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Chapter 6. Tracing the development of intercultural competence in telecollaborative interaction: An analysis of evaluative language in eTandem exchanges

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Abstract

Numerous studies have been conducted into telecollaborative eTandem exchanges and their potential to foster the development of participants' intercultural competence. These studies have included content analyses of learner interaction, end-of-project questionnaires, interviews and attitudinal surveys. However, studies that analyse the development of intercultural competence in telecollaboration through a linguistically grounded approach are still scarce. To address this gap in the literature, in this chapter we analyse how forty American and Spanish university students used evaluative language in their samples of attitudinal objectives (Byram 1997) taking Vinagre and Corral's (2017) data and findings as a starting point for this analysis. Preliminary results show that the participants used similar evaluative tokens both in their interaction and attitudinal objectives, which could be understood as a strategy to converge by adapting to their partners' communicative practices.

Key words: Appraisal, email, eTandem, intercultural competence, telecollaboration

Introduction

Research in telecollaboration has shown its potential to stimulate the development of participants' intercultural competence (Keränen and Bayyurt 2006). Telecollaboration refers to the application of online communication tools to bring together classes of language learners in geographically distant locations with the aim of developing their foreign language skills and intercultural competence through collaborative tasks and project work. In these projects, "internationally-dispersed learners in parallel language classes use

Internet communication tools such as email or synchronous chat in order to support social interaction, dialogue, debate, and intercultural exchange with expert speakers of the respective language under study” (Belz 2004, 1). A specific model of telecollaborative exchange is teletandem or eTandem (Lewis and Walker 2003), which can be defined as virtual “reciprocal support and instruction between two learners, each of whom is a native speaker of the other’s target language” (O’Rourke 2007, 43). In these exchanges, participants carry out tasks or project work together with the purpose of improving their own communicative and intercultural competence and to help their partner achieve the same. Studies which have focused on the development of intercultural competence in these exchanges have included content analyses of learner interaction, end-of-project questionnaires, interviews and attitudinal surveys (Belz and Müller-Hartmann 2003; Schenker 2012; Vinagre 2014). However, studies which analyse the development of intercultural competence in telecollaboration through a linguistically grounded approach are still scarce (Vinagre and Corral 2017).

If eTandem partnerships are to remain effective and rewarding, affective and interpersonal issues need to be considered in participants’ virtual interaction since lack of closeness, friendliness and trust in one own’s partner can affect communication and threaten collaboration. Thus, the main objective of this study is to analyse how eTandem partners use attitudinal language (Martin 2000; Martin and White’s Appraisal Theory 2005) to display traces of the *attitude* component of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as described by Byram (1997). In order to do so, we take as a starting point, the results from Vinagre and Corral’s (2017) study in which they analysed how twenty dyads of university students in Spain and the United States used appraisal tokens in their telecollaborative interaction.

The reasons that justify selecting *attitudes* as the specific component of ICC for our analysis are manifold. One refers to the difficulty participants seem to experience when trying to develop intercultural attitudes through telecollaboration (Vogt 2006; Vinagre 2014). Another reason is provided by Byram (1997), who emphasizes their importance by stating that they are a prerequisite and anticipated outcome of intercultural communicative competence (33). Finally, Belz (2003) explains how the notion of attitude surfaces as a key theoretical/analytical construct in both Byram's (1997) model of ICC and Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory.

Theoretical Framework

Intercultural communicative competence

Defining intercultural competence is difficult and, for this reason, there is not one single definition that attracts consensus among scholars (Baxter Magolda 2000; Bradford, Allen, and Beisser 2000; Hunter 2004). Some of this difficulty lies on the fact that "...culture is a highly complex, elusive, multilayered notion that encompasses many different and overlapping areas and that inherently defies easy categorization and classification" (Furstenberg 2010, 329). According to Fantini and Tirmizi (2006,12), intercultural competence is "a complex of abilities needed to perform *effectively* and *appropriately* when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (emphasis in original). Despite the lack of consensus, the common denominator underlying these definitions is the capacity to step beyond one's own culture and interact with others from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Sinicrope et al. 2007). Taking this notion as their basis, most models of ICC elaborate on the different aspects of (self)awareness and internal transformation required in the process of becoming successful intercultural communicators. According to Bennet's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), a person's worldview must shift from avoiding cultural

difference to seeking cultural difference (i.e. there has to be an internal evolution from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism) in order to become a true intercultural communicator. In Gudykunst's (1998) Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Model (AUM), the importance of self-awareness is emphasised as the key component in ICC. This author suggests that those hoping to adjust to new cultural situations must learn to "successfully manage their anxiety in new cultural environments" (232). Byram's (1997) Model of ICC includes the attitudes, knowledge and skills speakers need to interact successfully in intercultural situations and considers the attitude component as the most important, since attitudes condition the success of intercultural relations. More recently Risager (2007), building on Byram's proposal, suggests an expanded conceptualization of intercultural competence that would include the resources and competences an individual possesses. These would include linguistic (linguastructural) competence, languacultural competences and resources (semantics, pragmatics and poetics), linguistic identity, translation and interpretation, interpreting discourses, use of ethnographic methods, transnational cooperation, knowledge of language as critical language awareness and knowledge of culture and society and critical cultural awareness (Risager, 2007, 227). Other developments in ICC theory have been brought to light by Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005), who tried to identify those characteristics of perceived ICC that are common to people from different cultures. These authors call for a culture-wide model of ICC that would include the following ten dimensions: heterogeneity, transmission, other-centred, observant, motivation, sensitivity, respect, relational, investment, and appropriateness. Finally, Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence creates an ongoing process that begins with attitudes and then moves from the individual level (attitudes) to interaction level (outcomes).

Despite the wide variety of models and proposals discussed above, there are many reasons that justify choosing Byram's (1997) model of ICC for this study. This author

operationalised his model to include specific observational objectives that could facilitate direct assessment (including performance assessment) of the different components of ICC, including attitudes. Performance objectives are essential, since they can reveal an individual's ability to use any acquired intercultural competence in authentic situations. As Chen (2009, cited in Young & Sachdev, 2011) mentions, Byram's model is still "unusual among the plethora of available models in being pedagogical, and specifically applicable in formal language learning contexts, rather than simply modelling the act of intercultural communication" (83). Finally, as already mentioned, the notion of attitude surfaces as a key theoretical/analytical construct in both Byram's (1997) model of ICC and Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory. According to Belz (2003), the main differences between the two approaches lay in the fact that Byram (1997, 57-58) provides objectives or functional descriptions of the expected attitudes of intercultural speakers (with examples of behaviours that would be considered as instances of such attitudes), whereas the appraisal framework offers detailed specifications of the linguistic resources (lexico-grammatical) that interlocutors may use in order to express different attitudinal positions in interpersonal interactions. For these reasons, Appraisal Theory seems to be particularly suited to the investigation of how participants in virtual collaborative exchanges communicate in order to develop their intercultural attitudes. Following Belz (2003), the main aim in this study is to discover whether the systematic connection between specific aspects of intercultural communicative competence and specific features of evaluative language can provide us with a richer and more detailed outlook of the complexities of virtual collaborative interaction.

Byram's (1997) Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence

Byram (1997) defines ICC as "the ability to relate to and communicate with people who speak a different language and live in a different cultural context" (1). This author suggests

that becoming an intercultural communicator does not only entail acquiring knowledge about the foreign culture, but also requires developing those skills and attitudes that are necessary to understand and relate to people from other countries. These skills, attitudes and knowledge shape his model of ICC which consists of five interdependent principles: a) attitudes, b) knowledge, c) skills of discovery and interaction and d) skills of interpreting and relating. The interplay of these four principles should lead to the fifth, namely e) critical cultural awareness. This final component underlies all the others, since it focuses on comparison and evaluation, key abilities for any learner who is to become a truly intercultural communicator.

In this model, the first component is *attitudes* (of curiosity and openness) which refers to the ability to relativise oneself and value others. According to Byram (1997, 33-34), attitudes of curiosity and openness are preconditions and anticipated outcomes of intercultural competence, since the success of intercultural communication depends on establishing and maintaining good social relationships. Moreover, the ability to relativise oneself and value others and the capacity to “suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own meanings and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging” (Byram 1997, 34) are also essential, since they help minimise the negative effects that stereotypes and preconceived ideas may have in our perceptions of others. Specific objectives for the attitudinal component include developing in the learner (a) a willingness to seek out interaction with the other in a relationship of equality; (b) a genuine interest in the other's point of view on phenomena in one's own culture and in the other's culture; (c) a readiness to interrogate the value systems and assumptions behind one's own cultural practices; (d) a readiness to examine one's own affective reactions to the experience of otherness and to cope with these reactions; and (e) a readiness to engage with culturally appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication in the

corresponding contexts (Byram 1997, 51). A linguistically grounded analysis of participants' intercultural attitudes in virtual collaboration would need to establish both the frequency and distribution of those lexico-grammatical features that signal a development of the above-mentioned five objectives.

Given the scarcity of studies that analyse how participants use evaluative language for intercultural communication in virtual collaborative exchanges, the current study seeks to answer to the following research questions:

RQ1. Do the patterns of evaluative language used by students who engage in virtual collaboration (Vinagre and Corral 2017) signal traces of the attitudinal objectives according to Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence (IC)?

RQ2. Are there any differences between the appraisals used by the Spanish participants and those used by their American counterparts in their IC objectives?

In order to find answers to these research questions, we first analysed the lexico-grammatical tokens displayed by both Spanish and American students in their bilingual email messages using the attitude component of Martin and White's Appraisal Theory (2005). The results, published in Vinagre and Corral (2017), have been taken as the basis for our present study, in which we shall look for instances of appraisal that signal the presence of Byram's (1997) attitudinal objectives in the corpus already analysed. Given that Vinagre and Corral's (2017) data and results are the starting point for the current study, we summarise them in some detail below.

The use of evaluative language in virtual collaborative interaction

Vinagre and Corral (2017) analysed how forty university students who were involved in an American-Spanish eTandem exchange used evaluative language (attitude) in their telecollaborative interaction. The twenty Spanish students were undergraduates aged between 21 and 22 who enrolled on a course on Information and Communication Technologies taught by one of the authors of the study at a Spanish University in Madrid.

The other twenty students were American undergraduates also aged between 21 and 22 who were studying Spanish at Columbia University in New York. As regards their competence in the foreign language, test results showed that the Spanish students' level of English ranged between a B2 and C2 whereas the American students' level was a B2 all according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Over the course of two and a half months the students worked in pairs and they had to discuss by email a series of topics relating to each other's and their own cultures (getting to know each other, stereotypical beliefs, their countries' history, feasts and celebrations, colloquial expressions, plans for the future, etc) together with some free topics that they were to negotiate and decide upon together. Following eTandem principles, messages had to be written half in English and half in Spanish. As a final task, the students had to participate in *Cityscapes*, a project that aimed to explore the linguistic landscape of their respective cities. They were asked to upload photos of how the foreign language was used in their cities and then they had a Skype session with their partner in order to discuss what they had discovered about each other's and their own cities. Finally, they had to write a joint bilingual essay on what they had learned from this project.

After the intercultural exchange finished and students' consent was granted, the authors gathered the content from the emails (211 messages, 59,908 words). Then they manually tagged the corpus and analysed quantitatively (inter-rater reliability coefficient, descriptive statistics, relative frequencies, chi square test) and qualitatively the instances of explicit attitudinal evaluative language following Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory. The framework developed by these authors "provides for analyses of those meanings by which texts convey positive or negative assessments, by which the intensity or directness of such attitudinal utterances is strengthened or weakened and by which speakers/writers engage dialogistically with prior speakers or with potential respondents to

the current proposition” (White 2015, 1). These semantic resources, also known as the language of evaluation or appraisal, are used by the speakers as they adopt stances either towards phenomena or affairs. Although there are three components in this proposal (attitude, engagement and graduation), Vinagre and Corral (2017) only focused on the analysis of the attitude subcomponent, which is itself divided into three subcomponents namely affect (What emotional reaction do participants exhibit?), judgement (How special, capable or dependable is someone?) and appreciation (How valuable is someone or something?). Affect reflects people’s positive or negative emotions or feelings (un/happiness, in/security, dis/satisfaction, dis/inclination) and it may be expressed through verbs of emotion, adverbs, adjectives of emotion and certain nominalisations. Judgement evaluates people’s behaviour ethically (morally and legally) and Appreciation evaluates aesthetically semiotic and natural phenomena. Some examples from the tagged corpus can be seen in Table 1 below (excerpts have been left in their original form without corrections):

Please Insert Table 1 here

The results indicated that students used mostly affect tokens in their interaction followed by tokens of appreciation and judgement. There was also a tendency to use mostly positive realisations of evaluative behaviour in the three attitudinal subcomponents. Table 2 illustrates these findings:

Please Insert Table 2 here

Finally, results from the chi square test showed that participants preferred using affect tokens over the other two types ($X^2= 51.84$, $df=13$, $p= 0.000001$ versus $X^2=16.994$, $df=9$, $p=0.04881$ for appreciation and $X^2=9.537$, $df=9$, $p=0.38924$ for judgement). These

results are statistically significant for the subcomponents of affect and appreciation, suggesting a high degree of association between the variables and less so for the judgement type. According to the authors, these abundance of affect tokens emphasised “the strong interpersonal quality of the interaction rather than a strictly ideational purpose (i.e. exchange of information and ideas)” (Vinagre and Corral 2017, 347) and that the students were more willing to express their own feelings and emotions rather than to judge their partners’ behaviour, as a strategy to construct a desirable personal identity that can help build rapport and solidarity with the partner in order to encourage collaboration (ibid, 2017).

Method

In order to discover whether the patterns of evaluative language used by students signalled traces of the attitudinal objectives of IC (RQ1) and whether there were any differences between the appraisals used by participants in both groups when fulfilling those objectives (RQ2), we searched the corpus described in the previous section (211 messages, 59,908 words) for samples of appraisals that matched Byram’s (1997, 33-34) descriptors for the attitudinal objectives in his model (See Table 3).

Please Insert Table 3 here

Only one of the researchers analysed all tokens to guarantee consistency in the analysis. However, in order to ensure internal reliability, the second researcher and an external rater analysed 20% of all tokens. Agreement among raters was high with an inter-rater reliability coefficient of 82.7. In those cases in which there were discrepancies, the researchers discussed them until consensus was reached. These discrepancies were mostly due to the fact that one token could sometimes be tagged under two different sub-categories, in which case a decision was made to include them in both. The quantitative analysis was carried out using descriptive statistics (raw numbers and percentages of evaluative tokens

found per IC objective) first. Then, given the differences in word count in the two corpora, the sample was normalised (x1000) in order to accurately reflect the relative frequencies in each corpus. Finally, we carried out a chi-square test to find out whether the results signalled actual differences between the groups or were just random.

Results and Discussion

In this section, we present and discuss the results from the analysis of evaluative language found in the corpus for each of the attitudinal objectives of IC (Byram 1997). See a summary the totals in Table 4 below:

Please Insert Table 4 here

Results from the chi-square test are statistically significant ($X^2=28.31$, $df=4$, $p=.012938$) which suggests that there is a noticeable degree of association between the variables. These findings show that all students used the same type of attitude tokens to fulfil each of Byram's attitudinal objectives although there were some differences in the subtypes preferred by each group. Thus, students in both groups used mostly affect appraisals in their traces of all attitudinal objectives. The Spanish group used 99 tokens of affect (69.23%, relative frequency 46.98) to fulfil objective 1) with most of the samples belonging to the type interest (38, 26.5%, relative frequency 18.03). The American group used 35 tokens of affect (77.7%, relative frequency 19.18) to fulfil the same objective with most samples belonging also to the interest subcategory (18, 40%, relative frequency 9.86). Although the percentages are similar in both groups, there is a higher number of tokens of interest in the Spanish group. This result could be explained by the fact that this group was the one to initiate the exchange and it is likely that the students may have used abundant tokens of interest in their introductory messages in order to engage their partners. Traces of objective 2) in the Spanish group were accompanied by 64 tokens of affect (78.04%, relative frequency 30.37), most of them of the interest type (46, 56.09%, relative frequency

21.83) whereas the American group produced 66 tokens of affect (73.33%, relative frequency 36.18) in the same objective, most of them also of the interest type (49, 43.33%, relative frequency 21.38). These findings would be consistent with the descriptors for this objective (a willingness to seek out interaction and genuine interest in the other). Similarly, both groups of students used mostly affect appraisals (18 tokens, 42.85%, relative frequency 8.54 in the Spanish group and 30 tokens, 51.72%, relative frequency 16.44 in the American group) in their samples of attitudinal objective 3). The fact that they were mostly of the interest type would suggest that the students preferred showing interest rather than judgement when questioning the value systems and assumptions behind their cultures. As regards objective 4) which involves examining one's own affective reactions towards the other's culture, both groups used mostly affect (20, 50%, relative frequency 9.49 in the Spanish group versus 24, 77.41%, relative frequency 13.15 in the American group). Finally, to fulfil objective 5) the Spanish students used mostly tokens of affect (14, 51.85%, relative frequency 6.64) most of them of the interest type (8, 29.62%, relative frequency 3.79) to show their readiness to engage with culturally appropriate verbal communication. Similarly, their American counterparts used mostly tokens of affect (6, 40.00%, relative frequency 3.28) followed closely by the tokens of judgement 5 (33,3%, relative frequency 2.74). As regards the American group's preferred types, they used in equal numbers affect (interest) and judgement (positive propriety). The presence of these categories in the students' discourse seems to be consistent with the purpose of this objective which entails enquiring and discussing what is considered appropriate verbal behaviour in the foreign culture.

These results suggest that, when the interaction of participants in telecollaborative exchanges is analysed linguistically, it is possible to find clear indicators of the presence (or lack of thereof) of the attitudinal objectives described by Byram (1997). This finding is

highly encouraging given the challenges that the assessment of this component poses for practitioners who wish their students to develop IC in virtual intercultural exchanges.

Another revealing aspect is that the use of evaluative language as a lingua-pragmatic resource in virtual interaction seems to follow the principle of communication accommodation (Giles and Ogay 2007). According to this principle, participants in intercultural encounters may choose to behave in a manner either similar (convergent) or different to that of their interlocutors (divergent). Given the overwhelming similarities in the appraisals used by both groups when fulfilling their IC attitudinal objectives, it is reasonable to think that students in virtual intercultural exchange prefer using similar lingua-pragmatic tokens in order to converge, a communicative strategy motivated by “the desire to gain approval from one another” rather than diverge, by moving away from similarity or towards difference in an attempt to “to emphasize distinctiveness from one’s interlocutor, usually on the basis of group membership” (Giles and Ogay 2007, 296). According to these authors, converging to a common linguistic style can improve the effectiveness of communication, since the similarity in speech styles between partners has been associated with predictability and intelligibility. Another reason is the desire to gain approval from your interlocutor, since the more similar we are to our interlocutor, the more they will like us and the higher our chances of gaining social rewards and recognition from them. Other reasons to look for convergence in intercultural interaction is to indicate closeness, solidarity and trust, all essential factors for effective virtual collaboration (Vinagre and Suárez, forthcoming).

Conclusions

Findings from this study show that students who participated in an eTandem exchange

used very similar evaluative tokens (affect) in their interaction. This suggests that participants preferred using lingua-pragmatic convergence strategies when communicating with their partners in order to emphasise their similarities rather than their differences. Also within this context, specific tokens of attitudinal appraisals signal the presence of the attitudinal objectives of IC (Byram, 1997). This finding can prove especially useful for those researchers who are interested in investigating the development of their students' IC in virtual intercultural exchanges.

As regards the limitations of this study, data collection only included the interaction produced by twenty Spanish-American dyads and, therefore, larger corpora incorporating data produced by speakers of other languages and cultures will have to be analysed for results to be significant. In future studies, we intend to analyse the impact that task design may have in the use of evaluative language by participants in these exchanges in order to discover whether the findings in this study are context-specific or task dependent.

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