UNDERSTANDING THE "OTHER SIDE": INTERCULTURAL LEARNING IN A SPANISH-ENGLISH E-MAIL EXCHANGE

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural learning is often assumed to be an automatic benefit of e-mail exchanges between groups of learners in different countries, but little research exists on whether on-line intercultural collaboration does actually develop learners' understanding of the other culture's perspective and world view. This paper reviews what recent literature suggests intercultural learning to involve and then reports on a year-long e-mail exchange between Spanish and English second year university language learners. Using the results of qualitative research, the paper identifies key characteristics of e-mail exchanges which helped to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997). It also outlines elements of e-mail messages which may enable students to develop successful intercultural relationships with their partners.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the plethora of descriptive reports on intercultural e-mail projects, little appears to be known about what students actually learn from the interaction with their virtual peers in other cultures (Kern, 1998; Mueller-Hartmann, 2000a). Although many projects adopt ambitious aims which involve the development of tolerance and better intercultural awareness, as well as the reduction of stereotypes and prejudice (Gray & Stockwell, 1998; Meagher & Castaños, 1996; Roberts, 1994; Sakar, 2001), little has been done to evaluate to what extent such objectives can be achieved in the limited life-span of an e-mail exchange between groups of foreign language learners or how they should be achieved. Nevertheless, recent work in this area would appear to demonstrate that this gap in the literature is being addressed (Belz, 2002; Belz & Kinginger, 2002; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002).

The belief that contact between cultures automatically leads to intercultural learning and to the development of positive attitudes towards the target culture has already been rejected by many (Allport, 1979; Coleman, 1998; Fischer, 1998) and Richter confirms that this is also the case for virtual intercultural contact: "The Internet brings about the contact of cultures, but this does not automatically imply cultural understanding" (1998, p. 15; this author's translation).

Others, including Belz (2002), Belz and Müller-Hartmann (2002) and O'Dowd (2000) have also found many impediments for intercultural learning in technology-supported exchanges. In contrast, Furstenberg, Levet, English, and Maillet (2001), Tella (1991), and von der Emde, Schneider, and Kötter (2001), have reported more positive experiences.

This paper reports on an e-mail exchange which took place between five pairs of Spanish and English second-year university students over the course of one academic year. Both sets of students were studying the language of the partner group. This author was both the teacher of the students in Spain and the researcher. By carrying out a content analysis of students' on-line interaction, combined with questionnaires and interviews, my aim was to "look beyond the texts of interaction to the broader contextual dynamics that shape and are shaped by those texts" (Warschauer & Kern, 2000, p. 15). In particular, I wanted to gain insight into why some networked exchanges may fail to lead to intercultural learning while others can bring learners to alter their perspectives and change their way of viewing both

the home and target cultures. The central research question can be stated as follows: What characteristics of e-mail exchanges lead to intercultural learning?

Section two is a review of the recent literature on the aims of intercultural learning and intercultural communicative competence. Section three offers an overview of how e-mail exchanges have been seen to contribute to intercultural learning in the foreign language classroom. This is followed in section four by a brief presentation of the background of this particular project, including its aims, the tasks which the students carried out, and the qualitative research techniques which were employed by the author in order to identify the effects of the exchange on the learners. In sections five, six, and seven, I look at the three key elements which emerged during the exchange as being influential to the development of intercultural learning. Finally, in the discussion in section eight, I consider the possible consequences of these findings for the organisation and implementation of future intercultural e-mail exchanges.

INTERPRETATIONS OF INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

The process of "intercultural learning" and its implied goal "intercultural competence" (Grosch & Leenan, 1998) have recently become fashionable in the world of foreign language methodology; however, their exact meanings continue to be the source of much debate and disagreement. Writers such as Hu (2000) and Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, and Colby (2000) have made practical contributions to the discussion by presenting overviews of cognitive, affective, and skill-based aims, while others have outlined the content of interculturally-oriented curricula (Neuner, 1997) as well as activities for developing intercultural competence in learners (Sercu, 1998). However, collections of papers in search of common definitions have served merely to reveal the many different interpretations of intercultural learning which exist, as well as the different levels of importance which writers and teachers feel should be attributed to this goal (for examples of varying definitions see Bausch, Christ, & Krumm, 1997). Edmonsdson and House (1998) believe that intercultural learning has avoided definition because it is seen by some as a learning objective, by others as a learning process, and yet by others as a particular form of communication. These authors also question the usefulness of the term when, in their opinion, all foreign language learning is inherently "intercultural." Finally, they consider "intercultural learning" as overloading communicative competence with sociocultural objectives. The consequences of this is that the linguistic aspect of language learning has been played down in favour of an idealistic, affective perspective (Edmondson & House, 1998; House, 1996).

The emphasis which models of intercultural learning attribute to changing students' attitudes and perspectives has particularly been the cause of much criticism in the literature. Hamburger (1990) suggests that intercultural learning over-emphasises foreignness and the differences between cultures and therefore risks leading to a reinforcement of stereotypes and ethnocentrism among learners. Kramsch (1993) has highlighted the difficulties in ascertaining if and when the affective aims of intercultural learning have been achieved. Finally, Cryle questions the realism of focusing on the affective aspects of intercultural learning when getting students to become more aware of foreign perspectives may be "an unhelpfully distant goal" (2002, p. 30).

Despite this lack of clarity in terms of definitions and evaluation, there seems to be general agreement among the supporters of intercultural learning as to its key underlying goals and their consequences for language instruction. Risager (1998), in her review of approaches to culture learning, explains that, in contrast to previous approaches to language and culture learning, students are no longer expected to simply take on positive attitudes towards the target culture and its members. Byram (1997) outlines why this is the case: "Attitudes which are the pre-condition for successful intercultural interaction need to be not simply positive, since even positive prejudice can hinder mutual understanding" (p. 34).

Similarly, Bennet (1993), in his developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, warns against the limited nature of an understanding of culture where difference is recognised, but nevertheless minimised

in order to highlight the "universality" of human behaviour. Bennett says the belief that "deep down we all are the same" is not an adequate response to cultural difference. Although characteristics of cultures may have much in common at times, he sees this as not being relevant to the real issues of intercultural communication:

> They [attitudes of universalism] fail to address the culturally unique social context of physical behavior that enmeshes such behavior in a particular worldview. Failure to consider this context leads people to assume that knowledge of the physical universals of behaviour is sufficient for understanding all other people. (Bennett, 1993, p. 43)

Instead, Bennett sees true intercultural sensitivity coming about when behaviour is understood as belonging to a particular cultural context and the behaviour is therefore subsequently judged from within that context and not by the learners' own cultural standards. This ability to step back from one's own cultural background and critically identify the original cultural reasoning behind beliefs, actions and behaviour is described by Bennett as "constructive marginality" and reflects much of what other writers have described as "critical cultural awareness" (Byram, 1997), dialogism (Tella & Mononen-Aaltonen, 1998), intersubjectivity (Kinginger, in press) and "cross-cultural capability" (Killick, 1999). In contrast to earlier models of culture learning, learners are no longer expected to reject their own culture and "take on" the target culture (something viewed as undesirable as it involves replacing one form of monoculturalism for another), but rather to find what Kramsch (1993) describes as a "third place." This refers to a location between the home and target cultures where all behaviour (both that of others and that of oneself) is seen as being grounded in a particular cultural context. This concept owes much to the description of the "third domain" offered by Bhabha (1994) and Bakhtin's notion of dialogism (1986). Kramsch (1993) sees the term as an alternative to the tendency in foreign language teaching to treat the home and foreign cultures as monolothic entities. She refers to the phrase "being on the fence," as being representative of the common belief that language learners are somehow located merely between two cultures. She criticises this term for ignoring the reality of differences in class, race, religion, and so forth, which are inherent in each of the two national cultures. Instead, Kramsch suggests that learners need to locate themselves in a place which "grows in the interstices between the cultures the learner grew up with and new cultures he or she is being introduced to" (p. 236). This description highlights two important aspects of intercultural learning. Firstly, it underlines the learners' newly achieved distance from both the home and target cultures, and secondly, it refers to the multiplicity of cultural identities which belong to all of us, thereby rejecting the fallacy of "one nation = one culture."

Taking into account these principles or key characteristics of intercultural learning, Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence can be seen as a representative model of what elements the process of intercultural learning should aim to develop in learners. There are various reasons for this choice. Firstly, the model (summarised below) offers a comprehensive approach that deals with the skills, attitudes, knowledge and critical awareness which have been seen to constitute intercultural competence. Secondly, Byram's main work on the model offers not only objectives for each of the components, but also suggests modes of assessment for each part. Such elaboration on the model facilitates the teacher and action researcher's (Wallace, 1998) task of operationalising and putting the model into practice in the classroom, although Burwitz-Melzer (2000) criticises the objectives proposed by Byram as being "inevitably very general and abstract" (p. 45, this author's translation). Finally, the model has already been put into use extensively in foreign language classrooms. As such, it has become a common point of reference in the literature on intercultural learning, thereby confirming to a great extent its relevance and practicality. Classroom practice and research which have been carried out using the model, at least to a certain extent, as a source of aims and assessment include Byram (1999), Duffy and Mayes (2001), Müller-Hartmann (1999), and Woodin (2001).

Byram's model (1997) contains the following elements:

- "Attitudes of curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (p. 50).
- "Knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general process of societal and individual interaction" (p. 58).
- "Skills of interpreting and relating: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own" (p. 61).
- "Skills of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (p. 61).
- "Critical cultural awareness/political education: an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (p. 63).

The question which is of interest here is, *What must occur in an intercultural e-mail exchange in order for such learning to be achieved?* The following section looks briefly at how networked technologies have been used until now by teachers to develop intercultural learning.

INTERCULTURAL LEARNING AND NETWORKED EXCHANGES

Intercultural exchanges in education have their origins in the global learning networks pioneered by Freinet (1994) in France in the 1920's and later by Lodi in Italy in the 1960's (Cummins & Sayers, 1995). Freinet made use of available technologies and modes of communication to enable his classes to exchange "cultural packages" of flowers, fossils, and photos of their local area with classes in other regions of France. Similarly, Lodi motivated his class and helped to develop their literacy skills by encouraging them to create student newspapers in collaboration with distant partner classes.

Cummins and Sayers (1995) also make reference to the importance of Allport's (1979) "contact theory" in the design of successful global exchange projects. This theory proposed that inter-group prejudice could be combated by providing the rival ethnic groups with opportunities to co-operate together to achieve common academic goals.

E-mail based exchanges and projects between groups of language learners have received much attention in the literature of computer mediated-communication (Cummins & Sayers, 1995; Donath & Volkmer, 1997; Meagher & Castaños, 1996; Warschauer, 1997) and much has been made of their potential for developing intercultural competence and bringing about a change in students' perspectives (Kinginger, Gourvés-Hayward, & Simpson, 1999). However, many e-mail exchanges often result in little more than superficial pen-pal projects where information is exchanged without reflection and where students are rarely challenged to reflect on their own culture or their stereotypical views of the target culture. For example, Meagher and Castaños found in their exchange between classes in the USA and Mexico that bringing the students to compare their different attitudes and values led to a form of culture shock and a more negative attitude towards the target culture. Fischer (1998), in his work on German-American electronic exchanges, warns that very often students simply react to the foreign way of thinking, dismissing it as strange or "typical" of that particular culture, instead of reflecting and learning from the messages of their distant partners.

For this reason, researchers have called for carefully designed approaches to e-mail exchanges which integrate them fully into the classroom as opposed to treating them as mere pen-pal activities (Cummins & Sayers, 1995; Kern, 1998; Roberts, 1994). Mueller-Hartmann (2000a) suggests that if learners are to achieve a genuine change in perspective in an e-mail exchange, it is necessary to have an effective task-based structure which is integrated into the classroom so students have an opportunity to analyse and

reflect on their computer-based investigations with the help and guidance of their teachers. Several recent studies have also looked at how the outcomes of intercultural exchanges can be influenced by both macro- as well as micro-level aspects of the environments in which they take place. Belz (2002) describes how social and institutional factors in Germany and the USA, such as language valuation, technological access, and course accreditation, influenced the outcome of intercultural exchanges between university students in these two countries. Similarly, Müller-Hartmann (2000b) looked at the institutional pressures and requirements which influenced the developing relationship of teachers who were organising an intercultural e-mail exchange. He also investigated how the teachers' ability to adapt to the extra challenges of such an exchange influenced the intercultural learning process of their students. Referring to e-mail exchanges as well as other on-line learning activities, Warschauer's (1999) ethnographic study of four different language classes emphasises the need for electronic learning activities to be authentic, learner-centred, relevant to students' lives, and also for them to allow students to explore their own social and cultural identities.

In the following section I explore a year-long e-mail exchange between two classes of language students in Spain and Britain. This qualitative analysis attempts to identify what elements influenced the developing attitudes of the students towards the target and home cultures and thereby affected their levels of success in achieving "a third place" between both cultures.

BACKGROUND TO EXCHANGE: LEÓN, SPAIN AND KING'S COLLEGE, ENGLAND

Project Background

As the teacher of the Spanish students, I came into contact with my counterpart at King's College, London through the IECC Network, one of the many on-line mailing lists which facilitate the creation of intercultural partnerships between classes in different countries. Both of us were native speakers of the language that we were teaching. At the time, I was an Irish teacher of English as a foreign language in Spain and my partner was a Spanish native speaker teaching in London.[1] We decided that five members of each class would be paired together for the exchange. The five participants in León were a subset of approximately 50 students enrolled in a second-year course of English as a foreign language at León University, while the students from London were part of a smaller second year class of Spanish as a foreign language. The students' levels in their respective foreign languages varied greatly, although my partner teacher and I both believed, based on previous class tests, that all the students were able to express themselves in the L2 at a relatively advanced level. With one exception, none of the Spanish group had been in Britain before, while all the members of the British group had spent periods abroad either in Spain or Latin America.

Project Tasks

Taking into account Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence, we both agreed on a series of tasks, which we hoped would serve as a springboard for discussion and interaction. Some of these were based on material already placed on-line by the Tandem Network, while other activities were adapted from the Cultura project (Furstenberg et al., 2001). Following Appel (1999) and Brammerts (1996), students were asked to complete each task in their target language but also to write a section in their own language where they would correct the mistakes made by their partner in previous correspondence.

Table 1. Overview of Tasks

Task	Title	Description	Aim
1	In-class e-mailing list	Students discuss the image of Spain abroad (Spanish Group only).	Accustom students to using e-mail in their learning.
2	Introductory letter	Students introduce themselves and tell partner what may be different if they visited the other's home town.	Students get to know their partners and reflect on cultural differences.
3	Word association	Students write the associations which they have of key words such as "good food," and "bull-fighting." They then compare their reactions with their partners' (Furstenberg et. al., 2001, p. 57).	Students become more aware of the link between language and culture.
4	In-class e-mailing list	Students discuss the image of Britain in Spain and recount their experiences with members of that culture (Spanish group only).	Brainstorming and discussion for future exchange with partners (Kern, 1995)
5	Tourist shop	Students visit a local tourist shop and report back to their partner, telling them what they saw and how accurately this image represents their home culture.	Students reflect on how the two cultures are represented to foreigners and how accurate these representations are.
6	Comparative expressions	Students complete a list of comparative phrases (e.g. "as good as ... as black as...") in their native language. They then explain the possible origins and cultural significance of these phrases.	Students examine differing connotations in the two cultures by comparing what nouns are used in comparative phrases.
7	Text extracts (1)	Students read text extracts taken from various foreign writers about Spain and the Spanish. The Spanish group reflect on how accurate they feel the texts to be. The British group pose questions about the texts.	Using the texts as a springboard, both groups explain to their partners how they view the Spanish culture and people.
8	Explaining idioms	Students explain in the target language the meanings of various idioms from their own language. They also look at the idioms' origins and significance.	Students look at the link between idioms and cultural values in both cultures.
9	Text extracts (2)	Students read and discuss various short extracts about England and the English.	Using the texts as a springboard, both groups explain to their partners how they view English culture and its people.
10	"The Unfaithful Woman" (source: e-mail mailing list)	Students compare reactions to a fictitious story which brings up issues of morality and sexuality.	Discussion of the story leads to comparison of moral values and sexuality in both countries.

The tasks reflected the components of Byram's (1997) model in that they involved interacting with members of the target culture in order to acquire knowledge and subsequently to become more aware of the different interpretations of cultural products or practices which members of another culture may have. In tasks 5 and 9, students also had the opportunity to became more aware of their own culture and how it

was viewed by members of the foreign culture. Due to time and technical restrictions, the English group was not able to use the in-class e-mail exchange system which was carried out in León (tasks 1 and 4). These tasks allowed the Spanish group to discuss the topics and develop their ideas with members of their own culture before carrying out the tasks with their foreign partners. As this was the first time any of the Spanish students had used new technologies in their classes, the activities also gave the students an opportunity to get used to e-mail as a medium for debate and learning.

For each task students were required to write at least two messages to their partner. In the first message they were to present their own opinion and in the second they were to discuss and react to the message they had received from their partner. In many cases students wrote more than the minimum number of e-mails in order to discuss topics other than the task.

Researching the Exchange

Having established the exchange and the theme of my research, I then identified the research approach which would best suit my needs. The approach which I adopted was essentially ethnographic (Agar, 1980; Nunan, 1992; Spradley, 1979); however, the research also strongly reflects the principles of action research. Wallace (1998) defines action research for teachers as "collecting data on your everyday practice and analysing it in order to come to some decisions about what your future practice should be" (p. 4).

Wallace also sees action research as part of a process of reflection on professional practice which leads to professional development. This reflected my own aim of improving the standard of learning in my classes by attempting to identify how one of the learning activities (i.e., e-mail exchanges) could be improved and its effectiveness increased. Shetzer and Warschauer (2000) consider action research to be particularly well suited for researching aspects of networked-based language learning as the electronic networks can greatly facilitate collaboration and the co-construction of knowledge between the teacher/researcher and the learners themselves. As will become clear later, interaction between myself and the students involved in this study (on both face-to-face and virtual levels) played an important part in the conclusions of this research.

A variety of ethnographic techniques were used in the research in order to capture "the immediate and local meanings of actions, as defined from the actors point of view" (Erickson, 1986, p. 119). It was hoped that, through the analysis of the interviews, e-mails, students' essays, and questionnaires, I would be able to identify the issues emerging which were important for the students, as opposed to those which I, teacher and researcher, might have considered influential in the exchange's level of success. The research techniques employed in this study included participant observation, e-mail data, questionnaires, interviews, the researcher's reflexive journal, and peer-group feedback.

Participant Observation

In this study I played the roles of teacher and classroom researcher. By taking on both roles I hoped to play an integrated role in the community of learning and to experience the benefits and drawbacks of on-line learning first hand. My role as course teacher also allowed me to build up a relationship of trust and familiarity with the students, which an outside researcher may not have achieved. Other researchers of second language learners have also carried out successful studies of the classes they are teaching (Belz & Kinginger, in press; Canagarajah, 1993; and partly, Warschauer, 1999). I was, of course, aware of the dangers of my role as both teacher and researcher in this project and exploited various techniques indicated in the literature in order to minimize the influence of my own sociocultural frameworks (Davis, 1995) and the risk of engaging in biased interpretations of the data. These techniques included member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), that is, checking my interpretation of the data with that of the actual students who produced the data. Another technique I used to avoid researcher bias was a reflexive journal.

E-Mail Data

The Spanish students were asked to send me copies of all messages they sent or received from their partners in London. In total, I received approximately 150 e-mails containing copies of messages which had been sent. I also received 30 e-mails containing feedback on the exchange and answers to questions which I had sent to students.

Questionnaires

The Spanish students were regularly sent questionnaires by e-mail during the exchange in order to establish their developing reactions to the virtual contact. The teacher in London was unable to engage in similar research with her class due to time restrictions. Instead, the English students were asked, on a less regular basis, to fill out questionnaires which were then mailed to León. They also carried out and submitted an extensive personal evaluation of their exchange at the end of the course which proved to be particularly helpful for our research purposes.

Interviews

During the course of the exchange, I asked students to come to my office and carry out interviews about their experiences. These interviews were recorded on audio tape and later transcribed for content. During the interviews, I usually had a print-out of the particular student's e-mails and many of the questions were based on sections of their correspondence. While students were normally chosen for interview on a random basis, others were specifically chosen when they appeared to be having a particular problem or a phase of particularly rich interaction with their partner. By asking students to comment on their e-mail correspondence I was able to take into consideration their interpretation of events instead of imposing my own analysis on the material. The fact that students could also be interviewed by e-mail enabled me to react quicker to issues as they emerged.

Researcher's Reflexive Journal

Following each class, and at regular stages during the study and evaluation of the other data, I made entries into a reflexive diary regarding my thoughts on the exchange and the intercultural learning which, I felt, was or was not taking place at that stage. If I received any feedback from students or the partner class in any form this was also noted in the journal. Very often, I printed out e-mail messages and pasted them into the journal near other information which I felt was related to the same category or theme. By noting down my theories and ideas in the journal, I was able to return to these at a later date and reflect on their validity and, in many cases, fine tune them in the light of new research material.

Peer-Group Feedback

Throughout the exchange I was in regular contact with the teacher of the class in London. Our messages often involved reporting on how our students were reacting to the exchange and what they were learning from it. Very often I contacted my partner to try out theories which I was developing based on the data.

While carrying out the research I attempted to let the themes and issues emerge from the material, as opposed to testing what particular theories might be confirmed or rejected by the data. As the term proceeded, I collected e-mails and other data and began developing ideas about what the key issues were. I then checked with other sources (e.g., interviews, questionnaires) in order to confirm or refute these ideas. This triangulation of data is seen as a vital part of any qualitative research as it helps to develop a deeper understanding of the subject in question (Denzin, 1970; Müller-Hartmann, 2001).

In the course of the exchange, three key issues emerged which were influential in the extent to which students became more aware of the differing perspectives and interpretative systems of the target culture. Each of these three themes will now be looked at in detail in sections five, six, and seven.

STUDENTS PRESENTING THEIR HOME CULTURES

In his research on electronic literacies, Warschauer (2000) reports on a class of native Hawaiian students who, in their class in Hawaiian language, used their Web-page projects to make a contribution to information about their native language and culture. He goes on to talk about the potential of on-line project work "for fostering the exploration and expression of cultural and social identity" among learners and suggests that it allows them "to carve out on-line space for their own language and culture"(p. 56). Similarly, during this exchange, the students in León seemed to be taking this opportunity to fight against the stereotypes which they felt others had of Spain and of the Spanish people. It became apparent that students were taking control of the virtual medium and the interaction with their foreign partners to present their lives and their homes as they perceived them and thereby correcting the misrepresentations which they believed others had of them and their culture.

Before beginning their exchange with the students in London, the Spanish students took part in an in-class e-mail discussion between themselves and other class members (task 1). In it they gave their reactions to questions about what they thought was Spain's image abroad and whether they would feel proud to say they are Spanish when they are away from home. Even though participation was not compulsory, the questions provoked many responses, the majority of which reflected an attitude of frustration and annoyance as to how the students believed their country was viewed by others abroad. The following message reflects the general content of the exchange and shows an awareness of the stereotypes which would appear to exist about Spain:

> E-mail extract 1
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> First of all, I want to say that I am very proud of being Spanish, although people around world doesn't have a good idea about us. I think the most important problem is the noise we make. People says that we talk very loud and, from my point of view, it is due because we don't mind expressing our feelings; we shout when we are happy and we shout when we are angry as well.
>
> There is another idea that I think it is not true. There is a lot of people who thinks that Spanish people is very lazy and we are the whole day laying at bed and going to parties. People works here so hard as in other countries and some cities of Spain are very hot which makes the work harder.
>
> It is time people changes their minds about us.

As a result of this frustration, it appears that many members of the Spanish group used their exchange with the English students to differentiate themselves from this negative image and highlight other aspects of Spain. The level of success they experienced in carrying out this goal was influential in their level of participation in the exchange and whether or not they later reported a changing perspective to the British culture. The following two partnerships in the exchange show first a negative and secondly, a positive example of this.

Partnership One: An Unreceptive Audience, Juan and Alice

Juan,[2] one of the Spanish exchange participants, considered himself a "Leónese nationalist"[3] and in the course of the year he caused many heated debates in class as he attempted to steer many discussions to the questions of regional nationalism and the need for autonomy in León. When the exchange began, he took the opportunity of his introductory e-mail to his partner (task 2) to immediately differentiate between Spain and León on a political and historical level:

> E-mail extract 2
>
> I'm going to tell you something about Llión and about my nation (situated within an area of the North-West of Spain):

Llïón is an ancient town of about 150,000 inhabitants. Llïón and the Leónese Country ("País Llïonés" in the Astur-Leónese language) are the result of a mixture of Celtic, roman, Germanic, Arabic, Jewish and other cultures. Because of this fact, we have monuments from different ages and cultures and our traditions are also the result of that mixture. For example, in Llïón there're some Romanic churches and a gothic cathedral and in some areas of the "País Llïonés" (Leónese Country) there're buildings of pre-roman art.

It is interesting to note in this e-mail how Juan begins his presentation of León in a way that almost assumes that the region is independent from Spain (not the case) by using terms such as "nation" and "Leónese country." The fact that he does not explain what he means by these terms seems to imply that he expects his partner to be already aware of the local political situation. After receiving a copy of this message, I immediately sent Juan an e-mail, asking him why he had chosen to tackle this issue with his partner in his opening message.

E-mail extract 3

I used the names "Llïón" and "País Llïonés" because I think that is important to support our language (a language that is decreasing the number of speakers but that is still spoken by 10% of the Leónese people -- I'm not actually very sure of the rate of speakers).

I consider the "País Llïonés" my nation instead of Spain because I think that the Spanish identity is an invention: in Spain there're a lot of different languages, personalities and traditions (different cultures, the case of the U.S.A. is a very similar case: different nations within a "country").

I think that internet is a very good way for expressing ideas because it isn't controlled by censors (yet?). And I like to show foreigners the Leónese culture because I don't like the common place of "Spain is bulls and flamenco."

Comments such as "I consider the 'País Llïonés' my nation instead of Spain" and "the Spanish identity is an invention" as well as many other comments in the course of our time together in class show that this belief in regional nationalism was a central part of his personal and cultural identities. His comments about the Internet not being "controlled by censors" and that he liked "to show foreigners the Leónese culture" also demonstrate that he saw the on-line activities as a safe and promising medium to express this identity without it being rejected or laughed at. (Many times in class his classmates had sighed with impatience when he raised the topic.) Unfortunately, Alice, his virtual partner in London, did not seem to be very receptive to his particular view of his homeland either. In a later interview, Juan reported being surprised and a little disappointed that his partner had not reacted to his presentation in any way and had simply ignored the differentiation between Llion and Spain. Perhaps as a result of this, this particular partnership never seemed to function very well and messages remained short and impersonal for the remainder of the exchange. In her final evaluation of the exchange, Alice complained that Juan had failed to complete certain tasks and that he had rarely attempted to enter into any detailed explanations of his ideas and views. Her rejection of his ideas on his culture appear to be confirmed in a comment almost tinged with sarcasm: "his description of his area didn't particularly make me want to visit his 'Lionese country.'" Juan's attempt to express his own perspective of his culture therefore met with rejection and as a result his interest and motivation to carry out the exchange seems to have died quickly. His own final feedback reflected this. In it he described his partner as "not very friendly" and resigned himself to the stereotypes of Spain which he believed his partner to have and which he was unable to change: "She thinks that a lot of commonplaces like bull-fighting and flamenco are true. It didn't surprise me at all."

In this case, the breakdown of the partners' relationship highlights the need for further developing both students' intercultural communicative competence. Alice, for example, appears unwilling or unable to try and understand Juan's representation of his home culture. For this reason, she perhaps needs to further develop an attitude which Byram (1997) describes as "interest in discovering other perspectives on

interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena … in other cultures" (p. 50). Juan, on the other hand, needs to work on the skills of interpreting and of interaction. Firstly, he must be able to identify in advance that his version of his home culture may contrast with the image that Alice has of that culture. Byram refers to this as the skill of being able to identify possible areas of misunderstanding in interaction (p. 52). Secondly, he must be able to use his skills of interaction to express his understanding of his home culture in a way in which is interesting and understandable to his partner. Juan's position on regional nationalism and identity is very common in Spain and it is therefore important that students of Spanish should be made aware of this aspect of Spanish culture. However, Spanish students engaging in e-mail exchanges need the intercultural communicative competence to talk about this concept in a way which their virtual partners will understand it.

Partnership Two: Opening Up to "The Other Side," Anna and Mary

Other members of the Spanish group were more successful in using their exchange to express or defend aspects of their cultural identity. I found Anna to be the student who was most affected personally by her experiences with Mary, her English partner. The warmth and honesty which the two expressed in their e-mails almost from the beginning of the exchange led her to comment on a feedback form at the half-way stage that "my experience with my exchange partner is the best thing to happen to me this year" and in a later interview she explained, "I always imagined them [the English] very serious and reserved. But after doing this I've changed my mind. She is so nice." In contrast to Juan and Alice, Anna and Mary seemed to invest a lot of time in their messages, making sure to always write "off-task" as well as carrying out the activity they had been asked to do. Both students used their partner to find out extra information about their target culture and both made sure to acknowledge comments and respond to questions which they had been asked by their partner.

Early on in the exchange, Anna and her partner found differences in attitudes towards "los toros" (bull fighting) when they were asked to compare what came to their minds when they thought about this well-known Spanish tradition (task 3). This developed into an exchange which showed the great potential for this type of comparative activity (Furstenberg et al., 2001). Mary associated "Spain, blood, cruelty, and festivals" with the term, while Anna responded with the much more positive associations "tradition, olé, and bull-fighters." This is a typical clash of opinions on one of the most representative cultural symbols of Spain. For many, both in and outside of Spain, bullfighting is a cruel sport where animals are toyed with, tortured and then slaughtered in the name of culture and tradition, while for others, *los toros* represents tradition and bravery and is seen as a fair combat between man and beast. In an interview with Anna after this initial exchange on the subject, she reported being frustrated by her partner's associations but was unclear as to how to deal with the subject in further e-mails. In response, I explained to Anna that she should use this clash of opinions as an opportunity to become more aware of how British people view her culture, thereby discovering, in the words of Byram, "other perspectives ... on familiar phenomena" (1997, p. 51). Secondly, I suggested that the challenge of the exchange was not for Anna to try and change her partner's opinion, but rather to successfully explain why she personally felt the way she did, thereby giving her partner an insight into the different beliefs and meanings which she attributed to the topic. In this way, the exchange of messages gave Anna the opportunity to develop her intercultural communicative competence in several aspects. She gained knowledge about a cause of misunderstanding and disagreement between the Spanish and British cultures (Byram, p. 51) and she was also given an opportunity to try and mediate between two different interpretations of a cultural practice. This is an important aspect of the intercultural skills of interpreting and relating (Byram, p. 52).

Following our discussion together about her partner's message, Anna's next e-mail contained the following explanation:

E-mail extract 4

I'd like to tell you about your last E-Mail I think it is very important to know each other a little bit. I think your opinion about " toros" is wrong and I want to explain you something about this. (I don't want to change your opinion, I only think that is better to know something else.)

"Toros" is a typical thing here in Spain but some people think that is cruel too. When I was a child I hated bullfights but one day my father went to a "corrida" and I went with him. When you are there, you change your mind. You realise that it's a world (some people are inside and others outside). These bulls are grown to bullfight. When a man have a farm with chickens, he kills them and sells them. People buy them because they need to eat. It's true that people don't need these bullfights, but I will ask you that if you will come to Spain again you should go to a "corrida."

It's a bit expensive but you will understand it. Nevertheless I understand that some people hate it and I understand that they try to eliminate it.

Anna's low level of English is evident here but, despite her limited linguistic resources, she approaches her explanation in a sensitive, tolerant way such as in her comment in the opening paragraph, "I don't want to change your opinion, I only think that is better to know something else..." She also lets her partner know that she understands that other people are against bull fighting. In any case, it is unlikely that her line of argumentation here would convert anyone to *los toros,* but nevertheless it does go beyond the basic claim "bull fighting is good" and tries to explain her genuine belief that the *corrida* is as much a natural part of life as people killing and selling farm animals. The task and her foreign audience forces Anna to put into words and explain what she may have taken for granted until now, thereby achieving what Byram (1997) describes as suspending belief about one's own culture (Byram, p. 50). In Mary's following e-mail she does not react in detail to Anna's explanation; however she does seem to have taken on the reasoning behind her explanation:

E-mail extract 5

Gracias por tu explicacion de tu perspectiva de los toros. Es interesante entender "el otro lado," no?

[Thank you for your explanation about your opinion on bull fighting. It's interesting to understand "the other side," isn't it?]

Apart from learning how to effectively express her culture, Anna is also learning about the important link between language and culture in the form of communicative style and sociolinguistic norms. Earlier in the exchange, Anna had corrected her partner's Spanish mistakes in the following way:

E-mail extract 6

Well, I´m going to tell you something about your mistakes: You have problems with the gender of nouns, adjectives and articles.

We don´t say "chevere" and " plata" We say: "que algo es guay, muy bueno, estupendo, genial.. and so on" and "dinero, pelas..."

Anna's lack of knowledge of suitable language for pointing out mistakes to an English-speaking person or her inability to use such language probably risked insulting or hurting Mary who was being corrected in such a dismissive way. I wrote an e-mail to Anna suggesting that the language she used for correcting was perhaps a little too direct and harsh for an English speaker and that, instead of saying, "you have problems with..." that she could say something like, "you made one or two mistakes with..." Furthermore, her rather dismissive comment, "We don´t say 'chevere' and 'plata,'" was not strictly correct. The terms she was correcting referred to vocabulary items which are used in some South American dialects of Spanish but

not in Castilian Spanish. Therefore, Anna's e-mail should have been explained that the "we" in her correction referred only to speakers of her dialect of Spanish. Anna acknowledged these corrections and I think the message explaining her opinion about bull-fighting reflects a growing sensitivity to issues of directness and politeness (i.e., appropriate social interaction) in language, something which is considered an important aspect of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997, p. 58).

The success of Anna's exchange and the relative failure of Juan's (a fact reflected in the relative number and quality of e-mails sent as well as in the contrasting feedback from all four partners during and at the end of the exchange) may be attributed to various factors. Motivation, proficiency level, access to technologies and interest in learning about the target culture all may have been influential factors. However, none of these emerged as significant in interviews with the two Spanish students, and they were also not noticeable in the final evaluations submitted by the English. If anything, Anna should have had more difficulties getting involved in the exchange due to her level of English and her lack of experience in interacting with foreign nationals. Their contrasting levels of success would therefore appear to be due to the reactions which they received when they expressed aspects of their culture to their partner. If they perceived their partner as being interested in their descriptions of their own culture, then they felt encouraged to write more and, possibly, to learn more themselves and change their attitudes towards the target culture. If, on the other hand, they felt their positive face was threatened (Brown & Levinson, 1987) by their partner showing a distinct lack of interest in their cultural background, then motivation to write and to change their attitudes rapidly diminished.

When Anna was asked at the end of the exchange if her attitude towards the English had changed, she wrote, "My original idea about the English was totally wrong. They are not serious and closed. They are people like us and I like knowing it now. The tasks taught me that they are not like others describe them; you have to get to know them to know how they truly are." This reflects a development in attitude, moving away from negative stereotyping, but perhaps only reaching as far as what Bennett might describe as "minimisation" and "physical universality" (Bennett, 1993) where cultural difference is ignored in the belief that we are "deep down all the same." While this may not be the "third place" aimed for in intercultural learning, her comments do demonstrate a process of development and a growing awareness of the inaccuracies of national stereotyping: "they are not like others describe them."

Students Engaging in Distancing and Cultural Self-Reflection

According to Cummins & Sayers (1995), one of the many valuable aspects of the early global networks of Freinet and Lodi was their adherence to the principle of "distancing." This referred to the process of learners reflecting on and becoming more aware of their own environment and culture by interacting with foreign partners and answering their questions about the home culture. Gervilliers et al. (cited in Cummins & Sayers, 1995, p. 137) explain the principle in the following way:

> The student, because she needs to describe them, develops an awareness of the conditions of her life, of the life of her town or her neighbourhood, even of her promise…She had been living too close to these conditions and through inter-school exchanges she distanced herself from them in order to better comprehend the condition of her life. (1977, p. 29)

The power of intercultural comparison and dialogue is also recognised by the writer Bakhtin:

> In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly .... A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning... (1986, p. 7)

The following example from the project serves to illustrate this point.

Partnership Three: Questions From Abroad, Lourdes and Sonya

In the León -- London exchange, students were constantly called on to distance themselves from their home culture as they tried to explain the meaning and significance of aspects of their language and everyday lives. Several interesting examples of this come from the partnership of Lourdes and her English partner, Sonya. These students wrote the longest messages of all the partnerships. This was due, perhaps, to the high levels of competence both students had in their target languages and also because both seemed to recognise the usefulness of having a partner in the target culture who could help with cultural and linguistic doubts and questions. Both would often include comments and questions in their mails which were not related to the tasks but which referred to topics which had come up in other classes and in other contexts.

The partners were led to distance themselves from their home cultures several times in the course of their correspondence as they tried to differentiate between the everyday products and practices of their countries and their deeper cultural significance. In many cases, the students were able to take an "off-task" comment about something one of them had done and then explore its significance in both cultures. When Sonya mentioned in the introduction of one of her mails that she had been at a fireworks display in London for Halloween, Lourdes took up the comment and contrasted the British significance of the festival with the Spanish:

> E-mail extract 7
>
> Here I have met some English people, from Liverpool and the other day when they asked me where they could buy fireworks I thought they were crazy, but now you have told me about that day I can understand. Here we don't celebrate that night. We are more religious - at least the older generation - and that night we don't do any special things .... The day after Halloween we usually go to the cemetery to put flowers on the graves. That is supposed to be something devout but for most of the people it is just an occasion to show the neighbour your new dress, car or husband. I hate that and it happens a lot in the villages. I think I am beating about the bush but I want you to know the truth.

The genuine expression of feeling in this mail becomes clear in the personalised example using the second-person pronoun, "it is just an occasion to show the neighbour your new dress," and the direct statement of intent at the end of the message, "but I want you to know the truth." This therefore becomes much more than a superficial comparison of "facts and fiestas." Lourdes not only describes what happens on that date in Spain but also tells her partner how she actually feels about the tradition, thereby giving her a personal, critical perspective into the target culture -- something which textbooks are generally unable to do. In terms of intercultural communicative competence, the students are primarily learning about how institutions and traditions in the target culture (in this case, Spain) are perceived through the perspective of members of that culture. This is an important aspect of the knowledge which students need in order to interact successfully with members of the target culture (Byram, 1997, p. 51).

Both students were given another opportunity to engage in distancing and reflect on their own culture when they carried out the task of visiting the tourist shops of their respective cities (task 5). Both students found that their country was represented by symbols which were, at times, inaccurate and misleading. Lourdes claimed she was disappointed that León's shops were full of dolls of bull-fighters and flamenco dancers while Sonya wrote,

> E-mail extract 8
>
> *Las tiendas se venden tambien las banderas de Inglaterra, que representan el nacionalismo del pais. Sin embargo, el idea de nacionalismo no existe realmente. Inglaterra tiene una sociedad muy multi-cultural . No conozco a nadie quien es totalmente Ingles.*

En las tiendas vi muchas teteras y cajas de te. El te es como una institucion nacional aqui. Si tenemos un problema, la primera cosa que hacemos es tomar una taza de te. Pensamos que el te puede resolver nuestros problemas y despues nos sentimos mucho mejor.

[The shops also sell English flags which represent the nationalism of the country. However, the idea of nationalism doesn't really exist. England has a multi-cultural society. I don't know anyone who is totally English.

In the shops I saw a lot of teapots and boxes of tea. Tea is like a national institution over here. If we have a problem, the first thing we usually do if have a cup of tea. We believe that tea can solve all our problems and that afterwards we will feel much better.]

The message demonstrates how both students seem to be becoming more aware that intercultural learning is much more than simply reporting and exchanging cultural products and practices. In the message, not only are facts reported: "The shops also sell English flags..." but the connotations behind these cultural products and what they symbolise are identified and then discussed: "However, the idea of nationalism doesn't really exist. England has a multi-cultural society..." In this way the students are trying to express the deeper cultural and contextual meaning of various aspects of their cultures -- all souls' day, flags, and tea. While doing this, they are forced to consider what these cultural symbols, so long taken for granted, actually mean to them and their compatriots. This is giving them invaluable practice in developing skills of interpreting and relating cultural symbols as well as attaining what Byram (1997) describes as "critical cultural awareness" (p. 63).

A further example, this time from another activity about comparative phrases in both cultures, shows how Lourdes is also becoming aware of the link between language and culture. Her message reveals that it is the process of carrying out the task with someone from another culture which makes her stop and reflect about an aspect of her language which she had never considered before:

E-mail extract 9

When we talk about working a lot, we usually say "trabajar como un negro" [to work like a Black]. It is really racist but I had never thought of the meaning before, sometimes you are so used to saying some things that you don't stop to think how despective they can be.

Later, in a mid-project interview, Lourdes' comments confirm that the exchange has led her to reflect on her own culture and language: "I have been able to compare our two cultures and in many situations I have reflected about why we say some expression and not the other ... I learned not only about the other culture but also I find very interesting themes about my own culture."

Sonya also confirms this in her post-project evaluation and she seems to suggest becoming aware, not only of her own culture, but also of how her culture is viewed by members of the target culture: "I think the task [on tourist shops] helped us to discover and think about our own culture and how people see us. I agree with Lourdes when she says that you never know the image people have of your country until you do something like this."

As was seen earlier, Byram (1997) sees this willingness to understand how one's own culture is viewed by others as one of the key attitudes of intercultural communicative competence in learners (p. 50).

STUDENTS DEVELOPING PERSPECTIVE TO THE TARGET CULTURE THROUGH DIALOGUE

As the project progressed it became clear that students were not only using the exchange as a platform to express their own identity, but they were also using the interaction with their partners (both in their own virtual in-class debates and in their interactions with the target group) to "test-out" and develop their ideas on the target culture. Byram (1997) suggests that learners need to be able to "elicit from an interlocutor the concepts and values of documents and events and to develop an explanatory system susceptible of application to other phenomena" (p. 53) and it would appear that the students used this exchange in order to achieve this objective. Students told anecdotes, expressed theories, and made assumptions about the foreign culture, and then looked for their partners to respond to these ideas by either confirming or denying them. In this way students constructed a new perspective towards the other culture or, at times, simply confirmed their old one.

This process reflects the "technology-mediated" model of learning with technology which, according to Meskill and Ranglova (2000), places the learner's construction of knowledge at its centre. In this model, technology is used to facilitate interaction with variable sources of knowledge and thereby exposes learners to a variety of perspectives. This model is based on the dialogic principles of writers such as Bakhtin (1986) and Kramsch (1993) who see knowledge and meaning as being constructed when interaction and dialogue with others leads to a taking-on of new perspectives. Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen see dialogue as "interaction between self and other and the incorporation of the latter's conceptual horizon to one's own perspective" (1998, p. 13).

Warschauer (1999) and Kinginger et al. (1999) see networked learning as being particularly suited to dialogic interaction as it allows knowledge to be socially constructed through interaction with others in various on-line environments. On-line discussions allow learners to express their ideas and then to clarify and redefine them through feedback and through the other perspectives to which they are exposed.

Partnership Four: The Cost of Failing to Engage, Manuel and Heather

Manuel was one of the most academically successful students in the class and seemed to be respected a great deal by students both because of his intellectual capabilities and his position as class representative. I was surprised to find out during one of my early interviews with him that he was unhappy and frustrated by the exchange due, initially, to his lack of knowledge of how to work e-mail and then later, to his inability to connect on a personal level with Heather, his partner in London. He complained that she was unwilling to "get stuck into" the topics and discuss issues in a more-detailed, revealing level. He explained,

> She blows hot and cold. One day she appears to have changed her batteries and to do her part, the next she doesn't care ... "Well, I'm really busy" ... I don't know. I tried to encourage her to start a debate about the monarchy but she completely ignored the theme ... she is always just referring to the task...

The introduction of one of his e-mails reflects this frustration and shows that Manuel is well aware that a superficial completion of the tasks is unlikely to lead to stimulating debate or productive learning:

> E-mail extract 10
>
> Hi Heather! We were supposed to have done a task before this one but, anyway, I think it's better if we catch up because if we don't, we will go one step behind our class-mates and, after all, these tasks intend to get us started so it is up to us.

Here, Manuel is indirectly reprimanding his partner for not having written sooner and thereby having missed out on a task ("We were supposed to have done a task before this one"). He felt that they should have been engaging in more interaction together than simply completing the tasks ("these tasks intend to get us started so it is up to us"). In later e-mails with his partner (relating to task 9), Manuel could be seen trying to express stereotypes he had about the British and then looking to her to confront and tackle these ideas. He seemed eager to construct new ideas and to consider an alternative perspective. In an e-mail relating to texts which both students had read about the British and the Spanish he wrote,

> E-mail extract 11

> ...it is very relevant the part [of the book extract] that alludes to the way English people behave with foreigners, that is, how a foreign person feels that English distrust him or "make him feel small." It seems to be they are very good at doing so. It's well-known that many people go to England in summer because nowadays everyone wants to improve their command of English and all that stuff. So, people are given accommodation by families that are paid for it. Of course, it can be considered a business, and if you don't want to involve in personal affections is up to you, but, at least, the family should make the person feel comfortable and in an atmosphere that accepts him and not as if he were an object with which they have to put up for a month or two so they can afford the rent or buy a better car. With no doubts, there must be very different types of people who must provide the visitors with a better or worse treatment, but what I've heard about it would be more or less like that.

> Anyway, you can give your opinion on this in a more accurate way as you live there and you can see the reality all around you day after day, so correct me if I am wrong 'cause maybe my friends have not been too lucky and because of them now I think this way

In this mail, Manuel tries to relate the text extract about the bad treatment of foreigners by the British to the experiences of his friends and other Spanish students being badly treated in English homestays: "what I've heard about it would be more or less like that." However, his final sentence seems to be the sign of a learner in search of dialogue in the hope that this will allow him to develop or even change his opinions towards the target culture: "you can give your opinion on this in a more accurate way ... so correct me if I am wrong." The task gave Manuel the opportunity to develop his intercultural communicative competence by eliciting the British perspective on this behaviour. Unfortunately, Heather failed to respond to his ideas and questions. Her next e-mails dealt with other tasks and Manuel's opinions were left unchallenged. In a final feedback on the exchange he concluded that, "My opinion about them [the British] was not good at the beginning and I'm afraid it continues the same." In reference to the British image of Spain he says, "They've got some stereotypes of Spain and they comply with them. They are not interested in learning."

Manuel is an example of a learner's attitudes towards the target culture being developed through interaction. However, instead of developing a better understanding of the foreign culture through dialogue with others, he used his previous experiences and his own lack of a successful working relationship with his partner to confirm the negative stereotypes which he had before. His perspectives are indeed being constructed through interaction but not in a way one would wish.

In contrast to Manuel, a further example illustrates how another Spanish student was able to construct a more empathetic view of the target culture by gaining insight into how members of the foreign culture view themselves (i.e., the English) and their own culture (i.e., England).

Partnership Five: Seeing Through the Eyes of Another, Susana and Janet

Despite initial technical problems, Susana (from Spain) and her partner Janet (from England) had developed a relatively good working relationship during the initial exchanges of e-mails. Both students

wrote to each other in a friendly manner and were taking care to correct each other's language errors at the end of each message. When the students were asked to carry out the word association exercise (task 3), they found that they had very different attitudes to the term "police." Janet associated the word with "uniforms, crime, corruption and racism," while Susana simply wrote, "a normal person." In an interview with Susana following this exercise, I asked her how she felt about this:

> This really shocked me. We had spoken about a black teenager being killed by the police in London. But this message really brought it home to me ... Her comments about the police left me ... I don't know ... I thought these things only happened in the films. This really shocked me.

Soon after she carefully breached the subject again with her partner, explaining why she had been shocked by her comments:

> E-mail extract 12

> And finally, the police is something difficult for me to explain. They are people like you and me but we think that they can help us, but sometimes they can't because they can't do anything. I think it was a bit unjust what you said, they do which they can to help us.

Her English partner responded to this in the following way:

> E-mail extract 13

> *Gracias por tus contestas a mis preguntas. Estoy de acuerdo con lo que dijiste de la policia - hay un limite a lo que pueden hacer, pero no piensas tambien que hay bastante corrupcion en la policia? La "LAPD" en los Estados Unidos es notoria, no? Y, aqui en Inglaterra, la policia metropolitana de Londres tiene una reputacion racista, especialmente desde la muerte de un joven negro, Stephen Lawrence. Sus asesinos (blancos) no fueron acusados, a pesar de muchos testimonios y pruebas.*

> [Thanks for your answers to my questions. I agree with what you said about the police. There is a limit to what they can do, but do you not think there is a lot of corruption in the police? The LAPD in the USA is notorious, isn't it? And here in London the metropolitan police has a racist reputation, especially since the death of a young black boy, Stephen Lawrence. His (white) murderers were not brought to trial, despite a lot of witnesses and proof.]

Here Susana is being given insight into the reasoning behind Janet's negative attitudes to the police and develops her knowledge of "institutions, and perceptions of them, which impinge on daily life within one's own and one's interlocutor's country" (Byram, 1997, p. 51). This can be seen, for example, in the extract "here in London the metropolitan police has a racist reputation, especially since the death of a young black boy..." Susana therefore has the opportunity to move on from an initial shock about the differing attitude to a better understanding of the cultural context which has caused this belief to come about. Commenting on exercises similar to this one, Byram, Morgan, and Colleagues state that

> When learners acquire an understanding of the connotations of lexical items in the foreign language and contrast them with connotations of an apparently equivalent item in their own, they begin to gain insight into the schemata and perspectives of the foreign culture. (1994, p. 44)

Later in the exchange, Janet sent Susana the following mail giving her reactions to short texts she had read about England and the English (task 9). Once again she gives her partner a well thought-out explanation of English behaviour based on the English cultural context. Here, Susana is again being given the opportunity to see foreign cultural behaviour through the eyes of someone from that culture:

E-mail extract 14

Comparando los habitos ingleses con los espanoles, los espanoles no tienen miedo de expresar susentimientos como los Ingleses. Y esto puede parecer casi arogancia a los demas estranjeros. Pero, como dice Paxman, es solo porque es parte de su cultura proteger la "privacy" en una forma que los hace parecer muy poco abiertos. El autor hace tambien una relacion entre el hecho que la mayoria de los ingleses poseen la casa en la que viven. Hay un sentido muy fuerte del privado, y tener una casa propria significa mas intimidad y "privacy", pero eso no me parece muy diferente que en qualquier otro pais. Paxman relaciona todo esto tambien con el hecho que Inglaterra es una isla, pero yo no creo que eso tenga mucho que ver con los caracteres frios. Yo lo relaciono mas con el clima, que no deja que la gente se quede fuera en la calle o en otros sitios publicos para mucho tiempo.

[Comparing the English and the Spanish, the Spanish are not afraid to express their feelings, unlike the English are. And that could seem like arrogance to many foreigners. But, as Paxman [the author of the texts on England, 1998] says, this is only because it is part of their culture to protect their privacy in a way which may seem quite closed to others. The author also makes a link to the fact that the majority of the English own the house in which they live. There is a very strong sense of privacy, and owning one's house means more intimacy and privacy. But this doesn't seem to me to be very different from other countries. Paxman relates all this to the fact that England is an island, but I don't believe that this has much to do with the cold characteristics. I relate it more to the climate which doesn't allow people to stay out on the street or in other public places for a long time...]

In this mail, a supposed aspect of British cultural behaviour (Britons' unwillingness "to express their feelings") and a native's understanding of it are explained by a member of that culture, thereby exposing Susana not only to British behaviour, but also to an understanding of that behaviour "from an insider's perspective" (Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan, & Street, 2001, p. 43). Susana's growing empathy and understanding that cultural products and practices have different meanings in different cultures (an integral part of intercultural communicative competence) shows itself clearly in an e-mail she sends towards the end of the exchange. Talking about texts she had read about Spain (Hooper, 1995), she writes,

E-mail Extract 15

The author said that the Spaniards have a big lack of shame, that we have little conscience of embarrassment, maybe he is right but only if you see it as an English person. They see it this way because they judge it with their rules.

Having received so much insight from her partner on the way the English see and experience their world, Susana seems to be moving on from the assumption that everyone judges behaviour and sees the world in the same way that she does. She shows an understanding that Spanish cultural behaviour will be understood in other ways by other cultures ("maybe he is right but only if you see it as an English person"), a first step on the road to empathy with the target culture. Byram et al.(1994) describe this form of empathetic understanding as "informed supposition" which occurs when students try to imagine how the world might be seen through someone else's eyes.

At the outset of this paper it was asked what characteristics would be conducive in the development of successful intercultural learning in an e-mail exchange. The reported research identified three such characteristics: (a) acceptance of one's own culture by one's partner, (b) the development of distancing, and (c) dialogic interaction. The following section looks at the implications of these findings for future exchanges.

IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This exchange would appear to confirm the value of network-based interactions for the development of intercultural learning as it was outlined in section two of this paper. The different relationships which developed during the e-mail exchange helped students to either develop the different components of intercultural communicative competence or at least served to highlight the components which required further attention (see, e.g., partnership one). Throughout the exchange students were given an opportunity to learn about the important link between language and culture, both through activities which led them to recognise the differing semantic connotations of words in different cultures and also through the need for them to deal with the various communicative styles and socio-pragmatic rules in intercultural communication. Furthermore, in their interactions with their partners, they were also challenged to identify and explain the values and significance of products and practices in both the home and target cultures.

Evaluating to what extent the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of intercultural communicative competence were developed and how the students would later put them to use was difficult to evaluate in the time period during and immediately after the project -- and for this reason it was not attempted in this study. Indeed, increased intercultural competence is only likely to be revealed through further long-term study of the students involved (Kramsch, 1993). Nevertheless, research did reveal evidence of intercultural learning taking place and, most importantly for our research questions, what was causing this to occur.

The feedbacks and interviews carried out with the Spanish students at the end of the study suggested that some students simply confirmed their negative attitudes towards the target culture (Manuel and Juan) while others such as Anna, Lourdes, and Susana had moved on from the stereotypes and prejudices they had expressed in interviews and questionnaires at the outset of the exchange. The reasons why these students were more successful than the others in changing their attitudes and developing their intercultural communicative competence appear to be as follows. Juan's failure to find a receptive audience to his representation of Spain and León (in partnership one) meant that his own personal goal for the project was rejected by his partner and he subsequently lost his intrinsic motivation to engage in the exchange and, instead, developed a rather pessimistic outlook towards the target culture. Manuel also found his attempts to elicit alternative perspectives from his partner ignored (in partnership four), and consequently he worked with the little information he had about his partner to come to negative conclusions about her and her culture.

In contrast, the exchanges which enabled learners to successfully develop aspects of intercultural communicative competence exhibited the following characteristics:

- Students had opportunities to express their feelings and views about their own culture to a receptive audience (as in the case of Anna in partnership two).
- Students were encouraged to reflect critically on their own culture through questions posed by their partners (as in the case of Lourdes in partnership three).
- Students engaged in dialogic interaction with their partners about the home and target cultures and consequently this led to a growing awareness of differing perspectives on the two cultures' products and practices (as in the case of Susana in partnership five).

Consequently, it is clear that not only is task design important for the development of intercultural communicative competence (as already pointed out by Müller-Hartmann, 2000a), but also the learners' ability to take part effectively in e-mail exchanges. Much has already been written about the skills learners need to have when engaging in on-line activities. Shetzer & Warschauers' (2000) electronic literary approach, for example, puts forward a useful framework of skills and knowledge which students need to have in order to develop electronic literacy, while Belz (2001, 2002), Belz and Müller-Hartmann (2002) and Kern (1998) have highlighted various types of communication breakdown which students need to be aware of in on-line intercultural exchanges. However, based on an analysis of the e-mails

exchanged by students in this exchange, the students who were able to develop a successful and interculturally rich relationship with their partner had written e-mails which had the following elements:

- They took into account the socio-pragmatic rules of the partner's language when writing in that language (see e-mail extract 6).
- Apart from the basic information on the topic in question, they also provided their partner with analysis and personal opinions about the topic (see e-mail extracts 4, 7, and 14).
- They asked questions which encouraged feedback and reflection from their partner (see e-mail extract 11 and 13).
- They tried to develop a personal ("friendly") relationship with their partner, as opposed to simply focussing on the tasks they had been given (see e-mail extract 7).
- They recognised and reacted to the needs and interests of their partners, answering their questions and encouraging them to write more about the topics which interested them (see e-mail extract 5 and, for an example of when this was not the case, see partnership four).

As Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen (1998) point out, current netiquettes encourage users to write short e-mails, often no longer than one screen. Students may also find it difficult to get access to e-mail for long enough in order to compose in-depth messages. Nevertheless, if intercultural communicative competence is to be developed successfully and if students are to learn anything more than superficial knowledge about the target culture, then students need to write messages which take into account the points laid out above. Writing messages off-line or combining e-mails with essays and other hard copy materials (as suggested by Kern, 1998) are two possible solutions to this problem. During the early stages of this project, guidelines for interpreting e-mails from the other culture as well as examples of what I perceived to be good messages (based on the insights of my on-going research) were drawn up and given to the students. These examples and suggestions were often adapted from the students' own e-mails (when they gave me permission to use them) and also from the examples provided by Kern.

It became clear during the exchange that learners are no more likely to know how to compose effective e-mails for their foreign partners any more than they are likely to be aware of the skills and knowledge necessary for intercultural learning. For this reason the role of the teacher in on-line learning needs careful attention. For many years the term "guide on the side" has been used to describe the role of teachers in the technology enhanced classroom, where their function is seen to be that of "a facilitator of knowledge rather than the font of wisdom" (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). However, many researchers (Feldman, Conold, & Coulter, 2001; Fischer, 1998; Müller-Hartmann, 2000b) have been critical of this view. They have suggested that while the Internet may allow opportunities for on-line collaboration, this does not mean that learners will have the skills to exploit these opportunities for successful learning. Similarly, following an analysis of this exchange, I definitely see the need for myself as a teacher of intercultural communicative competence to take a greater role in helping students in analysing and creating e-mails in any future on-line exchanges.

CONCLUSION

This project set out to identify the factors which successfully lead to intercultural learning in virtual exchanges. It was found that the students who were able to successfully develop their intercultural communicative competence in this exchange had found a receptive audience for the expressions of their own cultural identity. They had been forced to look at their home culture from a new perspective through the questions and comments of their partners, and through dialogue with their partner they had begun to understand the different ways a culture's products and practices can be experienced. However, this project also revealed that intercultural exchanges which fail to function properly can lead to a reinforcement of stereotypes and a confirmation of negative attitudes. This confirms the findings of Belz (2002, p. 70-72).

The research also attempted to identify elements of e-mail messages which would enable students to establish successful intercultural relationships with their partners. The ability of the students to build up a personal relationship with their partners via e-mail, their sensitivity to their partners' needs and communicative style, and their capacity to produce engaging, in-depth correspondence were found to be key aspects of the e-mails which lead to the successful development of intercultural communicative competence in the exchanges.

In conclusion, it is important to point out that the area of intercultural e-mail exchanges continues to offer fertile ground for further research and analysis. It would be perhaps useful, for example, to identify whether the characteristics of successful e-mail exchanges and the content of effective e-mails which have been presented here need to be modified or expanded in other cultural and institutional contexts. Furthermore, greater investigation is needed into the question of how teachers can maximise the intercultural learning experience of e-mail exchanges. Finally, more in-depth research is also required into how notions of language, nation, and cultural identity are addressed by learners in intercultural e-mail exchanges.[4]

NOTES

1. I would like to thank my partner in London, Manuela Gil Torres, for her contribution to the development of the exchange and the collection of data for this research project.

2. The names of the participants used in this paper have been changed.

3. For a significant minority of people in the Spanish region of León, a strong sense of local identity is accompanied by a desire for greater autonomy from the Spanish state. As is the case in other Spanish provinces, the movement for independence is often associated with the use of a regional language instead of Castilian Spanish (Hooper, 1995; Mar-Molinero, 2000).

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