Chapter 8

Examining L2 Learners’ Use of Engagement Strategies in Telecollaborative Written Interactions

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ABSTRACT

Based on an intercultural telecollaboration project between two universities from either side of the Atlantic Ocean, this chapter analyzes written discourse produced by advanced learners of Spanish as a foreign language and higher intermediate learners of English as a foreign language in order to explore how second-language learners negotiate their ideological positions, create new knowledge, and build their arguments when discussing their first culture (C1) and second culture (C2) in telecollaborative written asynchronous interactions. Two research questions are addressed: a) the extent to which learners engage in a dialogic activity in online forums when discussing their C1 and C2, and b) the ways in which L2 learners use expanding and contracting discourse strategies to develop arguments about C1 and C2 in telecollaborative written asynchronous interactions. The model used in order to analyze the input is based on Engagement, a discourse-semantic subsystem of the appraisal framework.

INTRODUCTION

The extensive research in telecollaborative environments on learners’ cultural reflections (Basharina, 2007; Belz, 2003; Helm, 2013; Liaw, 2006; Lomicka, 2006; O’Dowd, 2016; Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Sevilla-Pavón & Haba-Osca, 2017; Ware & O’Dowd, 2008) illustrates the indisputable interest in intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997, 2000) in foreign language (FL) education. These studies have

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shown that, while not exempt from problems that might lead to communication breakdowns resulting from participants’ dissimilar cultural engagement styles (Belz, 2003; Ware & O’Dowd, 2008), learners generally express curiosity and are willing to engage in discussions that foster intercultural discovery (Elola & Oskoz, 2008). Online forums, which not only allow learners to provide personal opinions but also the time to reflect, react to their groupmates’ contributions, and search for additional information to support and counteract different points of view, could be ideal venues for L2 learners to engage in a collaborative dialogue leading to second language (L2) intake. However, there is scarce knowledge to date regarding how L2 learners co-create new knowledge and build their arguments collaboratively when discussing their first (C1) and second cultures (C2) in written telecollaborative asynchronous interactions.

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which FL learners express not only their ideas regarding their first language (L1) and L2 cultures, but also how they discuss and argue their personal viewpoint regarding current issues through collaboration with others in a telecollaborative encounter. Engagement, a discourse–semantic subsystem of appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005), presents itself as a framework to capture argumentation strategies that are typical of online discussion forum entries (Coffin & Hewings, 2005). Therefore, in this chapter, after addressing some of the current concerns in telecollaboration, we discuss in further detail the subsystem of engagement, focusing on contracting and expanding strategies. Subsequently, this study examines the extent to which L2 learners participating in asynchronous online discussions in a telecollaborative asynchronous interactions present their own ideological positions while simultaneously developing new knowledge and discussing and addressing the claims made by others in an informal yet informed and academic manner.

BACKGROUND

Telecollaboration

Telecollaboration has been defined as an “internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural/national backgrounds set up in an institutional context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence through structured tasks” (Guth & Helm, 2014, p. 14). Despite problems that may arise, among other things, from differing interactional styles, incompatibilities in world interpretations, and socio-institutional constraints (Basharina, 2007; Ware & Kramsch, 2005; Ware & O’Dowd, 2008), research has also been reported on gains in language development (Hauck & Youngs, 2008; Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004), learner autonomy (O’Rourke, 2007), and intercultural communicative development (Fuchs, 2007). In these telecollaborative encounters, learners synchronously or asynchronously engage with one another in dyads, triads, or small groups (Helm, 2016) to participate in different tasks that often entail a cultural discussion. Interactions have commonly made use of synchronous online tools, such as chats (Belz, 2003; Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2017; Müller-Hartmann, 2006) and video conferencing (Helm, 2013; Sevilla-Pavón & Haba, 2016), or asynchronous tools, such as wikis and blogs (Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Guth & Marini-Maio, 2010; Hauck & Youngs, 2008; Lee, 2009, 2010, 2011), email (Fuchs, Snyder, Tung, Jung, & Snyder, 2017; O’Dowd, 2007; O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Turula, 2017; Ware & O’Dowd, 2008), and online forums (Chun, 2011; Liaw & Master, 2010). Despite being considered a more traditional tool, online forums provide “a critical common space in which [to] share and verify hypotheses and points of view, to ask for help deciphering meanings of words and concepts, and to constantly negotiate meanings and interpretations” (Bauer, de