you!!!To answer your question, I like to watch cartoons rather than read comic books. This is because cartoons have an uplifting feeling!*

I'll visit your blog and give you some opinions ((≡ ° ♀ ° ≡)) hahaha I'm also willing to make friends with you!!!Thank you for visiting my blog:]

Note: Researcher's emphasis in italics. Texts in brackets indicate researcher's correction for clarifications.

**APPENDIX B. Excerpt 3: Interaction between Tin-Jun (TW) and Jamal (JP)**

- 1 Tin-Jun-->Jamal (May 15, 2009)  
It is really excited and inspired to see some of our own country people performed excellently in the world. *I am also happy to hear the good news about Nicol. In fact, we don't play squash much in Taiwan. After I searched some basic information about squash. It seems that it requires lots of technique.* How about you, Jamal, do you play squash?^^
- 2 Jamal-->Tin-Jun (May 15, 2009)  
haha...im not interest to squash..but prefer to volley and soccer...so, what they most play at Taiwan? and how about u?
- 3 Tin-Jun-->Jamal (May 16, 2009)  
Frankly speaking, *I am not quite sure what sports we play most here. However, I would like to share my own experience with you.*^^ I like to play badminton. Speaking of volleyball, we have a volleyball team in our department. When I was in primary school, we played basketball and baseball. When I was in junior high school[school], we played basketball and badminton. When I was in high school, we played basketball, volleyball, badminton, ping-pong and soccer. Now, we play basketball, volleyball, badminton, ping-pong and softball. Sorry, I could not answer your question precisely.
- 4 Jamal-->Tin-Jun (May 17, 2009)  
tin-jun, u [don't] need to feel sorry....im very impressed with ur answer...u told everything..i like it...maybe we can share our experience about anything...glad to know u
- 5 Tin-Jun-->Jamal (May 18, 2009)  
Jamal, sure. I am willing to share my experience with you as well.^^ By the way, I missed one thing, that is, I like to play badminton but I like to watch tennis games.  
Ha~ha~XDDD

Note: Researcher's emphasis in italics. Texts in brackets indicate researcher's correction for clarifications.

**NOTES**

1. For example, in textbooks of intercultural communication (e.g., Jandt, 2010; Samovar & Porter, 2004), westerners and easterners are often categorized as individualist and collectivist in relation to Value Orientation Theory. In addition, African Americans, Spanish-speaking Americans, and Caucasians are considered as different speech communities in the United States due to the variations in their word use, grammar rules, and interaction patterns.
2. These studies, framed in sociocultural perspectives, reported that rather than exercising frequent negotiation of meaning in the structured initiation-response-feedback (IRF) sequence proposed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), learners in a joint activity participate in a reciprocal dialogue in which they practice meaningful conversation and offer collaborative support to one another (Foster & Ohta, 2005; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Ohta, 2001). Thus, peer assistance can arise in the process of co-construction and collaboration in addition to communication breakdowns and failure in negotiation of meanings during social interactions (Foster & Ohta, 2005; Ohta, 2001; Swain, 2000).

3. Wang (Chien-Ming Wang) is a baseball pitcher for Major League Baseball in America. He was at his peak performance while at the New York Yankees when the study was carried out. Wang was born in Taiwan, and many people in Taiwan regard him with national pride and glory.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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