First Year EFL Students' Perspectives on Digital Technology and Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

There is no doubt that nowadays digital technologies provide an avenue and a space where humans, including students across the world, could communicate, send and receive messages, share information, acquire new knowledge, and cooperate with each other notwithstanding the distance that separates them. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to examine a group of first year students' views on the use of digital media to share or exchange information with contacts with different or similar cultural backgrounds and whether this online cultural communication affects, either positively or negatively, their process of language learning as well as the development of intercultural relationships in the virtual community through the creation of a network of personal connection. It concludes with recommendations for uses of digital technologies that foster deeper learning, and useful intercultural communication to help EFL students advance their learning and acquire 21st century skills.

Keywords: digital technologies, communication, culture, first year EFL university students, intercultural communication.

Introduction

The fast advance of digital technology or digital media has brought human dealings to a highly interrelated level. Due to this reality, many researchers have undertaken many surveys on the affinity between digital technology and intercultural communication. Accordingly, this paper examines first year EFL students' views on the impact of digital media on their intercultural interactions, particularly their intercultural relationships.

Obviously, for a better insight of the theme sharing information across cultures in the new millennium; there are three different notions which need to be defined: namely culture, communication, and digital media.

Defining Culture

First, we need to examine what we mean by the term culture. Raymond Williams (1983) stated that that culture "is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language". To him, the word "culture" refers to all the characteristics common to a particular group of people that are learned and not given by nature (89). Properly speaking, the central part in the expression intercultural communication is the term culture. Intercultural communication scholars commonly concentrate on how different cultural entities hold cultural opposing views from one another: Muslims are different from Christians; Japanese are different from Americans; men differ from women; old differ from young, etc. (Gudykunst, "Issues in Cross-cultural Communication Research.").

What is meant by Communication?

As for the other fundamental element in intercultural communication – communication can be described as the exchange and sharing of information between people on different levels of awareness and control. More precisely, communication may be illustrated as a

"symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed" (Carey 23). In other words, communication takes place whenever someone ascribes meaning to another person's words or actions.

Defining Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is universally identified as the exchanging of communication across languages and cultures or among people of different nationalities (Gudykunst, "Intercultural Communication: Introduction." 163–166). It occurs when persons under the influence of different cultural communities interchange meanings. In attempting to grasp the real connotation of intercultural communication, it is probably most useful to understand first the differences and similarities of cultures in different communities.

Notwithstanding their cultural experiences and credentials, human beings in general perform many of the same activities on a daily basis and have many of the same needs and desires. We all breathe, eat, sleep, and pursue friendships and want to be valued and esteemed by those who are cherished to us. Nevertheless, much dissimilarity exists between cultural groups. Males and females do not often perceive the world in the same way. Old and young have different ambitions and dreams. Muslims and Christians have diverse beliefs.

Defining Digital Technology

Digital technology or digital media are general expressions recently coined to characterize all that is associated to online technologies such as the internet and other mobile devices. The term digital technology in general refers to those digital media, which are interactive, two-way communication and involves some form of computing in contrast to old media such as the telephone, radio and TV.

Many scholars illustrate digital technology as the aptitude to bring together text, audio, digital video, interactive multimedia, the Web, email, chat, the cell phone, computer applications, and any source of information accessible by one's personal computer. Social media such as Facebook, blogs, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter, and the iPhone, have facilitated to people from different parts of the world to create connections and build up intercultural relationships (Boyd & Ellision, 212-18).

If we combine what is said above about "culture" ,"communication" and "digital technology" as a basic definition, we would now be able to delineate intercultural communication in the digital age as the sharing of information on different levels of awareness and control between people with different cultural backgrounds through digital tools.

Technology and Intercultural Communication

It goes without saying that the impact of technology on people's everyday communication is incredible. Today, with the explosion of computers and other communication technologies, we truly live in the global village projected by media expert Marshall McLuhan (1967).

Communication technology connects us to events from the most distant parts of the world and links us to individuals we may never get together face-to-face from around the world. Perhaps the most ground-breaking innovation has been the Internet.
At a time when the Internet became more easily reached, a new generation of "digital natives" grew up in the middle of a world characterized by abundant new technological tools and became familiarized with the constant use of new media throughout their daily lives. The arrival of the Internet and other related communication technologies have had remarkable consequences on English as a Foreign Language students' intercultural communication.

The greater part of this new generation of technological savvy or net generation learners spends on average 5 hours online daily, and can acquire all the needed information in a very short time and share it with their friends via social media. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine a group of first year students' views on the use of digital media to share or exchange information and whether this online communication affects, either positively or negatively, their process of language learning as well as the development of intercultural relationships in the virtual community through the creation of a network of personal connection.

Background of the Study
Participants, Methodology and Data
The participants subject to the present experiment are two first year groups of 46 and 38 graduate students pursuing a licence degree in English as a foreign language.

Study Procedure
This survey focused on four aspects of the students' experiences with digital media and intercultural interaction:
Hence, the following questions are addressed:
1- What is the impact of technology on intercultural communication?
2- What are the advantages and drawbacks of intercultural relationships?
3- Does digital communication strengthen intercultural relationships?
4- How do students respond to intercultural communication?

Data Collection
The following types of qualitative data were collected:
A focus group interview with students of both groups was used and it included general questions related to the impact of technology on intercultural communication. A questionnaire including general open question answers and focusing on general characteristics related to the use of digital technology and intercultural communication was also used.

Study Results
Findings obtained from examining the obtained data are as follows: Concerning the impact of technology on intercultural communication, collected and analyzed students' answers revealed that the use of the Internet and other communication technologies has several implications for students' language learning and intercultural communication.

First of all, communication with other peers by means of online technologies increases learners' rate of information. The majority of the students revealed that digital technology provides access to information about other cultures and other peoples. Students noted that they can now instantly find out almost anything about any group in the world simply by searching the Internet. They can also have access to increasing amounts of information about what is happening in their own and other countries.

Second, most students revealed that digital technology brings them in contact with people from different cultural backgrounds. They said the Internet/e-mail allows students to interact with Facebook friends from different cultures and to carry on discussions with these people in virtual chat rooms and on discussion boards. This exchange allows them to improve their foreign language knowledge, particularly vocabulary acquisition.

Third, online communication with online contacts increases exchange with people who are similar to themselves. For example, students on campus can stay in touch with their

local communities, keep up with what is going on at home, and receive emotional support during difficult times of new environment adaptation.

Fourth, the majority of interviewed students confessed that online communication involves more choice than in face-to-face interaction in terms of identity choice. One can freely choose the identity to assume in order when communicating with others. For instance, when one sends an e-mail, they can choose whether or not to reveal certain aspects of their identity. The recipients will not know if you are male or female, young or old, unless you tell them.

The second question addressed to the participants in this survey is related to the advantages and drawbacks of intercultural relationships. As regards the benefits, most students recognize that the opportunity to have a variety of intercultural relationships that present differences in age, gender, religion, race, or nationality is one the advantages of intercultural communication of digital technology. The potential benefits in these relationships are tremendous. Students believed that they often entail upholding a balance between divergences and similarities and discovering and learning new facts. As far as the drawbacks are concerned, most students generally believed that intercultural relationships present particular challenges because of cultural differences in communication style, values, religion, and opinions.

Moreover, concerning whether or not digital communication reinforces intercultural relationships, on average students saw that online communication both facilitates and inhibits the development of intercultural contacts. Through intercultural relationships, students say they can learn a lot about other people and their cultures, and about themselves and their own cultural background. At the same time, intercultural communication can also involve barriers like stereotyping and discrimination. And these relationships take place in multifaceted historical and political contexts' discussions.

One of the main aims of this survey is to see the extent to which EFL students responded to intercultural communication. Results revealed that while some students reacted to intercultural situations with amusement, curiosity, or interest, others perceived intercultural experiences as distressing. The latter viewed those who are culturally different as intimidating, or as pushing them to change. In these cases, students say they responded with hostility, or anger.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As this paper is founded on a small-scale study involving few students and few aspects related to intercultural communication, any conclusions deduced on the use of digital technology tools for intercultural communication and for language learning are uncertain. Further research with a larger group of differing levels would produce more comprehensive conclusions about the benefits of using new media tools for intercultural interaction and for foreign language learning.

Nowadays the world we dwell in is "a global village" where no event, nation, or culture can stay unidentified. What takes place in one corner of the world would have an effect on all parts of the world. As the world is becoming smaller, we are more and more cooperating with people from many different cultures.

Despite the fact that modern technological innovations have made it easier for us to be in touch with people anywhere in the world, such interactions can be complicated if we do not know how to deal with people and cultures unlike our own. Accordingly, since one of the important objectives of foreign language teaching is to facilitate interaction and cultural exchange, foreign language teachers should convince their students to use these tools to make their language learning experience richer in terms of intercultural communication.

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