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Engaging Linguistics and Literature:

Perspectives and Insights beyond the Curriculum

English Letters and Language Department
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Intercultural Learning via Online Chatroom of EFL Students

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Abstract

Internet nowadays could be used as an instructional tool in the foreign language classroom. This research, therefore, discusses the students' experience in Cross Cultural Understanding course using online chatroom. The purposes of the research are to create opportunities for students to gain cultural knowledge and enhance the intercultural experiences via online chatroom. While carrying out the research, qualitative research method was employed and the data were mainly gathered through students' online chats with native speakers, questionnaire and interview. The research revealed that students were very enthusiastic in doing the online chats since they liked the immediate feedback and responses in the online communication. There was also improvement of intercultural learning such as in the intercultural awareness in telling tradition from each culture. Then, it indicates that foreign language teachers could apply the online-based activities for the students and designing the suitable ones in an EFL classroom.

Keywords: intercultural learning, online chatting

1. Introduction

Interaction among members of different cultural groups is an increasingly common aspect of everyday life. As more and more people visit, study, work, and settle in cultures other than their own, the impact of cross-cultural interaction can be profound. The impact can be especially confusing and even deleterious if its dynamics are not understood (Groen, 2009, p.1). However, he adds that communication across cultures can be enhanced if one has developed a reasonable degree of cultural self-awareness, awareness of the other culture(s) and sub-cultures, empathy, and interactive competency. In this internet technologies era, communication across culture very easily changes from face-to-face communication into computer-mediated communication (CMC). One of the development of CMCs is Instant Messaging (IM) which becomes enormously popular nowadays as online chat. Chat is a two-way form (synchronous) of CMC, a dialogue in real time as we

keyboard or speak our words, an online conversation between two or more people (Almeida d'Eça, 2002).

Integrating chat in EFL/ESL can be powerfully motivating and bring enormous excitement to what is generally a difficult process – learning a language. Using chat means that the target language is learnt by interacting with people from the real world, in real time (often across several time zones) and using language of the real world, whether they are native or non-native speakers (*ibid*, 2003). Zsuzsana (2010, p. 163) finds that internet chat provides potential benefits for learning: facilitating comprehensible and contextualized interaction, learners' self-correction, and collaborative learning environment for the foreign language learners. Thus, through chatting, learners of a foreign language can communicate inexpensively and quickly with other learners or speakers of the target language all over the world.

The communication during the online chat allows foreign language learners to exchange ideas with native speakers (NS) and learn about the target culture. As supported by Lee (1998, p. 113) that foreign language learners gain a better understanding of cultural phenomena and a sharper perspective of the target culture by interacting with native speakers in online chats. This learning would bring to what is called as intercultural communicative competence, the ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and [the] ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002, p.10).

Among other user-friendly online chatrooms, skype is mostly used by people all over the world. It is reported that in 2010, Skype had 124 million users who placed 95 billion calls in the first half of 2010 (Melanson, 2010). Skype is a development of web 2.0. that provides the users with the facilities of audio call, video call, and instant messaging. There were some previous research conducted on the use of skype in relation to cultural competence. In 2009, Ryobe reported that Skype activity improved students' English and computer literacy while giving them the opportunity to explore other cultures, personalities, and varieties of spoken English. Another research result showed by Bataineh & Al-Abdali (2015, p.256) that Web-cam of Skype offered a good opportunity for teaching the sociocultural aspects of language implicitly. Additionally, the results of the research showed that university EFL learners improved and developed their sociocultural competence that included many and different sociocultural aspects of language.

Skype would be an effective way to introduce intercultural experience to EFL students in Cross Cultural Understanding (CCU) class who never communicate with NS. Their real problem in the class so far is the difficulty in getting the framework of intercultural communication by just having discussion of the theories, without having the experience in the real world. As such, the aim of this research is to discuss EFL

students' experience of intercultural learning from doing online chats with native speakers.

2. Method

The participants of this research were the English Department students of SunanGunungDjati State Islamic University in the academic year 2012/2013 in CCU class. F class (36 students) was chosen since none of them had the experience to chat with native speakers. This research was carried out over a period of 8 weeks and the descriptive qualitative design was employed here. When carrying out this research, the data were mainly gathered through students' chats on Skype with native speakers, questionnaire and interview. The procedures were started from asking students to make a Skype account, made friends with NS, and did online chat (instant message, audio call, video call) with the topics previously discussed in the classroom. Then, the analysis would be based on the students' growth intercultural competence by Byram (1997, p. 48) and the factors perceived by the students by Zhang (2015, p. 100).

3. Finding and Discussion

- The result of questionnaires showed that there were 33 students (92%) who had already heard about Skype but they did not know how it worked. 3 other students (8%) already had Skype account but they were very rare to use it since they did not have many friends on it. After all students had Skype account, they were very enthusiastic and agreed that chatting on Skype was an interesting thing to do (97%). They could do many things at the same time; for example sending instant messages using interesting emoticon, sharing pictures, sending files, making audio calls, and the most interesting one was making video calls.

To start with, there were some students (75%) realized that some of their assumptions of NS life were inaccurate. One of the students explored this topic with her American friend. She thought that every girl in America had very colorful lives and free life styles. She was surprised to know that her friend was socially isolated in her college and did not have many activities out of the college. Other example was shown here:

"I learned that it's not good to make generalization. I always think that Americans are not really into religion but from my chat with my American friend I think differently. I was surprised because my American friend was giving very good explanation about religion and faith. I could not understand totally what he say but I could get the points".

It could be seen here that at first the students gave a much more positive attitude to their home culture than the NS one but then it changed after they found different things. It showed that students felt they had learned both about the target culture and how the NS saw their culture. The contradictory finding such as this could help them to develop students understanding of the different images which cultures could hold of each

other and of themselves. This finding belongs to the ability to develop open attitudes.

Furthermore, intercultural knowledge was also found in this research. Some other students (70%) who had online chats with NS said that there were some similarities between their home culture and NS culture than they had realized before, such as Australian were also polite and friendly just like Indonesian. One of them said:

"I thought they would never ask permission when they will end the chat or the video call, in fact they tell me if she could not continue the video call but she was available to have text chat. She felt sorry and asked whether I was okay with that."

Here the students realized that these two cultures were similar in asking permission about something, the difference was only in the way they express it. They clarified that NS more direct in saying something and expressing ideas, while Indonesian got difficulties or being indirect in asking or saying something to express what they thought or felt. By knowing the similarities between the students' home culture and target culture explained there was the process of the students' changing understanding of target culture. This result aligns with Zhang's finding (2015, p. 109) on the international students' virtual conversations with their American counterparts which brought to light more similarities between the two cultures – Chinese culture and American culture - than they had realized previously.

In addition, intercultural skills of the students (81%) could be seen here. As said by one of the students:

"At the beginning of the chat I did not know what to write but when he started to explain his culture, I could find the differences and explain my culture better. When my chat partner talked about his culture, I can prepare to explain my culture same with him."

One part of the chats showed:

NS : I ve told u my family's fave food in party. Now u tell me
S : my family never party
NS : ok whats special food to celebrate something?
S : oh yeah, it is nasikuning
NS : what does it look like?

It indicated that the experience of NS to describe and explain their culture to the students provided valuable practice leading so that they could improve their ability to finish the task. The experience of having online chats with NS gave them knowledge and understanding about other culture. By answering and explaining their culture, the students recalled their memories and knowledge about detail things related to their cultures since then they knew what to write and what to tell when they need to explain something. Surprisingly, some of the students were able to find many new things from explaining to their chat partners that they did not know better previously.

Next, some students (70%) had reached the cultural awareness from having conversation on Skype. One of them commented:

"When my British friend told me about afternoon tea tradition in her country, I can see the difference that people in Indonesia do not have that ritual. And when there are guest at their home and eat together, everyone pass the food. It is different with Indonesian. Here the host offer to serve the food and sometimes put the food on the guest's plates"

Moreover, the advantage of applying live visual images into long-distance communication was making students to become more aware of the cultural differences in posture and appearance between the two countries. The students were surprised by the relaxed posture of NS during the video chat. They said that while they were very formal just like having interviews, NS were laid back and sometimes eating and drinking. The students also noticed that NS were very expressive and used their body languages a lot during video chat. Body language helped them evaluating whether they were understood and it spoke more than the actual conversations since being able to see each other made the contact more natural. As said by one of the students:

"By text chat, you only know the pictures of your partner in profile, it gives more curiosity and keeps the conversations going. But video chat makes you know their reactions, whether you are understood or not."

This revealed that they had learned more about target culture, able to describe and explain their home cultures, and were thus in a better position to draw comparisons between their home culture and target culture. By knowing the differences between the target culture and their home culture, the students could explain much better about their home culture. The differences could only be drawn when they had the understanding of target culture. Seeing the differences as the points of culture trained students to have deeper awareness.

Furthermore, there were some factors perceived by students in having such intercultural learning. Motivation was the main thing most students mentioned in the interview. They said that they were very nervous at the first time to chat with NS but then they got motivated because they liked the immediate feedback and responses given by NS. Motivation was getting bigger since they got some benefits, such as learning many new vocabularies. One of them said:

"Each time I do not understand what they said, I ask them and they let me know what the meaning is or when it is IM, I have time to check my dictionary. I get new vocabularies. I realize it when my paper get better score from my lecturer."

Besides, the students were also motivated because they could practice the spoken language in real-time by using written-like-spoken language in the same manner as in face-to-face interactions with NS. These results go with the results reported by Mahdi (2014) who indicated that using Skype for the oral CMC group created turn-taking patterns that were very close to face-to-face turn taking. This finding is also in harmony with

Mahfouz and Ihmeideh (2009) who pointed out that students' attitudes toward using text chat with anonymous native speakers of English for improving their English language skills are higher concerning speaking skills, followed by listening skills, reading skills, and finally writing skills.

Equality to learn from each other was the other factor influencing intercultural learning. Online chatting on Skype gave students the opportunity to interact with NS and practice their language skills. This is in line with Hals et al. (2009) who stated that EFL learners participate more equally in a discussion in a CMC environment. A sense of equality could also be seen from balance portion of sharing valued opinions, such as talking about one topic that attracted their mutual interest. They could also do the same things together. One student reported:

"My Australian friend showed me her pets and her house around. She asked me to do the same thing also and she was very excited to look at the traditional furniture at my house".

These equal interactions also enriched their mutual understanding and strengthening their relationships. By talking about the shared valued, the students felt they had the connection with NS.

Additionally, online chat on Skype was an interesting learning environment. It was found that the students enjoyed using a computer to communicate in English which was usually very hard to do in their traditional classroom. Students might find it interesting to express their opinions because in such noncurricular and informal environment, students might be found reluctant to express their opinions and feelings freely without having any hesitation or fear. Online chat on Skype provided the students a non-threatening learning environment. They could start and end any time they wanted to without any tight schedule. This new environment made the student feel refreshed and comfortable. This was in line with what Bataineh & Al-Abdali (2015, p. 257) said that students tried a new experience and atmosphere for learning that enabled them to acquire English language quickly, freely, and more effectively than studying traditionally.

On the other hand, there was a surprising finding of this research. There were some passive students who had very low frequencies in doing online chats with native speakers. These passive students got less experience in communicating with NS which influenced their intercultural competence at some points, as reflected in their interviews. A technical problem was also found on the signal or connection due to the low bandwidth of internet while video chat needed very good signal to connect. Some students reported that when they were in the middle of video chat, the connection was stopped due to the bad signal. When they were reconnected, the situation were different and they needed to change the topic into the new one.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, if the cultural component of EFL is taught and learned adequately, such as by using the online chat of Skype, it would be beneficial for learners in terms of enhancing intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skill, and awareness and they learnt it in a dynamic rather than passive way. Though EFL students' intercultural competence did not change significantly, however, online chats on Skype did make a difference and make them learn more about cultural and intercultural aspects. Motivation, equality, and environment are the main factors in supporting such experiences. Given the positive results described here, foreign language teachers should be encouraged to explore and experiment with integrated Internet resources for students. Future research can look into the assessment of students' intercultural learning by using the potential ways of assessment that may include pre-tests - post-tests and portfolios to measure students' development of intercultural communicative competence and the effect of intercultural language learning on their EFL learning.

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The Second Forum on Linguistics and Literature (FOLITER) Conference takes Engaging Linguistics and Literature: Perspectives and Insights beyond the Curriculum as its theme.

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