4 Taking care of their positive online face? Reasons and strategy development

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Abstract

This paper examines a peer virtual exchange project between students at the University of Cyprus and the University of Latvia. The main purpose of this project is to develop intercultural awareness. Through telecollaborative tasks, students are asked to interact in a common discussion space around elements related to their cultural values. The aim of this paper is to discuss students' strategies for these online exchanges. The hypothesis this paper seeks to examine is that students do not express themselves freely in the discussion forums in order to protect their personal and national image. We are thus interested in the public self-image of the students, known as 'face'. Our findings identified politeness strategies and we are interested in the main reasons for their acts towards positive and/or negative face.

Keywords: intercultural awareness, intercultural exchange, negative face, politeness strategies, positive face, virtual exchange.

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1. Theoretical background

One of the main areas of research in virtual exchange is the development of intercultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence (Müller-Hartmann, 2000; O'Dowd, 2003; Thorne, 2006; Ware, 2005). This article analyses a telecollaborative intercultural exchange at the university level between Cyprus and Latvia.

The studied telecollaboration is a Cultura-inspired project, based on the confrontation of cultural representations of foreign language learners from different socio-cultural backgrounds (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001). The particularity of the analysed project is that the students do not study the native language of their partner; in fact, both groups study the French language as the main subject and we used French as lingua franca. Therefore, there is a mixture of at least three different cultures: French, Cypriot, and Latvian. The goal of this project for students is to practise the French language while interacting on intercultural issues. The approach used in learners' task creation is focused on the analysis of different reactions toward intercultural communication situations. According to Furstenberg et al. (2001), the contrastive approach helps learners to realise the link between culture and language as well as to better understand another culture. The project involves two countries, one from the south and another from the north of Europe, which traditionally do not have bonds, and they do not regularly have fixed representations of one another.

Intercultural dialogue through virtual exchange projects has been pointed out by many researchers (Belz & Thorne, 2006; Helm, 2018; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). However, to achieve intercultural competences and awareness, practitioners need to be aware of some aspects. First, for disagreeing, debating, expressing feelings, and engaging in in-depth discussions with the partner, students need to feel comfortable and therefore activities to break the ice are considered essential (Helm, 2018). Second, the teacher's role is vital as they need to help learners identify cultural similarities and differences and guide them to reflect on their outcomes (Furstenberg et al., 2001). Thirdly, conflicts and cultural

miscommunication are expected (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Schneider & von der Emde, 2006; Ware, 2005).

The theoretical background on current research relies on the notion of 'face' (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1974). We take as a premise that

> "members of a society have […] 'face', the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects: (a) negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction […], (b) positive face: the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61).

We also use the notions of *face-threatening acts* and *face-flattering acts*, as well as negative and positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61; Goffman, 1974; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1996, 1997). In previous virtual exchange projects, researchers have shown strategies adopted by the participants on linguistic matters in order to protect their face (for example exposing themselves only in the chat) or their partner's face (such as pinning the miscomprehension on poor quality audio – Helm, 2018).

In our context, partners exchange in online forums on crucial topics regarding their culture and/or their country. We are interested in examining if students took care of their positive face during these online exchanges. We hypothesise that students do not express themselves freely in the discussion forums in order to protect their personal and national image. The research questions we attempt to answer in this study are as below.

- Can we observe in some students a partial or total dissimulation of their opinion on crucial topics (xenophobia, migration, cultural identity, hospitality, etc.)?

- Those who dissimulate, how do they do it and why?

2.   Methodology

The project, called *French language and intercultural exchanges*[3], lasted for six weeks during the spring semester of 2019. Students at the University of Cyprus had Greek as a mother tongue and students at the University of Latvia had Latvian and Russian as mother tongues. In both groups, students were pursuing their Bachelor and were covering similar studies (*French language and literature*). The French language level of both groups was heterogeneous, from A2 to B2, according to the European framework of reference for languages.

Both groups were coordinated by their teacher in face-to-face classes, and the whole process was integrated into both curricula. On a weekly basis, peers worked on crucial topics related to their cultural values and associations, like cultural identity, hospitality, xenophobia, and migration. Moodle forums were the main communication tool. In total, four tasks were proposed. Each task had the following steps:

> *Step 1:* Students had to complete online questionnaires (word associations and sentence completions). The results were provided anonymously per country.

> *Step 2:* Students had to react to situations in the forums[4] and discuss all the online activity in class (regarding Steps 1 and 2). To promote a clear peer to peer interaction, teachers did not participate in any of the online discussions. Nevertheless, students' online interactions were discussed on site and teachers coordinated the discussion.

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3. In French: Langue française et échanges interculturels.

4. Here are two examples of the proposed situations. Example 1: You are a volunteer in a humanitarian association that hosts refugees. Last week the refugee camp was flooded which caused major damage. The state announced that restoration work was needed and the camp would be liveable again in 15 days. Refugees are left homeless for two weeks. What would you do? Would you offer them help? (Task 2) Example 2: Your country has hosted a number of refugees. Your university, which plans to welcome young people between the ages of 18 and 25, decides, out of respect for the Muslim culture, to impose a certain dress code (prohibition to wear mini-skirts, shorts, low-cut clothing, transparent clothing, etc.). What do you think? How would you react? (Task 3)

Step 3: Students had to express their opinion based on the findings of the week.

Step 4: Students had to keep a journal of astonishment (shared only with the teachers), a tool used to increase satisfaction with exchange programmes (Reinhardt & Rosen, 2012).

Peers worked weekly on the topics mentioned above. The exchanges began with ice breaking activities and ended with reflecting activities on the virtual exchange. Our data corpus consists of:

- online interaction between peers for four different tasks (n=269 messages posted in 16 discussion threads);

- students' journals of astonishment (n=54 journals for 14 students); and

- teachers' on site observations (n=2, Nicosia and Riga).

Our methodology relies on a qualitative and quantitative cross-analysis of the above data (content analysis). We used a bottom-up/top-down approach to classify their forum messages and journal texts. For our analysis, we proceeded as follows: we first examined the forum messages, and then compared the students' face, exposed in the forums, with their private messages in the journals of astonishment. We used Nvivo 11 to code our data. In our research, we identified politeness strategies and examined the reasons for their acts towards positive and/or negative face in the journals.

3.   Analysis and results

3.1.   Students' forum interactions

Regarding the forum messages, in order to better understand the intention of students' contributions, we analysed the content of each message in its context,

and we identified its purpose in relation to the previous messages in the forum. Therefore, the forum messages in response to the proposed situations – in which every student needed to react – were classified into eight categories as follows:

- *first*: first to respond, message posted before any other contribution;

- *repetition*: say nothing new, just repeat the statement of existing messages;

- *new ideas*: introduce new thoughts regarding existing messages;

- *agreement*: express agreement with existing messages in the forum;

- *disagreement*: express disagreement with existing messages in the forum;

- *comment*: make comments, remarks, etc. on existing messages;

- *questions*: ask questions on other participants' messages in order to clarify an idea or statement; and

- *response*: reply to another participant's question.

Looking at all the categories, a general striking observation is the high proportion of messages in which students posted their message without addressing any of their peers and/or commenting on the previous messages (82.2%). Each one replies to the initial situation without expressly referring to the already existing reaction of their peers in the online discussion forums. In the following we are focusing on the categories that reflect issues of positive/negative face.

Another observation is the very low number of *agreement* or *disagreement* messages (7.1% of which 6.7% were *agreement* and only 0.4% *disagreement* messages). Even though we observed a high number of *repetition* messages (49.8%), students do not use any wording that shows that they agree with the forum's existing posts. Only in the third task, in the discussion thread "*Yes or no*

to a miniskirt?" did we observe a high number of *agreement* or *disagreement* messages (64.3% of messages in this forum).

A final finding is the *questions* to peers' messages. Only Latvian students asked questions to Cypriots (7.4% of messages), some of which replied (*response*); 25% of replies asked for more information and/or clarifications. We observe that most *questions* to peers' messages were posted at the beginning of the project and showed a progressive reduction from the first to the third task (50% of messages for the first task, 45% for the second, only 5% for the third, and no message for the final task). In regards *comment*, we identified only two messages (1.5%) in which students made a remark on existing contributions in the forums (the first from a Latvian student in Task 1 and the second from a Cypriot in Task 3).

Apart from the eight categories above, we also classified their messages in all the discussion forums into two types according to the content of the contribution: we identified messages with personal or with general content. We observed that Latvian students posted more messages with personal content than Cypriots (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Messages content
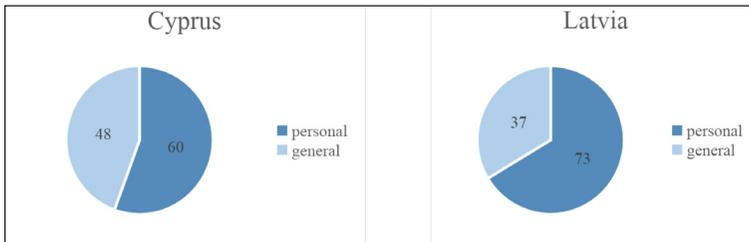
In the messages with personal content, students tended to give information about their life, such as the example below where the student explains her bond with her mother[5] (see Figure 2 below).

5. Translation of the highlighted text in French: I live with my mother, I love her and I am very happy to see her every day but I know that it will not last forever. [...] My 15-year-old mother left her parents to stay in Riga, [...] she never forgot the bond between her and her parents. Every weekend, she visited them, wrote them letters and thought of them, but at the same time, she was happy in the new city.

Figure 2. Example of message with personal content
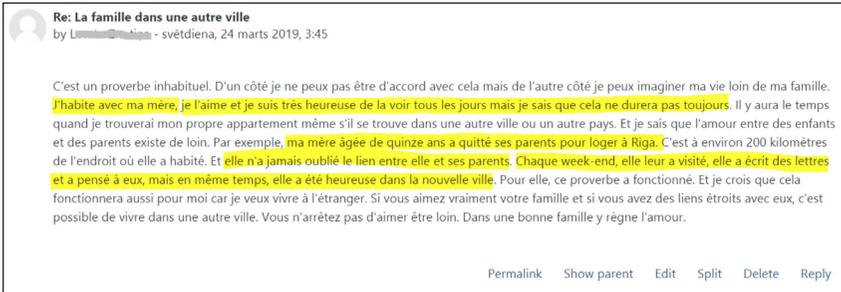
All of these observations point to a high degree of reticence in online interaction with other participants in this project. Learners seem to step back from potentially conflicting situations, to seek some distance, and do not enter into a direct discussion on intercultural issues.

3.2. Face developing strategies

The analysis of each student's activity in discussion forums and journals allowed us to identify different strategies adopted by the students. According to the classification used by Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 2), we classified them within three main strategies of politeness:

- positive politeness: the expression of solidarity ("Now I can say that I put myself in their place and I think differently, I can understand them", journal of astonishment, Cyprus-A11);

- negative politeness: the expression of restraint ("I didn't want to answer these questions honestly, because I thought it would be a little nasty", journal of astonishment, Latvia-A13); and

- off-record politeness: the avoidance of unequivocal impositions ("Something that surprised me was some answers regarding a homosexual couple who wants to adopt a child because some people

said that it was weird for them and not natural", journal of astonishment, Cyprus-A9).

More precisely, positive politeness strategies refer to the following: *having identical positioning in forums and journals*, *respecting others' opinions*, *and discovering others*. Negative politeness refers to *dissimulating the truth in the forums*. Off-record politeness concerns the following strategies: *being honest in the forums*, *being surprised but not reacting in the forums*, and *understanding others better*.

We observed that only two students (level A2) adopted the positive politeness strategies. The rest of the group is divided into off-record politeness and negative politeness (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3. Politeness strategies
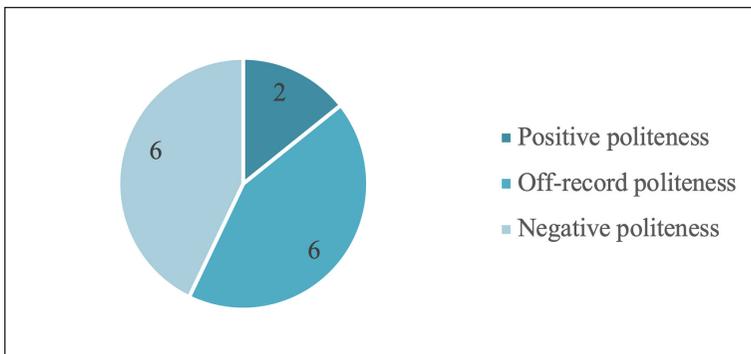
We also identified in our corpus two 'super-strategies': reflecting on oneself in positive and off-record politeness, as well as having nationalist and/or xenophobe behaviour off-record and negative politeness. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), strategies "can be mixed in discourse […and] we may obtain, for example, positive politeness markers within negative politeness strategies" (p. 17). For example, a student expresses her solidarity to refugees in the forum ("It's a horrible situation! I would like to help them, I think it is

my responsibility if I am a volunteer", forums, Latvia-A13), but for the same topic she clearly states in the journal of astonishment that she is hiding the truth, revealing a nationalist attitude ("I didn't want to say everything I believe […]. Not because my opinion is negative, but just because I was a bit afraid of what others might think. […] A lot of people come from these countries just to benefit even if they are not victims. […] I am worried about the culture and language of certain countries in Europe... It would be very sad if a culture disappears as time goes by", journal of astonishment, Latvia-A13).

A final point we examined is the reasons for their acts and strategies. We were particularly interested on the one hand in investigating the lack of reaction despite their surprise, and on the other, in hiding the truth in the forums. Therefore, we set up an inventory of reasons (see Table 1).

Table 1.   Inventory of reasons

Positive face	Negative face
• Afraid of what others will think about them	• Not willing to argue, debate, and/or fight
• Not feeling competent to talk about the topic	• Afraid of offending the other party
• Not willing to express themselves because the topic is not interesting, is a very personal issue, or is not a topic suitable for public discussion (preferring anonymity)	

We are entitled to wonder if the reasons for the non-expression of the opinion found in their journals of astonishment corresponds to their real reasons for not taking a position on the issues discussed.

4.   Discussion

Through these online exchanges, our results showed in some students a partial or total dissimulation of their opinion on crucial topics. Our analysis revealed

that the cultural shock for some topics did not lead them to face-threatening acts in the forums; we found that they adopted the technique of "avoidance" (Goffman, 1974, p. 17) and they used a "cultural alibi" (Dervin, 2011, p. 46) to justify the improper behaviour of their partners. We suppose that they avoided direct discussions on the proposed topics mostly out of politeness. Other critical research showed that "exposure and awareness of difference seem to reinforce, rather than bridge, feelings of difference" (Kern, 2000, p. 256). These online exchanges also allowed them to identify some differences not only with their partners, but also with members of their own group and culture. As some students stated, it is not a matter of culture, but it depends on the personality of each person:

> "in my opinion, it is absolutely possible to get along really well with someone from another country, because I think we get on well with people because of their personality and not their nationality. Moreover, I think that nationality does not determine personality" (journal of astonishment, Task 4, Latvia-AI).

Therefore, students seem to develop some intercultural competences: capacity for curiosity, interest in others, and openness to otherness. Our results align with previous research that telecollaboration "gives learners the opportunity to reflect on and learn from the outcomes of this intercultural exchange within the supportive and informed context of their foreign language classroom" (O'Dowd, 2011, p. 342). We may assume that this has been reinforced by the teachers as they discussed online interactions with students to help them better develop their reflections and findings.

Our study also showed that peers were not engaged in a conversation that may have allowed them to express themselves more freely in the discussion forums with their partners. We assume that this is due to various factors, such as the public (open to all members) character of the forums and the lack of familiarity with the members of the group. According to Marcoccia (2000), the forum's public character might cause face problems because this impoverishes some aspects of the relational dimension, like norms of politeness or emotional expression. In

our project, even though the first exchanges were dedicated to breaking the ice, our analysis showed that there was no discussion between them. We estimate that students' intentions were more educational than personal; in other words they were more interested in accomplishing the task, than creating any socio-cultural bonds. The Latvians' attempts to get into a conversation with the others were unsuccessful, probably because Cypriots rarely responded to their messages, something that maybe discouraged Latvians. Besides, our analysis also revealed that Latvians posted more personal messages than Cypriots. We presume that this different attitude is due to the familiarity with the communication tool, because Latvians were more familiar with computer mediated communication in discussion forums on Moodle than Cypriots. However, we may also consider that a forum is a slow communication tool for interaction and, despite the discussion in class with the teachers, the time allocated to discuss a topic on a weekly basis may not have been enough.

Finally, we estimate that not only the direct and personal interest of the proposed situation, but also the feeling of belonging to a community could be a key element for reaction in the forums. A previous study on virtual exchanges between two different cultures revealed that a micro-community could be established among its members (Dolci & Spinelli, 2007). In our study, the exchanges following the dress code, a provocative subject, where students unanimously reacted strongly (Christians against Muslims), showed that they felt they were in a comfort zone where they did not get into a debate against their partners alone to defend a nationalist issue, but shared the same values and had a commonality in protecting their national interests.

5.   Conclusion

In this project, students were challenged to reflect on their own and their peers' culture. In the current study, we confirm our hypothesis that students do not express themselves freely in the discussion forums in order to protect their positive face. Nevertheless, they show honesty not only in the journals, but also during the discussion in the class. We have revealed some politeness strategies

and explained the reasons for these acts. However, the findings of this research cannot be generalised due to a small sample of participants.

In future research, we would like to examine through discourse analysis the linguistic expressions students use to express and/or dissimulate their opinion. We assume that it could be interesting to compare the expressions appearing in the forums and in the journals.

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