Using Internet Technologies for Learning and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence

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This paper aims to discuss the use of Internet technologies such as instant messengers (IM), blogs and wikis as tools for learners to practice their skills in intercultural communication and for teachers to evaluate learners’ development of intercultural competence. Instant messengers enable learners from different cultures to have real-time conversations; blogs provide learners with web spaces to write reflective journals and have further discussion followed the IM exchange; wikis offer a collaborative environment for learners to co-construct knowledge on intercultural communication based on their experience in this exchange. The discussion includes the introduction of the characteristics and usage of each Internet technology, issues of how to make use of the data recorded on the IM software and web spaces for learners to examine and reflect on their linguistic and cultural problems when interacting with culturally different learners, and how to evaluate learners’ development of intercultural competence by seeking linguistic evidence from their language use in the process of interaction. The theoretical framework in this study involves theories in models of intercultural communicative competence in foreign language learning, an ethnographic and critical perspective of culture learning for intercultural telecollaborative task design and approaches on discourse analysis from a Hallidayian functional-textual theory of language.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, IM, blog, wiki, telecollaboration

From the ‘Native-Speaker’ Model to the ‘Intercultural-Speaker’ Model

The rise of communicative language teaching in the 1980s had moved the emphasis in foreign language education from grammatical and structural approaches to a more communicative and functional approach and focussed on developing the learners’ skills in communicative situations; however, its framework was still constructed on the basis of the native speaker’s ability to use and interpret language appropriately in the process of interaction and in relation to the social context. Under the ‘native-speaker’ model of language teaching and with a static view of culture, the instruction of culture in TESOL is often comprised of transmission of static cultural knowledge of an British or American way of living to the learners, such as the introduction of foreign festivals, food, sports, or the different ways of behaving; the aim of language learning is to be able to communicate or act in a way like native speakers do. This pedagogy has been criticised in several ways. For example, it assumes that people in a particular culture all speak and behave in the same way and thus neglects the fact that variations exist everywhere, even within the same country. Thus, it tends to form a stereotypical impression of the target culture to learners and fails to account for the phenomenon of English being transformed into an international language instead of the language only belonging to British or American people (Alptekin, 2002). What problematises the traditional way of cultural instruction is that it does not deal with the shifting nature of culture and thus lacks skill training for language learners to explore the culture by themselves. It neglects the fact that human beings are not only creatures being moulded by social or cultural institutions but also creators of culture.

The criticism toward the ‘native-speaker’ model has led to the emergence of the ‘intercultural-speaker’ model for culture instruction in foreign language education. In the ‘intercultural-speaker’ model, learners are no longer expected to reject their own culture and
take on the target culture, but rather to find what Kramsch (1993) describes as a ‘third place’. Kramsch sees the term as an alternative to the tendency in foreign language teaching to treat the home and foreign cultures as monolithic entities. Kramsch suggests that learners need to locate themselves in a place that “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 concept describes language learners’ newly achieved distance from both the home and target cultures and refers to the multiplicity of cultural identities that belong to all of us, thereby rejecting the fallacy of ‘one-nation equals one-culture’. Following the same line of thinking, Kramsch (2001) argues that in order to capture the complexities of the post-colonial, global age in which people live in multiple, shifting spaces and partake of multiple identities which are often in conflict with one another, teaching of intercultural communication will have to deal with shifting identities and cross-cultural networks rather than with autonomous individuals located in stable and homogeneous national cultures.

Byram (1997) proposes that foreign language learners become ‘intercultural speakers’, seeing their role not as imitators of native speakers but as social actors engaging with other social actors in a particular kind of communication and interaction which is different from that between native speakers. He constructed a model of intercultural communicative competence that contains five elements:

1. “Attitudes of curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own”
2. “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”
3. “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”
4. “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”
5. “Critical cultural awareness: 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. 50-63)

In the work of this model, Byram has offered objectives for each of these elements and suggested modes of assessment. Thus, this model is often used as a reference for researchers to evaluate the achievement of interculturality of the language learners. Byram’s model provides a relatively comprehensive structure for describing what intercultural competence contains and thus is so far the most recognised model of intercultural communicative competence.

**Intercultural Approach to English Language Teaching**

The above intercultural approach to English language teaching differs from the communicative language teaching approach in at least the following ways. First, it is necessary to distinguish between the cultural-specific and cultural-general competence and recognise the importance of both. The culture-general learning outcomes do not replace culture-specific learning objectives, but constitute the larger learning framework within which target culture learning occurs. What language learners need before they acquire the specific cultural knowledge in the learning process is the ability or the competence to see through the difference between themselves and their interlocutors and to develop the proper strategies for coping with the difference. Cultural-specific knowledge is gained after the
cultural-general knowledge that guides learners to approach a different culture. Thus, what language learners need first is a broad mind to recognise that every individual in the world is unique and carries multi-faceted and constantly shifting identities with themselves. This leads to the second characteristic of the intercultural approach; that is, learners need to develop an understanding of the multiple and shifting cultural identities, the awareness of the cultural differences and the willingness to decentre from their own cultural framework and to avoid stereotyping. When interacting with a new individual, we should not judge them by their ethnic, national or cultural background. Instead, we should understand them by what they say and how they act. Thirdly, knowing the ‘self’ is the starting point of intercultural learning. Self-expression is one of the major purposes and functions for learning a foreign language; self-identity should be affirmed to be an integral part of teaching and learning a foreign language. Lessons and tasks are needed that invite students to share their individual identity, which is essential for them to acknowledge themselves as unique and valuable beings and will be the starting points that inspire students to embrace differences and the uniqueness of other people and prepare them to transcend labels of people. Similarly, learners are expected to be both global and local speakers of English; they should be able to use English freely both in global and local contexts. Learning a foreign language does not require learners to abandon their local affiliation; instead, learners should be guided to form a third culture based on their original cultural background and their understanding of a different culture or a different way of thinking and living. Learners should not forget themselves in the pursuit of a new language ability; instead, they should be encouraged to look at their own culture from another culture’s point of view and to express their culture in a way that can be understood by people who hold a different perspective of the world. In addition, learners need to think about their role as a global citizen; that is, to find their local identity as embedded in their global identity. Finally, “skills of discovery and interaction” (Byram, 1997) is the core in intercultural competence. This is similar to what Paige et al (1999) describe as “learning how to learn about language and culture”. It is not possible for us to have full knowledge of how people from a particular sociocultural background think and act in a particular way, thus the skills to discover and to realise how other people perceive things are crucial for intercultural understanding. The process to achieve mutual understanding is just like what Ting-Toomey (1999) calls “mindful identity negotiation”.

Internet-Mediated Intercultural Learning

The advent of Internet technology has broken the limitation of classroom walls making connections with learners from different parts of the world possible without the need to travel. This technology has made the implementation of an intercultural approach to English language teaching far more tenable than before. The ‘virtual connection’ enables learners to have an authentic experience of communicating with people with different cultural backgrounds, thus helping learners develop the intercultural attitude, knowledge and skills. In addition, contemporary Internet technologies such as instant messenger (IM) software, blog and wiki websites appear to provide more interactive functions and most important of all, to be user-friendly. Normally, without much computer science knowledge, teachers and learners can make use of these Internet technologies with ease so that technology-phobia will gradually become less a problem for using these technologies in assisting school learning. What’s more, multi-literacy is another important educational goal in the digital society. By
adopting the Internet-mediated intercultural approach in language learning, learners can develop not only their intercultural competence but also their electronic literacy (Warschauer and Kern, 2000). Another important contribution of Internet technologies in assisting intercultural learning is the ability to store the interaction data effectively so learners can examine and reflect on the data after the exchange. Three kinds of Internet technologies as follow are used in this study.

**Wiki** technology provides at least four features: 1) it allows users to create and edit an article online without the need of HTML knowledge so it can be used transparently. 2) It can record and show every step of change users make to the page, so the teacher can track the change and thus realise the process of learners’ building-up of knowledge and assess their development of knowledge. 3) It allows every registered member to edit every page in the website so learners can have access to and edit their peers’ article as long as they log into the website. This function enables the co-construction of knowledge of learners and enables the more able learners or the teacher to help correct other learners’ linguistic errors. 4) It combines the ‘discuss’ function in each page so learners can leave comments to their peers to communicate why they make the changes; further discussion or negotiation of meaning can thus be motivated.

**Blog** technology enables learners to write an online reflective journal. All the entries can be archived in chronological order. Learners can recall their past learning experience by retrieving their previous entries in the archive, similar to browsing a hard diary page by page. In addition, it enables interactive dialogues between the author and the audience, so it is able to facilitate discussion between the teacher and the learner or to form a learning community among the learners. Therefore, weblog is an ideal tool for learners to keep a research diary; it is also a good platform for learners to publish their ideas and contains interactive functions for the authors and their audience to exchange opinions. Schuetz (2005) considers blogs to be an excellent tool for collecting students’ thoughts and tracing their development over time, something that can help reveal instances of possible conflict and indicates that students seem to write most reflectively when they conceive their writing as part of an ongoing dialogue.

**IM** technology can link learners virtually to have real-time conversation online. It is an ideal tool for practicing interviewing skills. Firstly, unlike emails, IM conversation is conducted in real-time, so it is more similar to face-to-face conversation. However, interaction in IM allows speakers more time to organise their thoughts before they type and send the message. Under such context, the students who are carrying out the interviews have ample time to reflect on what their exchange partners tell them and to decide on what questions will best lead to further exploration. Secondly, the anonymous nature of virtual interaction often provides support for learners who are shy or not confident about interacting with speakers of the foreign language. Thirdly, IM software can store the chat data simultaneously when the conversation takes place. The stored data serves as a great resource for language learners to observe and reflect on their conversations, which are important skills for intercultural communication.

**An Example of Internet-Mediated Intercultural Learning**

This study aims to design an intercultural exchange between EFL learners in Taiwan and Chinese as Foreign Language (CFL) learners in the UK by incorporating specific functions of each technology to facilitate language learners’ intercultural learning. The following chart shows the basic design of this exchange. However, this does not mean that this is the only way of making use of these technologies in the intercultural approach of
language learning. Language teachers can make creative and innovative use of the multiple functions of these technologies based on the context and objectives of their instruction.

The design of this study emphasizes the functions of real-time conversation and automated chat data storage in IM software. The real-time talk function makes IM an ideal tool for practicing intercultural skills of discovering and interacting. By interacting with other learners online, students can practice their interviewing skills and at the same time be challenged on their thoughts by other learners. There are different kinds of IM software available; software such as MSN messenger, Yahoo messenger or Skype chat is often talked about in the area of computer-assisted instruction. This article introduces recent software, Google Talk\(^1\). What makes Google Talk distinctive to other IM software is its more integrative design, which combines real-time talk with email. The chat data is stored in a format similar to email so the data can be sent directly from Google mail as an email to other users and can be edited with all the editing functions available for editing regular email. Thus, it makes the usage of the chat data more easy and effective. In terms of wiki technology, this study emphasises its function for learners to construct their knowledge systematically and another function for teachers to track their learners’ development of the knowledge in the learning process. All the history of learners’ change is recorded in the wiki. By selecting the ‘history’ button, the teacher can have a complete record of the process of learners’ construction of the whole article. Finally, this study makes use of blog websites for its function of reflective dialogue. The purpose is for teachers to interact with the learners so that they can assess learners’ development of intercultural attitude and provide learners’ guidance in the process of learning. This process implements an ‘intercultural stance’ that Ware and Kramsch (2005) suggest the language teachers have to model – “the intercultural attitude toward self and other, which includes the willingness to engage with the students in an

\(^1\) http://www.google.com/talk/
exploration of difference rather than an assumption of similarity, discussing jointly with the
students ways of conducting the exploration and ways of imagining the logic of another
person by interpreting his or her utterances”. In other words, the teacher’s role is pivotal in
leading students to develop a decentred perspective that goes beyond comprehending the
surface meaning of words to discovering the logic of their interlocutors’ utterances; this
reflection on the “logic underlying language” is what frames and fosters the intercultural
stance of language learning.

A Discourse Analytical Approach to Data Analysis

Normally, the studies in using telecollaboration to assist intercultural learning adopted
the analyst-sensitive content analysis for data interpretation (Belz, 2003). Belz’s (2003)
research is innovative in using linguistic expression as evidence for tracking the change of
learners’ perspective shift, which Byram (1997) has suggested as a possible indicator of
development in attitudinal component of intercultural competence. Belz and her student,
Schuetz (2005) mainly adopted a discourse analytical approach to data analysis that is based
on a Hallidayan functional-textual theory on language. In contrast to a structural-generative
approach developed by Chomsky, functional linguistics has put more emphasis on the social
context and looks at how language both acts upon and is constrained by this social context.
Schuetz (2005) argues that Halliday’s functional grammar provides a powerful analytical tool
by which linguists can link the syntax of a text to the meanings it is conveying; the
underlying assumption is that utterances are not only representations of reality, but that they
also encode the speaker’s attitude to, and his or her interactive intentions with those
representations.

Schuetz’s (2005) study shows that students’ potential development of cultural self-
awareness and their possible decentring can be analyzed within the linguistic framework of
modality. She especially relies on the analysis of deontic and epistemic modality in learners’
language to show their possible change of attitude. Deontic modality is defined as the ‘modal
system of duty’ and exhibits a speaker’s sense of duty or obligation in connection with a
particular event. Linguistic markers for deontic modality include modal auxiliaries such as
must, may, or should, and grammatical constructions that combine adjectives and participles
with be…to, such as be permitted to, or be allowed to. Depending on the choice of the
linguistic formula, deontic modal markers employ different degrees of commitment. For
example, we can differentiate between strong (e.g. “he must be right”), medium (e.g. “he may
be right”), and weak commitment (e.g. “he could be right”). Looking at deontic expressions
of modality will reveal whether the speaker takes the responsibility for a necessity. In other
words, deontically uttered statements give insight into the extent to which a speaker is
influenced by an authority; they reveal to what extent the speaker’s words are shaped by the
concepts imposed by one’s cultural models (Gee, 1999) and upbringing. An analysis of the
occurrence, frequency and degree of deontic expressions thus help find out the speaker’s
cultural models and the embedded assumptions about what he or she considers appropriate.
Changes in the use of deontic modality can be indicative of possible perspective shifts and
the ability to step outside such given frameworks. On the other hand, epistemic modality
refers to the degree of commitment a speaker has for the truth of a certain proposition;
epistemically modalised utterances reveal the status of the speaker’s understanding and
knowledge. The degree of confidence is encoded linguistically by categorical assertions,
modal verbs (to feel, to think, to assume) and modal adverbs (certainly, really). An analysis
of the use of epistemic modality with which a speaker is able to either intensify or mitigate
his or her commitment to the truth of an utterance may reveal possible changes in students’ perceptions of reality and points of view.

Both Belz’s and Schuetz’s studies point out that the analysis of the use of modality over time would indeed be instrumental to interpreting a learner’s development of critical self-reflection and intercultural competence. In the design of this study, the teacher can formatively assess learners’ attitude change by observing the learners’ language with IM, wiki or blog technologies to know whether there is a perspective shift in the process of interaction. By tracking the modality use, the teacher will have the ability to find out the cultural models learners have brought with them in the beginning of the exchange and how these cultural models are negotiated or reconstructed in the process of interaction.

Conclusion

An Internet-mediated intercultural approach is promising in English language teaching for enhancing young people’s intercultural competence, which is an indispensable ability in a global society. By making use of different features of a range of Internet technologies, teachers can provide learners effective media for practicing their intercultural skills and constructing their intercultural knowledge with either native speakers or other English as International Language learners. In addition, teachers can conduct formative assessment of learners’ development of intercultural competence by tracking the data recorded in these media. The discourse analytical approach based on the Hallidayian functional-textual theory of language can be used to complement the conventionally used content analysis of data so that evidence that is more objective can be used to show possible perspective shifts of the language learners during the process of learning.
References


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