

Student Language Teachers as Intercultural Learners in CMC-Based Project Work

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Abstract

This paper emerged from a larger study and analyzes the reflections of a transatlantic group of future language teachers who communicated with each other via the bulletin board and chat functions of *FirstClass*® to design a joint website module. The author employs the Grounded Theory method and engages in *action research* in order to identify and analyze instances displaying cross-cultural engagement. Data triangulation entails email and chat transcripts, pre-course questionnaires, self-assessments, post-course interviews, post-course questionnaires, post-course questions, logs, voices from the classroom, and learning process statements. Findings indicate that the transatlantic group was faced primarily with difficulties regarding consensus finding, joint decision-making, and a lack of awareness regarding potential personal and professional benefits of the project.

Keywords: intercultural learning - computer-mediated communication (CMC) – teacher education - model learning - negotiation

1. Introduction

The importance of intercultural learning in higher education and foreign language (FL) learning has been discussed for some time now (e.g., Bredella & Delanoy 1999; Byram 1997; Kramsch 1993; Stier 2006); however, the concept appears to be limited to life outside the classrooms (Hu 1998), and few teacher education programs seem to adequately prepare student teachers for multicultural environments (Willems 2002). If the notion of model learning is to be taken seriously (e.g., Freeman & Johnson 1998; Fuchs 2004; Van Lier 1996; Willis 2001), FL teacher educators should attempt to offer student teachers the opportunity to experience collaboration with geographically distant student teachers for the purpose of (intercultural) engagement.

Nowadays, cross-cultural encounters and collaboration can be relatively easily implemented with the aid of technology such as synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC). Nevertheless, CMC-based cooperation can turn out rather tricky and complicated. For instance, this was demonstrated through a recent case study in which English, French, and German speakers negotiated identity, role, and voice through tropological discourse processes (Kramsch, 2003). Kramsch concludes that how the groups managed (mis)communication in their attempt to understand one another, indicated that the interdiscursive communication process was *not* a question of finding the right words to express what someone wants to express. Rather, the process was a question of trying to see things as the other person sees things (2003).

This study seeks to gain insight into the kind of challenges that student teachers encounter in intercultural CMC-based collaboration and negotiation, and research questions included the following:

- How do participants articulate goals and expectations? What are the differences and constraints in the collaboration, and how do participants deal with them?
- How do participants experience and reflect on intercultural encounters in CMC-based negotiation? Which intercultural communicative competence skills do participants display?

2. Theoretical Framework and Prior Research

2.1 Defining intercultural competence

In order to develop the ability to communicate across cultures, people need to strive for attitudes and beliefs which encompass openness, tolerance, and willingness to communicate. This means that people need to be willing to develop the skills of being open or unbiased toward other peoples and their culture, and of experiencing something new. In addition, people should be willing to develop tolerance and be willing to accept and cope with cultural differences without looking at the other culture as inferior. Furthermore, people have to demonstrate the willingness to actively communicate with people from a different culture by accepting the different culture as being equal to their own (Doyé 1995). Teachers may not assume that learners already possess these skills but should aim at supporting learners' *willingness to develop* such skills. According to Kramsch, FL teaching and learning should aim at helping learners "to communicate appropriately with native speakers of the language; to get to understand others; to get to understand oneself in the process" (1993: 183). Moreover, raising learners' awareness with regard to what Kramsch calls "the third place" can help them accept differences, discover a new culture, and rediscover their own culture. This third place grows in the narrow space between the cultures that learners grew up with and the new cultures they are introduced to. However, seeing the otherness from someone else's perspective appears to be the main challenge in cross-cultural communication (1993: 236).

Byram presents a rather detailed model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), which includes the following domains: Attitude, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness/political education (1997: 50-54). *Attitude* is defined as the "curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (50). Within the context of this study, this would entail that learners are unbiased and open to learning about their transatlantic partners' cultures. In addition, learners may refrain from regarding their own culture as being superior to those of their transatlantic partners. *Knowledge* refers to the "knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction" (51). This includes social, cultural, and historical relationships in one's own and in the interlocutor's culture and aims at bringing learners to be aware of the relationship between the home and target cultures (51). For example, learners may become aware of why certain types of stereotypes exist in other people's cultures by asking their transatlantic partners about this. The *skills of interpreting and relating* are defined as the ability to interpret a

document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own" (52). In other words, the intercultural speaker possesses the ability to "identify areas of misunderstanding and dysfunction in an interaction" as well as to "mediate between conflicting interpretations or phenomena" (52). Related to this project, learners may be expected to analyze potential sources of miscommunication in their transatlantic collaboration, such as different expectations regarding the joint project work, or cultural conventions or writing styles. *Skills of discovery and interaction* entail the ability "to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (52). More specifically, the intercultural speaker is able to elicit from members of the target culture the concepts and values behind products and practices in their culture (52). Furthermore, these skills require interacting with interlocutors from a different country and culture, taking into consideration the degree of one's existing familiarity with the country and culture and the extent of difference between one's own and the other" (53). In this collaborative project, learners are provided the opportunity to use their transatlantic counterparts as unique cultural and professional resources. For instance, they may inquire about educational practices in their partners' countries and compare and contrast such practices with those in their own culture. Lastly, *critical cultural awareness* and *political education* comprise the intercultural speakers' ability to evaluate critically practices and products in their own and other cultures and countries (53). In doing so, they draw upon their knowledge, skills and attitudes (53). For example, intercultural speakers can engage in exchanges in which they mediate and negotiate with one another customs and traditions or political systems in their own country and in their partners'.

Breen and Littlejohn have identified *procedural negotiation* as one type of negotiation, which occurs on a group level where people (with different interests or points of view) uncover and share meaning with the ultimate goal of reaching an agreement on decisions (2000: 6). In language teaching, the primary function of *procedural negotiation* consists of managing teaching and learning as a group experience. Key decisions that have to be made include the following: "[W]ho will work with whom, in what ways, with what resources and for how long, upon what subject matter or problems, and for what purposes" (8; italics not in original). Based on the concept of *procedural negotiation*, Breen and Littlejohn have developed *key principles of negotiation* for learners (2000: 19-29; italics not in original) such as *activating the social and cultural resources of the classroom group* through using multicultural resources, different experiences, knowledges, and capabilities. Using such resources emphasizes achieving intercultural membership, a sense of ownership, exploration, alternative interpretations, and alternative ways of working (Breen & Littlejohn 2000: 22-23). Finally, Breen and Littlejohn also stress the importance of promoting learners' power of learning and interdependency in learning ("freedom with discipline," 2000: 22). Related to this collaborative project, learners are required to collaboratively make decisions with their transatlantic partner group and to constantly balance different agendas and particular goals, personal purposes and preferences for learning.

2.2 Intercultural learning in CMC-based language learning and teaching

Aside from earlier studies focusing on conversational participation in cross-cultural communication (e.g., Shea 1994) and intercultural projects among faculty and students in educational technology or multimedia (e.g., Davis Hagenson, Nilakanta, Fraser, Lopez Fernandez, Nyvang & Ellis 2004), a substantial amount of the research has been done on using synchronous and asynchronous CMC-based technology to foster cross-cultural and language learning (e.g., Belz 2002; Furstenberg, Levet, English & Maillot 2001; Müller-Hartmann 2000; Warschauer & Kern 2000). For instance, international email projects between Germany, Canada, and the US have shown how reading and discussing a joint piece of literature may foster negotiation of meaning and intercultural learning (Müller-Hartmann 2000: 143).

Relevant literature has also shown that prerequisites for cross-cultural competence appear to be difficult for learners to exhibit in online collaboration, namely in telecollaboration projects. This can be due mainly to institutional and technical constraints. For instance, participants have to cope with different academic calendars and institutional practices such as grading policies, diverging professional and cultural expectations and goals, as well as technical challenges (e.g., Belz 2002; Müller-Hartmann 2000; Kramsch & Thorne 2002; Ware 2005).

In a study analyzing telecollaboration between the United States and France, Thorne focuses on the impact of culturally embedded uses of particular Internet communication tools on the outcome of telecollaboration from a cultural-historical view (2003). The author examined three French-American case studies over a five-year period. His findings indicate that "Internet communication tools are not neutral media," and that individual and collective experience influenced the ways students engage in Internet-mediated communication (38). These findings seem to be supported by a recent study that discusses the notion of culture in the context of CMC (Reeder, Macfadyen, Roche & Chase 2004). The authors dispute the assumption that cyberspace is a culture-free zone and argue for a less essentialist and more dynamic, discourse-based understanding of culture. Their multidisciplinary study of culturally diverse participants in a distance adult education course in Canada demonstrated variations in participation frequency, which was the result of broad cultural groupings (101).

Moreover, O'Dowd examines intercultural learning in a range of Spanish-English email dyads of second-year university language learners. He found that some students successfully developed their intercultural communicative competence in their exchanges. Those learners engaged with other learners who were open to letting their partners express their own cultural identity and did not appear to insist on preconceived notions of cultural stereotypes. Yet, the study also demonstrated that in cases where intercultural exchanges did not function properly, stereotypes and a confirmation of negative attitudes were reinforced (2003: 138). According to O'Dowd, these findings are in line with those of an earlier study by Belz (2002: 70-72, as cited in O'Dowd 2003: 138).

3. Methodology

3.1 Context of the study

This paper emerged from a larger qualitative case study (see Fuchs 2006) which involved collaboration among 12 student teachers at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in Monterey, California, and 20 student teachers at the Justus-Liebig University in Giessen, Germany.

The author investigates how student teachers engage in and reflect on CMC-based intercultural encounters. More specifically, this paper analyzes the reflections of one transatlantic group of student teachers who communicated with each other through the *FirstClass*® bulletin board and chat functions to design joint website modules. Main focus is placed on the German group because the researcher acted as *participant observer* in Giessen and thus, collected most of her data in Germany due to logistical reasons (see Section 3.3.1 below). In collecting and analyzing student teachers' reflections, the Grounded Theory method (Strauss & Corbin 1998) was used under the larger umbrella of *action research* (Allwright & Bailey 1991; Richards 2003). The purpose of this paper is not to argue for a relationship between engagement in the project and the acquisition of cross-cultural competence. Rather, the author attempts to explore

student teachers' reflections on their own cross-cultural encounters and the challenges involved. By drawing primarily on Byram (1997) to categorize participants' intercultural experiences, the author identifies instances displaying intercultural engagement and triangulates them with other sources of data such as email and chat transcripts, logs, questionnaires, and interviews. Additionally, the author uses Breen and Littlejohn's principles of negotiation (2000) to complement Byram's model, especially in the areas of using multicultural resources, achieving intercultural membership, and finding alternative ways of working.

All participants were female, and ages ranged from mid-20s to mid-30s. Student teachers in Germany were state exam candidates in teaching English in the various state schools in Germany, and participants in Monterey were master degree candidates in either TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) or TFL (Teaching Foreign Language). Participants for this project were selected on a first-come-first served basis. The student body of the Justus-Liebig Universität Giessen is rather homogeneous, i.e., most students are German, while the student body of the Monterey Institute primarily consists of international students. The latter may be due to the fact that the Monterey Institute was founded "with a mission of improving international understanding through education in languages, cross-cultural communications and a detailed study of the complex relations between nations and peoples" (homepage, Monterey Institute of International Studies, <http://www.miiis.edu>). Consequently, there was an asymmetry in the project design with regard to participants' linguistic and cultural background, and using intact multilingual and multicultural groupings of participants may have had an impact on intercultural communicative findings.

The overall goal of the project included preparing student language teachers to use computer technology in their future teaching, fostering electronic and professional literacy and cross-cultural engagement.

3.2 The transatlantic cooperation

The course in Germany (*Computer-Mediated Communication in Foreign Language Teaching* or *CMC in FLT*), took place during the winter semester of 2002-2003. It included an eight-week collaboration with a course in Monterey called *An Introduction to Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL)*. The two courses were not identical due to different academic calendars. Student teachers on each end formed a total of 6 local groups of 3-4 members in Giessen and 2 members in Monterey. (Classes in Monterey tend to be much smaller because it is a private graduate institution, whereas the Justus-Liebig Universität in Giessen is a larger, public university.) Table 1 below shows the members of the focal group of this article, namely the *Literature Group*. (Participants' names are pseudonyms, and all data are represented in their original version.)

Monterey Institute of International Studies (Local Group)	Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen (Local Group)
2 Student Teachers: Susan (American) Hayam (Omani)	3 Student Teachers: Anita, Martina, Nadja (all German)

Table 1: The *Literature Group*

The local groups then formed a transatlantic group of 5 members and collaborated via the *FirstClass@* computer conferencing in preparing materials for a joint website. This website (<http://www.uni-giessen.de/anglistik/tefl/> >Seminar Projects >[Computer Mediated Communication in the Foreign Language Classroom](#) WS 2002/2003) was targeted at prospective language teachers and covered CMC-related issues such as starting an email project, designing tasks and lesson plans, and dealing with student motivation and cross-cultural challenges. The working language was English. The eight-week collaboration took place between mid-October and mid-December 2002 and included three phases:

Phase I: Members profiles and group formation

During this initial getting-to-know phase, the Monterey and Giessen members each formed local groups in their respective countries. Next, they exchanged profiles with their counterparts in the other country to form a transatlantic group.

Phase II: Negotiation of topic of website, sub-group formation and division of

tasks

In this phase, transatlantic groups negotiated a topic for their website, split

up into sub-groups, and divided up the tasks among group members. The final

product, i.e., the website, contained a CMC module with links to the relevant

literature and email project samples. Groups were encouraged to design a module that would be useful in their own future language teaching.

The *Literature Group*, chose to design tasks for an intercultural email project between English learners in Germany and learners of German in the U.S. (<http://www.uni-giessen.de/anglistik/tefl/> >Seminar Projects >[Computer Mediated Communication in the Foreign Language Classroom](#) WS 2002/2003 >Projects/Lesson Plans >An E-mail Project on Young Adult Literature in CMC).

The author chose this name for the group because they had decided to integrate young adult literature into their contribution for the website. More specifically, this group's email project aimed at using the book *A Cab Called Reliable* by Patti Kim as the basis for an intercultural exchange among students. In this novel, a Korean girl who newly immigrated to the US, struggles to surpass the chaos of a strange land and of a violent, overly stressed family. The *Literature Group* also included different pre-/while-/post-reading activities and a section on book recommendations for using young adult literature in CMC-based language teaching. The Giessen student teachers compiled the groups' modules for the final product, i.e., the website, and published them on the Internet.

Phase III: Peer feedback and reflection on learning process

During this stage, local groups in Giessen and Monterey provided peer feedback on in-class presentations by the other local groups. Additionally, participants wrote essays in which they reflected critically on their own learning processes.

3.3 Grounded Theory and an Action Research approach

3.3.1 Data collection

The status of the researcher in this study was that of a course designer (in collaboration with both the Monterey and the Giessen teacher educators) and participating observer in Giessen. Consequently, most of the data was collected in Giessen. In addition, the data from Monterey was limited to written data due to logistical reasons. *Participant observation* has been defined as "a field strategy that simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection" (Denzin 1989: 157-158). This kind of observation is a process involving the following two aspects. First, the researcher participates increasingly and gains access to the field and to the people involved in the research. Second, the researcher's observation gradually becomes more concrete and the researcher increasingly focuses on the essential aspects of the research (Flick 2002: 140). In this study, the Giessen teacher educator and the researcher had developed the goals and objectives for both the collaboration and the group projects (e.g., the nature of the tasks and possible topics). In her role as participating observer (e.g., Denzin 1989), the researcher took field notes, team-taught, and facilitated group work. More specifically, the researcher and the Giessen teacher educator commonly decided prior to each session what they were going to cover. The researcher also introduced the *FirstClass@* software.

In qualitative research, it is deemed crucial to include data from various sources and to get various perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation to ensure reliability and validity (e.g., Nunan 1992: 63). One technique of obtaining such multiple viewpoints is to "gather data on the same event or phenomenon in different ways such as interviews, observations, and written reports" (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Moreover, the authors point to the importance of interviewing and/or observing multiple and diverse representatives of persons, places, events, and times. This is typically achieved through the process of data triangulation which involves varying data collection methods and approaches (44). In this study, triangulation aimed at gathering information by eliciting data through one or more instruments or sampling strategies (e.g., Nunan 1992; Strauss & Corbin 1998). This included the following instruments:

- **Pre-course questionnaires** (administered prior to the start of the project)

The purpose of the pre-course questionnaires was to elicit information primarily about student teachers' computer skills, cross-cultural and group work experiences, and about their course goals and expectations. The questionnaire was a mix of closed and open-ended questions for two reasons. The author intended to obtain descriptive quantitative data that were easily gathered and analyzed via closed questions (Nunan 1992: 143). However, the closed-question technique "[...] may easily miss the insights that could be provided by the participants themselves, the teachers and the learners, beyond anything the researcher has thought to build into the data collection procedures" (Allwright & Bailey 1991: 4). Therefore, open questions served the purpose to receive more valuable responses which probably more accurately reflected the respondents' perspectives (Nunan 1992: 143). Questions on the post-course questionnaires were rated on a four-point Likert Scale. The scale ranged from 1=insufficient, 2=satisfactory, 3=good, to 4=very good (and from 1=not important at all, 2=not important, 3=important, to 4=very important). A neutral 5th point for either scale was not included in order to get a tendency.

- **Email and chat transcripts** (on-going throughout the project)

In this project, the Giessen *FirstClass@* server was used as a means for synchronous and asynchronous communication, i.e., for chat and email or group postings. All email and chat transcripts (located on the Giessen server) were generated by participants through negotiating project-related and/or personal issues.

- **Logs** (on-going throughout the project; Giessen and Monterey groups)

The logs consisted of regular entries made individually by all student teachers and helped gaining insight into the student teachers' learning experience from their point of view.

- **Mid-term learning process statements** (one time half-way through the project; Giessen group only)

In form of an essay, student teachers in Giessen were asked to reflect on a variety of issues such as the cross-cultural aspects of collaboration such as negotiating, bonding and trust building with their transatlantic partner group.

- **Post-course interviews** (one time at the end of the project; with Giessen group only due to logistical reasons)

This focus group interview (e.g., Patton 1990: 335, as cited in Flick 2002: 113) was semi-structured because it provided interviewees with a degree of power and control over the course of the interview as well as with a great deal of flexibility (Nunan 1992). Giessen group members were asked to follow up and comment on issues which had come up during their collaboration;

- **Post-course questionnaires** (one time at the end of the project; follow-up on post-course interviews; Giessen group only)

After the interview, each group member was asked to also fill out a closed questionnaire in order to obtain descriptive quantitative data (Nunan 1992). Members of the Giessen group were asked to individually rate how strongly they felt connected to their local Giessen partners and to their transatlantic partners with regard to having managed to establish a sense of community, and as to how much they identified with their final product. Questions on the post-course questionnaires were also rated on a four-point Likert Scale. The scale ranged from 1=insufficient, 2= satisfactory, 3=good, to 4=very good.

- **Post-course questions** (one time at the end of the project as a substitution for the post-course interview; Monterey group only)

Due to logistic reasons, follow-up interviews could not be conducted with the Monterey group because the researcher was physically located in Giessen at the time of the research. Alternatively, she sent the following three open-ended questions via email to the student teachers in Monterey:

1. Do you think that CMC projects like the Monterey-Giessen one make sense at the teacher education level? Why?
2. Do you feel motivated to try out a CMC project in your own future teaching? Why? If applicable, please outline your target student population.
3. Based on your CMC experience with Giessen, please make some suggestions as to what kind of learner and teacher training we will need in the future to help overcome the challenges that participants have to face.
 - **"Voices from the classroom"** (one time at the end of the project; anonymous questionnaire administered in class to the Giessen group)

This questionnaire asked participants to comment on (un)fulfilled goals and expectations, their learning progress, experiences with local/transatlantic groups, project results, motivation for participating, and suggestions for improvement.

The author chose to focus on one of the six transatlantic groups, namely the *Literature Group*, in order to provide as detailed an account as possible of the group's perception of their intercultural learning experiences. The reason this group was chosen was based on their intercultural topic choice. Since the researcher acted as *participant observer* in Giessen, she collected most of her data from the German group (see Section 3.1). As mentioned elsewhere (Fuchs 2006), one will need to look more closely at each transatlantic group in order to gain further insight into the multi-layered and multi-faceted processes of intercultural and social communication inherent in CMC-based projects.

3.3.2 Data analysis

The researcher employed the Grounded Theory method (Strauss & Corbin 1998) under the larger umbrella of an *action research* approach (e.g., Allwright & Bailey 1991; Richards 2003) in order to identify and analyze those instances in the data which show participants' reflections on their intercultural negotiation or miscommunication within their transatlantic partners. Moreover, differences and similarities regarding these instances were constantly compared (Flick 2002: 178-181; Strauss & Corbin 1998: 82-83). For example, Nadja mentions the importance of group expectations regarding the collaboration: "As regards our project I think it would be important to become aware of the **expectations** each group (Americans and Germans) has. If everybody makes up his mind it will be probably easier to find a base to correspond [...]" (Nadja, Giessen Group One, Email excerpt, Oct.21.02; bold print not in original). Hence, the *in vivo* code "expectations" was used initially and later expanded to the category "articulating goals and expectations" upon having compared this instance with data from the other participants. Next, the *categories* that had emerged from the data were linked to abstract or constructed codes taken from the literature such as attitude, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness/political education (Byram 1997: 50-54), and intercultural membership, sense of ownership, exploration, alternative interpretations, and alternative ways of working (Breen & Littlejohn 2000: 22-23). For instance, Anita highlights that she had been aware of "differences in our university systems." This statement can indicate both knowledge and political education regarding the educational institution in the perceived target culture, i.e., a graduate institution in the United States. An example for achieving intercultural membership could be the Giessen group's decision to invite Susan to Germany. By inviting her, the Giessen student teachers seem to display their interest in sharing their cultural experiences in their home country with Susan. Thus, they are offering her the opportunity to achieve membership for their culture. By the same token, the Giessen group members appear willing to expose themselves to Susan's prior experiences and to how she would relate such experiences to the German culture.

4. Results: Presentation and Discussion

4.1 Prior experiences and goals and expectations (Phase I)

The group members' answers in their pre-course questionnaires with regard to their cross-cultural experience, their group work familiarity, and their course goals and expectations can be summarized as follows.

With respect to prior cross-cultural experience, Nadja of the Giessen group had spent an extended period abroad (one year in the United States), Susan of the Monterey group had spent the longest time abroad (1.5 years in Germany), and Susan's partner Hayam had been enrolled in an American graduate school for eight months at the time of the start of the collaboration. It was not the intention of the researcher to equate "cross-cultural experience" with "travel abroad" because one can encounter intercultural experiences in one's home country. By the same token, going abroad does not necessarily imply that one has more intercultural encounters (see Lantolf & Pavlenko 2001, for a review of immigrants' experience of peripheral or full participation in the target culture). Yet, participants' answers suggest that they thought of intercultural experience in terms of having lived or traveled some place other than their home country.

In terms of prior group work experience, only Anita of the Giessen group indicated that she had worked with an international group before (with a group of Americans at an American high school). Susan had worked with a large group of other Americans, while Hayam had experienced group work with a fellow Omani and Americans. It should be noted that participants had not been given a specific definition of the term "group work," and that their interpretations may have resulted in different responses.

With regard to course expectations, the Monterey group had not voiced any expectations for the course or the project. On the other hand, Anita and Nadja of the Giessen group had listed specific goals and expectations. Aside from learning more about technology, both had expressed interest in intercultural communication and exchanges. The following section will look more closely at what group participants had to say about their transatlantic communication during the different phases of their project collaboration.

4.2 Expressing positive attitudes at the outset (Phase I)

When looking at the group's initial email correspondences, it appears that participants start out rather optimistically and positively in terms of their cross-cultural adventure. In her very first mail to her Giessen partners, Susan expresses real excitement "about working together on this project." She also wants to get to know more about each member of the Giessen group and suggests chatting (Email excerpt, Oct.26, 02). Furthermore, Hayam wants to get to know her transatlantic partners on a personal level: "I am very much interested in working with you and I am looking forward to knowing you at a personal level as well. You seem to be very interesting people!" (Email excerpt, Oct.27, 02). Nadja states that she is "glad" that her Monterey partners "seem to be quite interested in the project and in working together with us [...]" (Log 1 excerpt, Nov.3, 02). Furthermore, Nadja stresses the importance of meeting some "real English speaking people" for the purpose of having "some pleasant conversations" (Nadja, Learning process statement excerpt, Dec.19, 02). Her

interest in getting to know her English-speaking partners indicates that she is motivated to elicit from members of the target culture the concepts and values behind products and practices in their culture (Byram 1997: 52). Additionally, one could expect this group to display openness and ambiguity with regard to both working in groups and collaborating with people from different cultures since only one student teacher of the German group has had prior experience with group work. However, Nadja's statement could also imply that the Germans are primarily interested in interacting with Americans in this collaboration and that Hayam may not represent a member of the target culture for the Germans in this context. The German student teachers may have not been aware of the Monterey Institute's mission and its international student body (see Section 3.1), but these two factors may not be representative of the American university system. Yet, it seems evident that Byram's term *target culture* becomes a delicate issue because the term falls short of accounting for the multicultural nature of classrooms.

4.3 Activating classroom resources to make a joint topic decision (Phase I)

The initial attitudes of Susan, Hayam, and Nadja seem to stress their curiosity, openness, and readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about their own (Byram 1997: 50) since they all seem to be interested in engaging with their transatlantic partners. Yet, it appears that the Giessen group decides on a topic for their joint project as well as on the materials to be used (i.e., the novel *A Cab called Reliable* by Patti Kim) without consulting their partners in Monterey. According to Martina, "[i]n our local group we decided rather quickly on a topic and a book for our project, because everybody had ideas. We discussed our ideas and opinions and came to a conclusion which everybody liked" (Learning process statement excerpt, Dec.18, 02). Here, a possible reading could be that the Giessen group does not fully activate their "social and cultural resources of the classroom group" (Breen & Littlejohn 2000: 22-23). This also seems to be substantiated when the Giessen group learns that one of their Monterey partners, Hayam, "wasn't very involved in the project" (Nadja, Learning process statement excerpt, Dec.19, 02). Based on Martina's reflection, the Monterey group is not too happy about the book choice because they have a hard time finding the book in the US. Moreover, the Monterey group "[does] not know what we wanted them to do" and cannot partake in the Giessen group's book-based discussion.

4.4 Displaying awareness and education with regard to institutional differences (Phase II)

Once the Monterey group gets a hold of the book, things still do not appear to run as smoothly as expected Anita goes into more detail by analyzing why she thinks that her transatlantic group is having trouble collaborating and why her group feels "frustrated" about their lack of progress. She highlights that although she is aware of "differences in [their] university systems," she has been unaware of the impact of such differences on their collaboration (see also Belz 2002; Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Fuchs, 2006 on institutional constraints in German-American telecollaboration). In her reflection, Anita appears to demonstrate awareness of such institutional differences by pointing to the tight schedule that her counterparts in the US have. In other words, Anita seems to consider "the degree of one's existing familiarity with the country and culture and the extent of difference between one's own and the other" (Byram 1997: 53). Here, Anita also appears to demonstrate "knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction" (Byram 1997: 51). Yet, she concedes that she is surprised by the impact that such differences have on her group's transatlantic collaboration. This leaves her and her Giessen partners "really frustrated." They feel that they are not making progress and perceive the Monterey group as "really passive." It seems somewhat contradictory that Anita demonstrates awareness of institutional differences on the one hand, but that she does not seem to bring up these issues with her transatlantic partners. It may have been the case that the Monterey group could not dedicate as much time to their transatlantic project work because they were preoccupied with writing term papers for other seminars.

4.5 Interpreting and relating to sources of cross-cultural miscommunication (Phase II)

In her learning process reflection, Nadja attributes factors such as "different expectations, attitudes and opinions about the project or time problems" to their miscommunication. In addition, she believes personal differences such as work styles to be an obstacle. Here, it could be argued that the miscommunication was due to personality issues and not due to intercultural factors. Moreover, expectations may also differ from person to person, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. Nadja further thinks that the intra-group difficulties in the Monterey group are responsible for misunderstandings at the inter-group level:

Furthermore the [Monterey] group itself seemed to have problems. As far as I understood Susan, Hayam wasn't very involved in the project, so she [Susan] had to do a lot of work alone. Obviously they had communication problems within their group, what we in Giessen "felt" because we waited for a long time for their outlines. (Nadja, Learning process statement excerpt, Dec.19,02)

Nadja attempts to identify reasons for her Monterey partners' "communication problems" such as Hayam's lack of involvement. However, in order to clarify, Nadja could have displayed the curiosity or openness to other perspectives as called for by Byram (1997: 52). In other words, Nadja could have asked Hayam for clarification on why Hayam "wasn't very involved in the project."

4.6 Expressing a sense of ownership (Phase II)

According to Nadja's learning process statement and the Giessen group's post-course questionnaires, the Giessen group appears to have collaborated rather well without previously having known each other. Additionally, the Giessen group ranked the success of their local group work higher than their transatlantic group work. The differences between the perceived success of the local versus the transatlantic group could also be allocated to the lack of face-to-face communication regarding the transatlantic collaboration (see Fuchs 2006). By the same token, it is remarkable that the transatlantic group managed to develop a project despite major miscommunication. The fact that this intercultural group eventually succeeded in designing a collaborative project is also backed up by other data. For example, in their post-course questionnaires, the Giessen group assigned a medium of 3.333 ("good") on a four-point Lickert scale (ranging from 1=insufficient to 4=very good) when asked about how they identified with their final product. Moreover, the Giessen members all stated that they had "profited a fair amount" from the joint group work.

4.7 Skills of discovery and interaction: Chat as a clarification tool (Phase II)

In the following excerpt, Anita highlights how using chat with one of her Monterey partners (Susan) has helped to shed some light on their inter-group miscommunication:

[...] The chats were very helpful to understand what went wrong. Especially Susan and I got to know each other a little bit better during the project – especially because of our chats. I soon learned that she was having a hard time as well because our

American partners seemed to have some problems within their local group. She [Susan] felt "a little bit left out of the loop" (as she mentioned it) because at first she didn't get the novel and then she had some problems with her partner Hayam who was concerned that she [Hayam] couldn't work with us on the project because she is neither American nor an immigrant. [...] (Anita, Learning process statement excerpt, Dec.18.02)

According to Anita, the root of the problem appears to be the tension within the Monterey group. She mentions that Susan opens up to her in one of their chats and confides in her (Anita) why her partner Hayam may have difficulties. The chat excerpt below confirms that Susan is under the impression that Hayam may have not been able to relate to the project topic (a Korean immigrating to the US) because she is neither American nor an immigrant.

[...] Susan 1: It's common that immigrants or even the children of those immigrants wh [sic] were born in the U.S. struggle with issues of identity because they don't quite fit any one place

Susan 1: this may be a bit of a **challenge [sic] for Hayam** since she is neither American nor an immigrant, but I think we can still work through it [...] (Chat excerpt, Group One, Nov.14,02; bold print not in original)

4.8 Achieving cross-cultural membership (Phase II)

It appears that Hayam has not been able to obtain cross-cultural membership (Breen & Littlejohn 2000: 22-23) for her group. Her partners do not seem to display the same interest in her input as they do in Susan's. Even though the group decided to use a book on an intercultural topic (i.e., a Korean immigrant in the US), for their project contribution "An E-mail Project on Young Adult Literature in CMC," they do not appear to tap into Hayam's knowledge or experiences or use her as a unique cultural resource. Apparently, despite having temporarily resided in the US to get her master's degree, she does not seem to identify with the topic of "immigration." This could be a reason why Hayam ceases to contribute to the joint project work at some point. By the same token, Hayam's perceived non-participation could also be due to her partners' lack of sensitivity with regard to her cultural background. Unfortunately, one can only speculate as to why Hayam stopped participating at some point as it does not become evident from the data collected. Moreover, it was not possible logistically to conduct follow-up interviews with the Monterey participants. It would be very interesting to find out Hayam's rationale for trying to avoid miscommunication among different cultures because this kind of avoidance strategy most likely will not result in intercultural engagement. The question arises if Hayam cannot engage or chooses not to engage in discovering other perspectives on interpreting familiar and unfamiliar phenomena in other cultures and cultural practices (Byram 1997: 50).

In the small-group interview at the end of the project, the Giessen group seems to send rather diverging messages when speculating about why they consider Hayam's project participation marginal. For instance, Martina believes their topic choice to be the reason for any difficulties with Hayam: "I thought it was our topic because we were about ehm, intercultural...[...]...problems and she, she, maybe thought it was about HER or...[...]...about her personal experiences..." (Interview excerpt, Giessen group, Feb.13, 02, lines 87-91). Yet, the Giessen group seems to have conflicting opinions on whether language was a problem for Hayam or not. On the one hand, Anita speculates that Hayam might have encountered linguistic difficulties: "Maybe she has got some problems with the language, English language, because she is from Oman and sh-..., she always had to find out what this means or that means, so maybe she had some problems;" (Interview excerpt, Giessen group, Feb.13, 02, lines 82-84; see also line 242). On the other hand, Martina states in the interview that she feels that Hayam's language use in the chats was adequate. Unfortunately, it was not possible logistically to collect further data from the Monterey group to gain further insight into why Hayam chose to disengage from the collaboration.

4.9 Room for improvement: Forming cross-cultural relationships in CMC (Phase III)

The purpose of the post-course questions for the Monterey group was to get constructive feedback from participants with regard to how a project like this could be improved (especially in terms of technological, socio-cultural, linguistic, and institutional challenges). Hayam lists the following: "Dos and Donts of 'impersonal' communication," and "sharing of cultural backgrounds at the beginning or yet better communicating with a group of similar cultural background to avoid 'miscommunications'" (Hayam, Post-course questions excerpt, April 4,03). It seems evident, that Nadja senses that some of her transatlantic group's miscommunication could probably also be traced to cross-cultural factors. However, Hayam does not mention specific "areas of misunderstanding and dysfunction in an interaction" or how mediation between conflicting interpretations or phenomena could take place (Byram 1997: 52). With regard to her first point (the "Dos and Donts of 'impersonal' communication"), it also remains unclear what Hayam means by "'impersonal' communication" or by avoiding "'miscommunication.'" The fact that Hayam disengaged from the collaboration does not seem to support findings from communication theory. According to Walther (1996), even culturally diverse CMC groups whose members have never met in person can build interpersonal relationships that reach greater depth and intimacy ("hyperpersonal interaction," 18) compared to FTF groups. Moreover, "not only do CMC senders overcome the limits of the media to express personal cues, they may actually do so in ways that F2F communicators cannot" (1996: 19).

Furthermore, Nadja's second point also indicates that discussing cross-cultural issues with regard to Omani, German, and American culture was absent in the project. The Germans and the Americans might have not felt an urge to discuss intercultural issues because they formed the majority of student teachers in the overall project (20 Germans - except for one female participant who grew up in Germany but whose native language was Romanian - and eight Americans). The smallest number of student teachers' nationalities included two Japanese, one Omani, and one Ukrainian.

4.10 Articulating expectations & addressing institutional differences (Phase III)

In her reply to the post-course questions, Susan highlights a point that Nadja has brought up in her reflection as well, that is the issue of expectations. But while Nadja refers to her personal expectation of having wanted to establish a long-term relationship with her partners in the US, Susan refers to both expectations that group members have of each other and project expectations ("requirements and deadlines"). Articulating goals and expectations seems essential in any kind of collaboration to avoid leaving students feeling frustrated if their initial expectations are not met. Yet, as the author has argued elsewhere (Fuchs 2006), articulation goals and expectations appears even more important in CMC-based projects due to the lack of non-linguistic features (such as gesture) and paralinguistic features (such as intonation). Fisher, Phelps and Ellis also advocate establishing explicit norms among online group members early in the course such as being without judgment, being within the moment (focused), attending the group within that state, being totally open to the learning experience, and respecting the opinions of others (2000: 492).

In addition to the importance of combining task-based and personal communication in CMC-based partnerships (Fuchs 2006), Susan further suggests to include a discussion on the different countries' educational systems as part of the project (see also Belz's suggestion for "cultural sensitization" 2002: 76). As Anita points out, such institutional differences and constraints seem to have played a crucial role in the transatlantic group's miscommunication.

Nadja apparently feels that her expectations are not met because she was hoping for the cooperation to go beyond the project. She seems disappointed that instead of a long-term relationship, they "only" established a partnership, and she allocates some of the reasons to the lack of personal exchanges with her transatlantic partners:

[...] When we started the e-mail project I had, among other things, the expectations that we could establish a relationship which can be maintained even after the project. But at the moment it "only" seems to rest a partnership. Unfortunately we had not enough time to talk about private stuff because we had to discuss the project. The most important point for me was to learn that it is an illusion to start the project and think that it will be a nice time to meet some "real English speaking people" and to have some pleasant conversations. That's at least what you as a teacher should make clear to your students, to tell them that problems may occur and to give them some examples what could happen. [...] (Nadja, Learning process statement excerpt, Dec.19,02)

Nadja also appears to blame the teacher educators for not having told students about potential difficulties. This seems to be in line with findings by Belz and Müller-Hartmann (2003), who stress the difficulties that lie within teacher-teacher communication in telecollaborative partnerships and emphasize the role of the teacher (educator) in intercultural CMC-based projects (see also Fuchs 2004). Both teacher educators and the researcher in this project attempted to coordinate and synchronize their courses and syllabi, micro-manage tasks and deadlines, and troubleshoot software problems on an ongoing basis (see the "managerial" and "technical" roles of the teacher in Berge, 1995). Student teachers were presented with a detailed project outline at the outset of the collaboration. Moreover, the teacher educators and the researcher attempted to fulfil their roles as intercultural models by initiating a cross-cultural discussion on an introductory reading on socio-cultural aspects in telecollaboration projects (see Belz 2002). The rationale was to raise student teachers' awareness with regard to potential sources of conflict. As seems to be expressed in Nadja's statement above, this was not considered enough in the eyes of participants. Yet, her request to prepare learners for the pitfalls of cross-cultural CMC-based communication has been questioned by previous researcher who claim that the locus of the learning does not necessarily lie in the task itself (Belz 2002: 75).

4.11 Fostering positive interdependence (Phase III)

In her Learning Process Statement, Martina comments on her communication with both her partners in Germany and her transatlantic partners. She stresses that her Giessen group "made a good team" with their transatlantic partners by the end of the collaboration, and the Giessen group even invites one of her Monterey partners to visit them in Germany. Her reflective statement implies that Martina is able to identify "areas of misunderstanding in interaction" and she also seems to demonstrate that she is "curious and open to other perspectives" (Byram 1997: 52) by inviting one of her partners. Moreover, Martina regrets not having had the opportunity to get to know her partners better at the outset of the project. This indicates Martina's "curiosity and openness" and her willingness to engage with otherness as well as to discover other perspectives on interpreting familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in her own culture and in other cultures and cultural practices (Byram 1997: 50).

With regard to the question of whether she thought that the transatlantic group was necessary to achieve the results, Susan answers as follows:

I firmly believe that we needed each member of the cooperative group for the project to have turned out the way it did. I don't think that on our own we would have chosen to use a book as the focus of the project, yet having the book as a focal point gave us direction as we hashed out the project and what we wanted to do with it. (Susan, Voices from the classroom excerpt, Feb.2,03)

Apparently, Susan expresses appreciation for both the transatlantic group and for having had the book "as a focal point." Still, she concedes that she would have probably not used the book herself. Her comments indicate that she is open to exploration, alternative interpretations, and alternative ways of working (Breen & Littlejohn 2000: 22-23). Additionally, Susan points out that "[w]orking collaboratively on a CMC project began as being very frustrating but ended up being very fruitful" (Susan, voices from classroom excerpt, Feb.2,03). Yet, it remains unclear why exactly Susan deemed the collaboration "very fruitful" since she is not explicit about what allowed it to be fruitful.

Anita also ends her reflection on a positive note stressing that she managed to be patient and to establish trust and a working relationship with Susan. Anita believes this relationship to be due primarily to her meeting with Susan in the chat. Moreover, Anita seems to show that she is able to handle ambiguity and give her partners the benefit of the doubt because she "never doubted" that her partners would keep to their promise of sending their part of the project. Her reflection implies that Anita possesses "the skills of being able to identify possible areas of misunderstanding in interaction as well as being curious and open to other perspectives" (Byram 1997: 52). In addition, Anita seems to demonstrate the ability "to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (Byram 1997: 52). Anita also believes that her transatlantic partner group was indispensable for the intercultural and social learning experience:

It would be too hard to say that we could have achieved the same results without our co-operative group in Monterey. At the beginning I had the impression that we did all the work and that our partners at Monterey were quite passive and not very co-operative. But then we found a way to overcome these problems by communicating with each other - especially the chats helped us a lot to find out what we would like to do in our project and how we could split up the work. Especially Susan had some very good ideas. **Without our partners I would have missed the intercultural and social dimension of such a project.** (Anita, Voices from the classroom excerpt, Jan.30,03)

With regard to the question of whether she thought that the transatlantic group was necessary to achieve the results, Nadja answers as follows:

NO, because we did nearly all of the work and the parts they added were quite small, BUT we would have not experienced all this if we hadn't worked with them. Although it was not absolutely necessary for the results, **we nevertheless learned**

from them, or at least what is meant by intercultural learning. (Nadja, Voices from the classroom excerpt, Jan.30.03; bold print not in original)

This excerpt implies that Nadja feels that her partners did not contribute a substantial amount to their joint project. Nevertheless, she thinks that her Giessen group learned from this international collaboration and that they learned from the Monterey group "what is meant by intercultural learning." Unfortunately, Nadja does not clearly lay out what intercultural learning means for her and what and how exactly she feels she learned from the Monterey group.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Unlike their Giessen partners, the Monterey group did not voice any expectations for the course or the project. However, all group members expressed an initial interest in getting to know their transatlantic partners. Moreover, it appears that Anita and Susan were able to achieve mutual understanding in their chat and to reach Kramsch's "third place" (1993: 236), which allowed them to see the otherness from someone else's perspective. A related concept to consider is that of *intersubjectivity*, which originated in social psychology and implies that discourse participants have to make a constant effort to see things from the other's perspective in order to obtain a communicative goal (see Rommetveit 1974). In other words, *intersubjectivity* is a shared situation built through continuous negotiation. Understanding in discourse has to be satisfactorily *intersubjective* which presupposes a constant fluctuation between one's own role as performer and the role of one's counterpart in the interaction. While the Giessen group seemed to have established *intersubjectivity* with regard to their book choice, there appeared to have been a lack of *intersubjectivity* within the transatlantic group with regard to content and materials for their joint project (i.e., the novel *A Cab Called Reliable*). However, in order to gain further insight into the apparent lack of *intersubjectivity* within the transatlantic group, one may need to look more closely at the multi-layered and multi-faceted processes of (mis)understanding, (dis)agreement, and (mis)communication in discourse. For example, Linell suggests three different types of "miscommunication events" for analysis, i.e., *latent* (shows no symptoms in the interactional data), *covert*, (shows indirect reflections in the data) and *overt* (shows clear reflections and manifest properties in the data) miscommunication events (1995: 187-207; italics in original). Along the same lines, it could also be beneficial to look at how the various group members displayed *understanding* and *agreement* (with the latter presupposing a certain degree of understanding) or *non-understanding* and *disagreement* respectively (see Foppa 1995: 149-153; italics in original). For example, what linguistic features do group members use to signal *understanding* when, in fact, they mean *non-understanding*? How do these signals differ in emails and chats?

Another major challenge appeared to have been the inclusion of everyone in the decision-making process and the activation all of the classroom resources available. This seems to have become apparent because Hayam of the Monterey group discontinued participating actively in the collaboration. When Hayam stressed the importance of communicating with a group of similar background "to avoid 'miscommunications,'" the purpose of the cross-cultural collaboration in this project appears self-defeating. It is precisely this kind of intercultural encounter which can offer learners the experience of communicating, negotiating, and collaborating with people from different cultures and help them cope with the challenges they are faced with. Furthermore, since Hayam was a key player in the Monterey group, it would have been desirable to interview her to gain more information on her lack of engagement in the group project.

Along the same lines, the ultimate goal of intercultural projects should not be to eliminate the challenges that participants are faced with because such challenges may provide unique opportunities for learning. In fact, "salient (and perhaps fruitful misunderstanding" may "increase the depth of understanding" (Linell 1995: 185). Two members explicitly highlighted that it was a "fruitful" collaboration (Susan) and that they learned from their transatlantic partner group "what [was] meant by intercultural learning" (Nadja). By the same token, neither Susan nor Nadja were specific about what exactly "intercultural learning" implied for them. Here, further follow-up interviews would be required to shed more light on participants' perceived learning processes. Moreover, one should also investigate if and how the transatlantic collaboration has (or has not) contributed to the group's final product.

Finally, while it does not appear surprising that student teachers encountered similar frustrations as participants in similar CMC-based projects, it seems striking how student teachers dealt with constraints and difficulties such as diverging expectations about the project collaboration. One might have expected student teachers to look at cross-cultural encounters from a model learning point of view - more so than perhaps language learners who may not have the explicit goal of becoming language teachers. Student teachers might want to reflect more on the contribution of this collaboration to their own understanding and future teaching. In other words, collaborating over a distance may have provided them with insights into the challenges that their future learners may be faced with in telecollaborative projects for the purpose of language study. It seems vital for teacher educators to foster group interdependence and critical self-reflection in relation to (intercultural) learning. On-going group reflection of the learning process/progress can help groups to trace and evaluate outcomes. More specifically, student teachers should be encouraged to reflect on how these projects can relate to student teachers' future teaching and how they may possibly benefit from such collaborative projects on both a personal and a professional level.

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