

## INTERCULTURAL LEARNING THROUGH E-MAIL EXCHANGE

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Studiul intercultural este deseori considerat a fi un beneficiu al schimburilor de e-mail-uri dintre diverse grupuri, există însă puține cercetări referitoare la colaborarea interculturală on-line, care ar dezvolta capacitatea de înțelegere a celor ce studiază alte culturi și viziunea despre lume. Acest articol analizează literatura științifică recentă pentru includerea schimbului de e-mail-uri în studiul intercultural și concluziile autorilor bazate pe e-mail-urile dintre vorbitorii de limbă engleză și spaniolă.

### Introduction

It is known today that there is a good deal of descriptive reports on intercultural e-mail projects, nevertheless little appears to be known about what students actually learn from the interaction with their virtual peers in other cultures (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; 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.

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 scientists (Coleman, 1998; Fischer, 1998) and Richter confirms that this is also the case for virtual intercultural contact: "Internet brings about the contact of cultures, but this does not automatically imply cultural understanding" (1998, p. 15).

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, and Maillet (2001), Tella (1991), and von der Emde, Schneider, and Kötter (2001), have reported more positive experiences.

### Interpretation 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 many different interpretations of intercultural learning which exist, as well as the different levels of importance which writers and teachers feel that should be attributed to this goal (for example, varying definitions, see Bausch, Christ, & Krumm, 1997). Edmondson 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 by yet 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).

### **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 (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 (King-

inger, 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). 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 analyze 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 evaluation, 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 organizing 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 emphasizes 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.

To sum up, we should conclude from the above given theoretical overview and on the basis of the results of the analyzed e-mail exchanges between students from Spain and Great Britain that today there exists in the teaching/learning process of a foreign language the necessity of singling out its socio-cultural features in various forms of its existence, that is both oral and written, informal or formal communication, including e-mails communication. The learners should not only know the culture and civilization of the studied languages but should also be aware how to settle down the problem of clarification of the situation of culture clash. This is important today in the situation of the global e-mail communication with the native speakers and learners of the target languages as well as, in our Spanish and English project, where our students participate in Spanish and English exchanges on our initiative or on their own.

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