E-MAIL EXCHANGE AS A CULTURAL ACTIVITY: REFLECTIONS IN A LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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This paper reflects on an e-mail exchange project carried out with university students who are studying at the English Language Teaching Department at a university in Turkey. These students were matched with students in Taiwan who were also university students with similar ages. The students communicated outside the classroom via e-mails for six weeks. Their reflections on this activity were regularly collected through reflection papers, classroom discussions and after the end of the project through a questionnaire. Students' email correspondence was stored as evidence of their communication. The study is based on Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence and aims to present the areas in which the students showed development and points to be considered for future research.

Keywords: E-mail exchange, Intercultural communication competence, Intercultural awareness, Language learning.

INTRODUCTION

In today’s globalized world, increasing intercultural understanding, promoting intercultural awareness and establishing healthy intercultural relations have become crucial elements that education needs to foster. Especially in the field of language teaching, this necessity has been emphasized more. This is due to the fact that language can be considered to serve as a bond for the communication of people from different cultures. In the case of English language, the fact that the number of non-native speakers of English exceeds the number of native speakers of English in the world is a clear indicator that English language learners need to develop not only their language skills, but also intercultural communicative competence. Based on this view, this study aims to present findings of a study which was carried out to develop intercultural awareness of university students in Turkey and Taiwan. The project engaged the students in regular e-mail exchanges each week and the students were required to write to each other about a preset theme. The results of the study show that the students enjoyed this activity and found themselves greatly improved in their intercultural awareness which were reflected in the data collected.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Internet resources can offer valuable tools for use in the language classroom. While several studies have focused on synchronous communication via internet, some have dealt with asynchronous communication. Synchronous communication gives the chance of a real-time communication between people. However, if the communicators are in different time zones, synchronous communication is difficult to organize. One of the advantages of asynchronous communication via internet, such as e-mails or electronic bulletins, is enabling to communicate despite such different time zones. E-mails are one of the most frequently used means for asynchronous communication. Studies which searched for the use of e-mails in language teaching revealed that communication via e-mails and other computer mediated means not only help for the production of a complex language (Sotillo, 2000), but also increase student motivation (Meunier, 1998).

Computer mediated communication via e-mails has also been investigated for the integration of culture into the language classroom. Cifuentes and Shih (2001) conducted a study with Taiwanese and American students who communicated via e-mails. It was found in the study that the students benefited from the e-mail exchange not only in terms of developing their linguistic skills but also cultural awareness, which also improved their motivation. Ho (2000) also carried out a project with primary school students in Singapore and Birmingham. The findings of the project revealed that the awareness and understanding towards both the students’ own cultures and their partners’ cultures increased.

The emergence of the notion of the ‘intercultural speaker’ as the ultimate target in language learning has given rise to ways of integrating cultural contact in the language classroom. Based on the view that language learners should not model themselves on the native speakers of a language, but instead on a model of an ‘intercultural speaker’, Byram (1997) developed a model of Intercultural Communicative Competence. In this model (see Table I), intercultural communicative competence extends the model of communicative competence with the addition of a component of intercultural competence. The components of Byram’s (1997) model can be broadly grouped under knowledge, attitude and skills.

As it is noticed in the model, the qualities of an intercultural speaker include being ready to suspend disbelief towards other cultures, having a critical point of view towards events, having knowledge about different cultures and being open-minded. According to the model, the locations of learning are not restricted to the language classroom. Learners can develop their intercultural competence also by fieldwork and independent learning. In this respect, technology can serve as a helpful tool for getting in touch with different cultures, as the case with e-mail communication.

AIM OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to increase the intercultural awareness of twenty-eight university students of similar ages in Taiwan and Turkey by engaging them in an e-mail project. The participants in Turkey were all first year Turkish students studying at Gazi University, English Language Teaching Department. The participants in Taoyuan, Taiwan were freshmen students majoring in applied linguistics/ foreign languages at Yuan-Ze University. The major foreign language learnt by both Turkish and Taiwanese students was English. While the other main foreign language of the Turkish students was German, it was Japanese for the Taiwanese students.
As the study was based on Byram’s (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, it was predicted that the students would show development on all dimensions of the knowledge, attitude and skills dimensions of intercultural competence. However, it was also proposed that depending on the communication of the students, one dimension may take precedence over other components.
METHODOLOGY

The study gathered data from both quantitative and qualitative means. The students were required to communicate with each other via e-mails for six weeks as part of the coursework. The communication took place outside the classroom. The proposed frequency of writing to each other was three times a week at the beginning of the project. After a few weeks, it was seen that students found it more appropriate for themselves to write twice a week. The discussions of the students were based on preset themes for each week. The themes for each week were chosen as introduction, family, hospitality, a cultural artifact, food and stereotypes. The students were asked to cover the answers to the questions that are related to these themes in their weekly correspondence (see Appendix I).

At the end of each week, the Turkish students were required to submit a reflection paper about their weekly e-mail communication to their course teacher who is the researcher of this study. They were asked to write their reflections based on the question “Is there anything that you found interesting about your friend’s culture in terms of this week’s topic, based on your communication with your friend? Has anything in your exchange with your friend made you think more critically about your own culture?” Only the reflection paper required for Week 5 had a different question which was “There are more non-native speakers of English in the world than its native speakers. Therefore, when you go abroad, you are more likely to speak to non-native speakers of English than native speakers of English. Taking this into account, what kinds of skills do you think are necessary apart from linguistic skills for successful communication?”

A fifteen minute part of each class was also devoted to student discussions on the experience of e-mail exchanges. The e-mail correspondence of the students was stored as evidence of their communication. This also enabled the researcher to focus on the use of linguistic elements in the e-mail exchange; however this is slightly out of the scope of this study. Data was gathered through a 5-point Likert type questionnaire with eight items (see Appendix II) developed by the researcher and which is based on Byram’s (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence. This questionnaire was conducted in Turkish with the view that the students may feel more at ease with the language. Data was also gathered from the reflection papers by using content analysis method. Codes and themes that emerged in the students’ reflection papers and which also take place in the related literature were found out. Hence, the quantitative data of the study was obtained from the questionnaire, while the qualitative data was gathered from the reflection papers and the teacher’s observation based on discussions with the students.

FINDINGS

As a result of the content analysis, three main themes emerged which are also stated in the literature. These themes are knowledge, attitude and skills.

KNOWLEDGE

Related to the ‘knowledge’ dimension of intercultural competence, the students wrote in their reflections that they learnt many things about the Taiwanese culture. The knowledge they gained include the traditions, important events such as festivals, family relations and some facts about the country and its history. Most of the students stated that they were shocked by so many similarities of the two cultures although there are also differences. Gaining knowledge about “the
processes of social interaction in one’s interlocutor’s country” (Byram, 1997, p. 60) is one of the elements in the knowledge dimension of Byram’s (ibid.) model of intercultural communicative competence. As the following statements show, the students appear to have gained knowledge mainly in terms of this dimension:

It surprised me that big brothers keep an eye on their little sisters as our big brothers do. (Esra)

They regard family as important just like us. They care their families and visit their relatives frequently. Finding something similar in our cultures made me so happy. It means, being in different countries is not a barrier for friendships and feeling close. (Ali)

My friend told me that only the first son of the family is taking care of the parents. This was interesting, not like our country. In our culture, whoever has the ability, the son or daughter, takes care of the parents. (Arzu)

I learnt so many things about Taiwanese culture. I had no idea about it before. I was not even sure where it is located on the map. Now I know lots of things including its geography. (Can)

**ATTITUDE**

One of the students shows a critical stance towards her own culture after finding out so many similarities between the two cultures in terms of family relations. This can be seen as a sign of ‘willingness to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one’s own environment’ which is stated as one of the indicators of development in the ‘attitude’ dimension of intercultural competence by Byram (1997, p.58).

I did not think before that they give importance to family. By the way, Turkish families bring their children up by teaching that we are unique in the world because no one has strong family relationship or strong love of nation like us. I realized that we are not the only ones in the world in this respect (Cansel).

Another student makes a similar comment in terms of the similarities in hospitality traditions:

Actually, the most surprising thing is how similar both of our cultures are which made me feel that we, Turks, are not the only ones who are very careful about the way we treat a guest (Yeliz).

One of the students states his curiosity about whether the two cultures had any kind of connection in the past based on the similarities he found out. His comments can be seen as an indicator of an ‘interest in discovering other perspectives on interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in one’s own and in other cultures and cultural practices’:

Their elder play ‘Chinese chess’ as our elders love playing ‘backgammon’. Such kinds of things made me think that there may be lots of cultures similar to ours, or maybe there was a connection between our and their cultures in the past. I wonder what these kinds of similarities mean for each culture. Indeed, I would love to learn these kind of things and hope that my friend help me about it. (Ayhan)

The comments of a student are interesting as they show an ethnocentric point of view, although it is expressed in a way that has understanding for the other side as well. It should be taken into account that ethnocentric opinions can not be avoided immediately in a short time, but having such views can be seen as a first step in the process of developing intercultural awareness:
I can understand that they are hospitable persons like us. I want to say that our culture about this subject is more beautiful than theirs; however, I am sure my Taiwanese friend thinks in this way for her culture as well. (Elif)

Similarly, another student says:

My friend told me that in their culture, bringing some presents while visiting is an obligation. If somebody doesn’t bring a present while visiting, it is thought as impolite. It is an interesting culture because bringing presents to someone is a nice behavior but it should not be an obligation, I think. (Okan)

Moreover, the students’ great willingness to take part in this e-mail project which is observed by the teacher is itself an indicator of a positive attitude for intercultural contact, which is stated by Byram (1997, p. 57) as ‘willingness to seek out or take up opportunities to engage with otherness in a relationship of equality, distinct from seeking out the exotic or the profitable’.

SKILLS

According to Byram (1997, p. 61), the ability to ‘mediate between conflicting interpretations of phenomena’ is one of the indicators of the ‘skills’ dimension of intercultural competence. In this respect, the following words of a student reflect the development of such kind of skill:

My friend told me that she thought Turkish people were black before seeing my photo. And also she had thought we were too religious people and all our women covered their whole body to hide it. I think she thought so as we are Muslim. I was sad and surprised. But I think I was able to explain her about us. We both had a better view of each other at the end of this project and our stereotypes changed. (Nur)

Based on the reflection papers of the students, it can be claimed that the students showed development on all dimensions of intercultural competence. However, knowledge and attitude dimensions seem to have developed more, rather than the skills dimension. Taking into account that the ‘skills’ dimension may be more likely to be developed in face-to-face communication, this result was predicted.

In terms of the questionnaire, it was found that all of the students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements. The percentage distribution for each statement is as follows:

This finding shows that e-mail exchange is considered by students as a beneficial way of developing the students’ intercultural communicative competence. The items in the questionnaire addressed all components of intercultural competence which are attitude, knowledge and skills. The analysis of the reflection papers and classroom discussions, on the other hand, show that there seems to be more improvement on the attitude dimension of students’ intercultural competence. This means that the students improved in their open-mindedness, curiosity towards another culture and willingness to communicate with a member of a different culture. The second mostly developed dimension of intercultural competence appears to be the knowledge dimension. Prior to the e-mail exchange project, the students had very limited knowledge about Taiwan. However, after the e-mail exchange project, the students were greatly surprised by the similarities that the two cultures had. The students frequently showed an increased motivation to communicate more with their partners which extended the project to a friendship. This is a positive outcome of the study, as forming collaborations and friendly relationships are significant for intercultural communicative competence. In terms of the skills dimension of intercultural competence, apart from mediation skills, it was observed that the students reflected the skills that
are requisites of an intercultural speaker in their written discourse. They did this by using polite language, using confirmation checks before reaching an evaluation and by using some other communication strategies.

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The weekly classroom discussions about the e-mail exchange also revealed that some students were frustrated with the late replies they got from their Taiwanese friends. Although this was not intentional and mainly a technical problem, it caused a misunderstanding for some students. They expressed views like “my Taiwanese friend is not interested in my culture as much as I am interested in hers”. Therefore, it is important to deal with such problems at the beginning of the project.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the study, it can be concluded that e-mail exchange can be used as a helpful pedagogical tool for the development of intercultural competence among university students. In our globalized era, the demand for reaching the competence of an ‘intercultural speaker’ is increasing. Technological tools such as e-mails are only one way of achieving this aim. Students can also be encouraged for communicating through other means of asynchronous communication, through synchronous communication or a combination of both of them. Along with the development of intercultural competence, it is for sure that learners will also benefit from such communication in terms of linguistic aspects. It is the language teacher and the needs of the students that can give shape to a variety of possible cultural activities such as the one in this study.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX I

Week 1: Introduction

Try to get to know your friend such as his/her interests, her personality and country.

Week 2: Family

1. Talk about the importance of family in your culture by giving specific examples.
2. What kind of problems can occur if a foreigner does not know about family traditions in Taiwan and Turkey? Give an example.
3. Based on your exchange with your Turkish or Taiwanese friend, do you think your cultures have similarities in terms of cultural importance attached to family? Are there differences? What are they?

Week 3: Hospitality

1. Talk about the importance of hospitality in your culture by giving specific examples.
2. What kind of problems can occur if a foreigner does not know about hospitality issues in Taiwan and Turkey? Give an example.
3. Based on your exchange with your Turkish or Taiwanese friend, do you think your cultures have similarities in terms of cultural importance attached to hospitality and guests? Are there differences? What are they?

Week 4: A Cultural Artifact

1. Talk about a cultural artifact that reflects your culture.
2. What is the underlying cultural meaning in the artifact that you have chosen? Which cultural value dimension can explain the meaning of this artifact?
3. Based on your exchange with your Turkish or Taiwanese friend, do you think your cultures have similarities in terms of the artifact that reflects your culture? Are there differences? What are they?
Week 5: Food

1. Write a menu with your own culture’s food.
2. Which dish is served first and why? Who eats first? At what times do people have their meals in Turkey and Taiwan?
3. Based on your exchange with your Turkish or Taiwanese friend, do you think your cultures have similarities in terms of issues related to food in each other’s culture? Are there differences? What are they?

Week 6: Stereotypes

1. What kinds of stereotypes or views did you have about people from Taiwan before having a friend from that country?
2. Do you think your stereotypes or views have changed after the email exchanges with your friend?
3. Based on your exchange with your Turkish or Taiwanese friend, do you think there are similarities in terms of the stereotypes you had towards each other’s culture? Are there differences? What are they?

APPENDIX II

Please circle the degree that you agree with the following statements.

1. I strongly disagree
2. I disagree
3. I am not sure
4. I agree
5. I strongly agree

The email communication with my Taiwanese partner;

1. Made me feel willingness to communicate with a member of a culture about which I did not have much idea before.
   1 2 3 4 5

2. Made me see different perspectives in approaching events which I am both familiar and unfamiliar with in my own and the other culture.
   1 2 3 4 5

3. Made me increase my own awareness towards my culture by getting the chance to compare and contrast my culture’s and another culture’s values.
   1 2 3 4 5

4. Made me increase my knowledge about the reasons of possible misunderstandings that can be encountered between people coming from different cultures.
   1 2 3 4 5
5. Made me gain knowledge about the ways of living and behaviors of another culture.
   1 2 3 4 5

6. Made me bring explanations to events which show similarity to and difference from my own culture.
   1 2 3 4 5

7. Made me change my stereotypes that I had towards the other culture in a positive way.
   1 2 3 4 5

8. Gave me a reason to search about and gather information about a different culture.
   1 2 3 4 5