The Trouble with Cyberpragmatics: Embedding an Online Intercultural Learning Project into the Curriculum

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Research Articles

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on MexCo (Mexico-Coventry), an ongoing online intercultural learning project underpinned by action research. Its aim is to embed internationalisation into the curriculum of the institutions involved in order to promote citizenship competences, online intercultural communicative competence in particular, among both students and staff. The integration of telecollaboration into the curriculum has highlighted problematic aspects of the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), such as cyberpragmatics (Yus, 2011). Cyberpragmatics is intended here as the skill of understanding others' intended meanings in computer-mediated communication. It is suggested that cyberpragmatics in online intercultural learning exchanges is a 'Threshold Concept' (TC) (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 375), i.e. a key concept that is troublesome to understand as it is challenging to the identity of the learner, but which could open new learning horizons to the students who do manage to grasp it.

KEYWORDS

Action Research, Global Citizenship, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), MexCo, Online Intercultural Learning, Threshold Concept

INTRODUCTION

The MexCo (Mexico-Coventry) online intercultural learning project has evolved from a project aimed at tandem language learning to one aimed at developing intercultural awareness and raising students' ability to operate in a "difference-friendly world" (Fraser, 1996, p. 3). It is an ongoing international intercultural knowledge-transfer exchange involving students and staff from Coventry University (School of Humanities, CU from now on) and students and staff at the Universidad de Monterrey (UDEM - Dirección de Programas Internacionales de la Universidad de Monterrey - UDEM from now on).

The project aims at making the HE curriculum at each of the partner institutions involved more intercultural and international, in keeping with their strategic priorities to encourage students to become digitally literate global citizens. At CU MexCo has been integrated into the Languages and

English curriculum, while at UDEM it is part of the intercultural suite of modules offered to all courses by the international office. Both in Britain and Mexico, project MexCo aims to enhance its participants' intercultural awareness and transferable employability skills in a global context and help its participants to acquire ICC. This includes raising their awareness of the conventions of effective online engagement, or cyberpragmatics (term coined by Yus, 2011). In agreement with Stroińska and Cecchetto (2013, p.175) it is proposed here that the pragmatics of politeness proposed by Leech (1983) should be revisited in the light of Computer Mediated Communication developments. Politeness literacy for online intercultural exchanges in academic settings should become part of intercultural online awareness teaching and learning and is a digital and intercultural communicative competence *per se*. A distinctive feature of the MexCo project is that politeness literacy for online intercultural exchanges in academic settings is being explored by staff in collaboration with "Expert Students", in a model of staff-students action research developed at Coventry University (Orsini-Jones, 2015, p. 50; Orsini-Jones, Brick, & Pibworth, 2013). The "Expert Students" are students who have participated in the project in its previous cycles and appear to have grasped the complexities of ICC. They work closely with staff and enable them (staff) to see their practice through their eyes, in a role-reversal model of threshold-concept-informed curricular change (Orsini-Jones, 2013).

Through the analysis of the asynchronous interactions in the forums and the assessment of the collaborative online tasks, staff and students participating in the project are identifying problematic areas relating to intercultural communication online. The engagement with others in online exchanges requires a high level of critical multiliteracy and can prove to be challenging for undergraduate students. This leads to the hypothesis that Intercultural Communicative Competence online and online netiquette in particular is a "Threshold Concept" (TC), a concept that is troublesome to grasp for the learners as it is linked to alien knowledge that is not just alien in terms of language and epistemology (e.g. understanding what cyberpragmatics means) but also alien in terms of the identity of the learner (Orsini-Jones, 2010, p. 18). A TC forces the learners to question their assumptions, to reconfigure their learning landscape. The questioning of the learner's subjectivity brought about by the encounter with a TC, can also result in resistance to embracing the concept, not because it is difficult, but because the learner does not believe in it. The learner is not willing to engage in the transformational process that can be initiated by the engagement with troublesome knowledge, because they resist a change in identity. The challenge would therefore appear to also be ontological and relating to becoming a global citizen who can actively and respectfully communicate online with "others". The polarisation of feelings towards the "others" caused by the referendum vote for "Brexit" in June 2016 in the UK makes the raising of UK-based students' awareness of Byram's ICC components relating to knowledge, skills, attitudes and values (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey, 2002) more urgent. Helm and Guth (2010) adapt Byram's ICC framework, originally designed for physical mobility and exchanges, to online learning through telecollaboration making the online dimension more visible: see Figure 1 (edited and used with permission). It is argued here that Higher Education staff and students need to be aware of the online ICC 'rules of engagement' and become involved with the understanding of cyberpragmatics.

Project Description

MexCo is a telecollaborative project that began in July 2011 and is, at the time of writing (2016), in its sixth annual action research cycle. It is led by a team based at CU that includes staff members from Britain, France, Italy and Spain. The original overseas partner was the Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico City, from 2011-2013.

Figure 1. Framework for the goals of telecollaboration 2.0. Adapted from The Multifarious Goals of Telecollaboration 2.0: Theoretical and Practical Implications (p. 74), by F. Helm and S. Guth, 2010, Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang. Copyright 2010 by Helm & Guth and Peter Laing. Adapted with permission.

Since 2013 the Mexican partner has changed and is now the Dirección de Programas Internacionales, Universidad de Monterrey (UDEM).

In the 2014-2015 academic year, which underpins the discussion here, the participants on MexCo were:

- 115 undergraduate year one students based in Britain, all reading either English or Languages at Coventry University on a variety of degree combinations: English and Spanish, Spanish, English Literature and Linguistics, Spanish and International Relations, French and Spanish, English and Creative Writing; English and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL); Spanish and TEFL. Of these students, one was Romanian, four Polish, one Spanish, one Latvian, two Lithuanian, two from mainland China, one from Macau, three from Hong Kong, one Greek, one Czech, one Dutch and one Swiss.
- 114 undergraduate students from various years of study and reading for a variety of degrees at the Universidad de Monterrey in Mexico, all native speakers of Spanish;
- One second year undergraduate student from CU who had participated in the project in his first year and one final year student who had taken part into the project in year one and worked as 'ES' for the project in year 2 (both studying English and Creative Writing, both British). They were hired to support staff and first year students and helped staff during the face-to-face seminars;
- One postgraduate student hired as both part-time research assistant and seminar lecturer on the relevant module, see below (British);
- Four members of staff from UDEM, all Mexican;

- Four full-time members of staff from CU (one French, one Spanish, one Italian and one British) teaching the compulsory module Introduction to Studying English and Languages at University (more details below).

At CU the project is integrated into the syllabus of a mandatory academic skills module (course) on the English and Languages courses: Introduction to Studying English and Languages at University (worth ten of 120 credits in the first year)[1]. The aims and intended outcomes of the module (course) are to prepare students for academic study at degree level by discussing and practising academic writing, group project work, digital and presentation skills. It also aims to enhance students' awareness of how these academic skills can develop into professional competences. This includes introducing students to intercultural international communication to foster the development of the graduate competence of global citizenship (Coventry University, 2014). The introduction of the graduate competence of global citizenship through Online International Projects at level 1 is part of the internationalisation strategy at CU. 50% of the assessment grade for the module is awarded for the intercultural collaborative digital learning project carried out with Mexico.

In Mexico, at UDEM, the intercultural collaborative tasks form 40% of the grade awarded for the assessment portfolio for module Competencias Interculturales 1, offered as an option to students attending different levels of their degree courses, but is mandatory for students planning to engage in overseas mobility. A summary outline of the module is as follows:

- Las condiciones de un mundo globalizado demandan profesionistas con competencias interculturales para hacer frente a los retos actuales. Este curso contribuye a la formación de egresados en competencias interculturales, a través del aprendizaje experiencial, la reflexión y el desarrollo de la conciencia intercultural.
- Nowadays there is a need for professionals to have well developed intercultural competences, so that they can operate effectively in a globalised world. This course provides training at undergraduate level in intercultural competence through experiential learning and reflection, working towards the development of intercultural awareness (our translation).

And the competences developed:

1. Tiene conocimiento y aprecio de la propia cultura y de su historia.
2. Respeta las diferencias individuales y tiene apertura y tolerancia hacía formas de actuar y de pensar diversas.
3. Se relaciona fácilmente con diferentes tipos de personas y en ambientes diversos.
4. Maneja selectivamente diversas tecnologías de información y utiliza críticamente diferentes fuentes.
5. Knowledge and appreciation of their own culture and its history.
6. Respect for individual differences and an openness and tolerance towards diverse ways of life and ways of thinking.
7. Ability to form relationships with people from different backgrounds and in different contexts.
8. Ability to critically evaluate different sources of information and make use of a range of tools enabling computer-mediated communication (our translation).

As previously discussed by Orsini-Jones (2013, pp. 57-59, 2015, p. 52) the task design process was informed by the principles outlined in Liddicoat and Scarino for intercultural task development, that is to say that an experiential approach was adopted that included the following elements:

- Active construction
- Making connections

- Social interaction
- Reflection
- Responsibility

Below is a summary of the tasks that students engaged with in 2014-2015 for a period of eight weeks.

WEEKS 1-2

Activity 1: 'Warm up' task, 'Group Video Introductions'.
Students were matched in groups by CU and UDEM staff. Groups of four or five students at CU were matched to equal size groups at UDEM. Students created YouTube videos (private channel) sharing information on themselves, their university and city. They posted both the video links and their comments on the videos via an asynchronous Moodle discussion forum linked to the task.

WEEK 3

Activity 2: 'Analysis and Deconstruction of National Stereotypes in Films and Adverts'. Students watched (or attended if at CU) a lecture discussing the stereotypical representation of Latinos in American films (Echo 360 capture software was used for this, the lecture was shown f-2-f in Coventry and then uploaded online for the partners) and worked in groups to research and select examples of culture construction (Wendt, 2003) used in British and Mexican media. The clips were posted in the dedicated asynchronous discussion for the task and were used for intercultural seminar tasks and critical knowledge sharing in both countries.

WEEKS 4-5

Activity 3: Cultura Word Associations/Situation Reactions/Sentence Completions (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001, edited with permission) and associated reflections on Word Clouds created from the results. Students filled in online questionnaires/surveys created with Moodle quiz tools. After the surveys/quizzes were completed, Word Clouds were created by country response by one of the student experts (using Wordle), and all students engaged in independent and group tasks involving Word Cloud comparison.

WEEK 6

Activity 4: Group Interviews and Reflective Group Report.
Students conducted group interviews on pre-agreed topics which formed the basis of their intercultural reflective group reports. Skype was recommended for this, but students could use other e-tools. Indicative topics (negotiated between staff an students) included:

- Levels of freedom and permission for young people
- The student experience at UDEM and CU
- What is a family?
- BRITISH and Mexican humour

WEEKS 7-8 (CU students only)

Activity 5: E-portfolio Mahara - creation of multimedia interactive intercultural learning objects (assessed group presentation at CU).
CU students collated activities 1-4 and reflective blogs created in group using Mahara; they then posted the web link created for their learning object in the relevant asynchronous discussion forum created for their group and their matched Mexican peers group. They also presented the intercultural lessons learnt and their group's multimedia learning objects to their peers at CU face to face in an

assessed group presentation that was recorded, uploaded into a private YouTube channel with the help of the learning technologists, and emailed to students for the purpose of their debriefing with tutors.

The students were divided first into four seminar groups at CU and four at UDEM, then students in each seminar group were matched to form twenty six sub-groups. Each sub-group was formed by four/five students from each country and separate areas were created in Moodle for both each sub-group to carry out the set tasks.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

New technologies are amplifying the ever-expanding multiplicity of multimodal narratives and textualities that students must become acquainted with and master in order to be competent in academic and professional settings, as well as mindful of cultural sensitivities.

The above requires the engagement with a variety of literacies. There are various definitions of digital literacies, but they often focus, like those on the JISC website, on ICT aspects of literacy (e.g. Joint Information Systems Committee [JISC], 2016). Within the context of English Language Teaching, Hafner, Chick and Jones (2013, p.1) suggest that digital literacies include database search abilities, navigational skills in complex hypertext documents, digital commentaries online, co-construction of knowledge with blogs and wikis, creation and remix of multimodal texts and appropriate online interaction in a variety of settings.

There is moreover the issue of the literacies of the telecollaborative teacher to take into account. O'Dowd (2013) proposes that the Web 2.0 tutor should have specific competences in the following spheres: organizational; pedagogical; ICT/Digital; and in the area of interculturality (attitudes and beliefs). Many of these relate to the respect of "the other" in a globalised context, e.g. "an openness to partner teachers' alternative pedagogical beliefs and aims" (O'Dowd, 2013, p. 9). What became apparent in the course of engaging with MexCo with various Mexican partners was that the 'languaging' we were using for the project was different in its semantic connotation, even if the words used were the same, in a Saussurian mismatch of 'langue' and 'parole' in the two different countries. Examples include the interpretation of concepts that are crucial to a project of this kind, such as 'digital literacies', 'task', 'student-centred' and 'student autonomy'.

The most comprehensive literacy framework for the goals of Telecollaboration 2.0 and online intercultural learning, that provides a dynamic interaction between new online literacies, intercultural communicative competence and foreign language learning is provided by Helm and Guth (2010, p. 74, Figure 1). They include critical language awareness and pragmatics. Students must be made aware that, as stressed by Wendt (2003, p. 97), cultures constitute themselves dynamically in discourse, but discourses are always constructed, so we must teach students in Higher Education construction awareness: all cultures are constructs. For this reason, the definition of literacy preferred here is the more generic one proposed by Freire and Macedo (1987): the ability, the possibility and the will to read the world.

As one of the main aims of MexCo is to develop the ability to communicate effectively online amongst speakers of various languages through the medium of English, rather than develop foreign language competences, it has become apparent that there is a need to focus on raising the students' awareness of language and cultural constructions through online discourse in English, even for native speakers, and focus on the importance of netiquette in order to "read" better online discourse. This example of a posting by a British student from an exchange in academic year 2013-2014 illustrates this point: 'Mexicans! We want your poems! If you feel confident in doing so and would like to help our group project then please email me some of your individual poetry so we can compare your work to ours.' The message, which was meant to be friendly – in the words of its originator who was interviewed about it -, comes through as rather rude (both blunt and patronising 'if you feel confident'). No replies were posted to it. Staff decided to use it in seminars in 2014-2015 as one of the examples to discuss in seminars on how <u>not </u>to interact with the partners in Mexico. O'Dowd and Ritter (2006)

have reported on breakdowns in communication in telecollaborative exchanges that focused on the development of foreign language skills (O'Dowd & Ritter 2006, p. 634), where a lack of intercultural communicative pragmatic competence was evident.

Other issues encountered in MexCo, such as the lack of engagement of some students with the tasks and the asynchronous discussion forums linked to them, could be explained by the link that Yus has proposed between "relevance theory" (Sperber & Wilson, 1996) and levels of engagement of Internet users. Yus posits that as a consequence of paying attention to multiple sources of potential relevance and trying to process all of them in parallel (multitasking), Internet users might develop a reluctance to devote cognitive resources to stimuli that do not offer immediate reward or that involve deferred relevance (Yus, 2011, p. 12). The asynchronous discussion forums used for MexCo could therefore play a role in the lack of engagement of some students, as there will always be a delay in the replies by the partners. It is difficult to solve this issue, given the six hour time zone difference between Coventry and Monterrey. The expert student who participated in the project suggested to try and have an automatic response in Moodle following a posting, modelled on current languages apps, to reward posting and generate a 'feel-good' response. The team is investigating this suggestion.

Also, what is emerging is that messages can be perceived as 'rude' when they are not meant to be. Godwin-Jones mentions for example how "differing expressions of politeness or conventions for using titles and honorifics [...] can be taken as indications of general rudeness inherent in the target culture" (Godwin-Jones, 2013, p.5). Even the simple salutation "Dear", intended by the sender of a message to be polite and respectful, can come across as excessively so by the recipient, and can create an impression of coldness and distance – which may or may not be intended. This has in fact happened in MexCo, in communication between tutors who are native speakers of Spanish and their British colleagues, as the equivalent of '"Dear" in Spanish, as in Italian, is in fact informal, while "Dear" in English is rather formal (see Crystal, 2006; Wallace, 2004, p. 94 on this point).

Another factor that would appear to create intercultural misunderstandings consists in the expectations that some partners have of Britain and British students (and vice-versa). Monterrey is still, to a large extent, steeped in national Mexican culture and students at UDEM are rather homogeneous in comparison to students at CU. A challenging incident occurred when one of the Mexican students posted a picture of himself dressed as a Jihadi terrorist on Facebook, as his Halloween costume, in the first week of the exchange in 2014-2015. Although this incident was initially a threat (the CU students did not want to work with their Mexican partners any longer), it subsequently became an opportunity for real intercultural dialogue and reflection, as both sides learnt a rich intercultural lesson from it facilitated by the mediation of the tutors in both countries. Helm, Guth and Farrah (2012) argue that online intercultural exchanges should include practice of a dialogic approach to conflict, as demonstrated in their interesting work on an exchange between students in Italy and students in Palestine.

The trouble with telecollaboration on MexCo would therefore appear to have various facets. The major stumbling blocks encountered to date are that many students in both countries struggle to:

- See the relevance to their studies of the acquisition of ICC
- Manage their online presence effectively in the exchange (both verbally and visually)
- Tolerate difference
- Overcome stereotypes
- Use an appropriate academic/professional register when writing the tasks
- Understand the intended meanings of others

Because of its challenging nature, ICC would appear to have all the characteristics that are typical of a TC, summarised by Flanagan (2016) as follows:

- **Transformative**: Once understood, a threshold concept changes the way in which the student views the discipline;
- **Troublesome**: The learners will often find it problematic;
- **Integrative**: It exposes the previously hidden interrelatedness of concepts that were not previously seen as linked;
- **Bounded** : A threshold concept will probably delineate a particular conceptual space, serving a specific and limited purpose ;
- **Irreversible**: The change of perspective occasioned by acquisition of a threshold concept is unlikely to be forgotten;
- **Discursive**: The crossing of a threshold will incorporate an enhanced and extended use of language, and
- **Reconstitutive** : Understanding a threshold concept may entail a shift in learner subjectivity, which is implied through the transformative and discursive aspects already noted.

The transformational nature of understanding the importance of online intercultural exchanges is illustrated for example by this quotation from one of the UNAM students: "I have realized the cultures from all around the world are very different and very much alike at the same time. After this course my mind has opened and I have allowed myself to learn how to respect other people, their beliefs, their traditions" . (Task 4, Phase 4, Reflective report, Moodle discussion, November 2014). The wording "I have allowed myself" is revealing in terms of TC literature: the words of this (formerly) "resisting learner" illustrate that there is a direct correlation between the will to engage with the reconstitutive liminal state between the preliminal and the postliminal transformational states and the crossing of the threshold (Land, Meyer, & Baillie, 2010, p. x). Because the concept of ICC online is so complex, the students' oscillation in the liminal state can last for longer than the duration of an eight-week-long online intercultural project. What is important is to provide scaffolding structures of support (in Bruner's terms, 1983) to ease the uncertainty they face while engaging with "otherness".

METHODOLOGY

Threshold-concept-informed action research is the underpinning pedagogical approach adopted for the MexCo project to draw insights from the data collected in relation to the TC of politeness online or cyberpragmatics. Because of the problematic issues with cyberpragmatics encountered in the previous action research cycles that have been outlined above, in 2014-2015 a set of specific curricular actions were put in place to address cyberpragmatic competence at CU, both before the start of the exchange and during it, such as the introduction of explicit lectures on online interaction and the design of seminar exercises jointly created with the "expert students" for the relevant module.

The action-research model adopted for the various phases in MexCo is Kemmis and McTaggart's "participatory action research" (1988, p.14) that is seen as a "classic" in action research literature according to Burns (2010, p. 8). The latter (2010) argues that it is also the best known one, as it succinctly summarises all the phases of the action research cycles:

- A problematic issue is identified (lack of online cyberpragmatic competences)
- Change is planned collaboratively to address the issue (introduction of tailor-made lectures/tasks)
- The change process is implemented: "acted out"
- All agents involved in the change process reflect upon its outcomes, both while it is happening and at the end of the first phase of implementation (evaluation of data)
- A new cycle starts

Ethical clearance was sought and obtained for each of the cycles of the project, in compliance with CU guidelines. All participants were given the project information sheet and signed a consent form. All data were anonymised and dealt with in accordance with the Data Protection Act (UK legislation).

As most data were of a qualitative nature, the scheme for the coding emerged from the data themselves. In the first part of the analysis, the postings of students in the MexCo project were analysed according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory utilizing a table developed after it by Maricic (2001): "Politeness strategies on the Linguist List" (as quoted in Yus, 2011, p. 276).

In the second part of the analysis, the students' exchanges in the MexCo project were classified in accordance with Sperber and Wilson's "Relevance Theory" (1986, 1996) as applied by Yus (2011). The focus was on the analysis of the way students compensate for the lack of oral features that their typed postings exhibit in the asynchronous online forum discussion in the MexCo project, compared to the contextual richness of face-to-face interactions. One of the aims of the analysis was to ascertain if the cyberpragmatic curricular measures integrated into the module attached to the project at CU in 2014-2015 had had an impact on the students' ability to interact online effectively with their partners in Mexico.

A total of 507 postings were made by the students in the asynchronous discussion forums attached to each of the five tasks; the qualitative discourse analysis related to the 435 postings in the forums of the first three activities.

SAMPLE DATA AND DISCUSSION[2]

In their analysis of politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987) argued that in order for an individual to establish social relationships and enter into discussions, they have to acknowledge and reflect their awareness of the notion of face, which is the sense of self and the public self-image of the people we address. This notion of face is universal and is embedded in all cultures. Therefore, speakers should have respect for the expectations of each other regarding self-image, take into consideration their feelings and avoid Face Threatening Acts (FTAs). When FTAs are not avoidable, speakers can address negative politeness which is a 'redressive action' to the addressee's negative face. For the purpose of clarifying the analysis the glossary below has been provided:

- FTA (Face Threatening Acts): actions or behaviour that potentially threaten the face of others.
- Positive politeness strategies: linguistic choices which mitigate the force of FTAs by attending to positive face (the desire to be liked and approved of).
- Negative politeness strategies: linguistic choices which mitigate the force of FTAs by attending to negative face (the claim to territories and rights of non-distraction).

The results of the analysis of the students' postings were annotated and coded as shown below. CU students were coded as 'CUS' and their counterparts from Universidad de Monterrey were coded as 'UDEMS' (Ennegadi, 2015).

Positive= **[+]**/ Negative= **[-]**

Sample Exchange 1 CUS

Hey Guys!! **[1+]**

I'm **X** from Group 1 at Coventry University and I would just like to say that my group all loved your video**[2+]**! It was so interesting and you all seemreally lovely and friendly with really cool interests **[3+]**. I thinkwe have a lot in common **[4+]**.

Your university looksbeautiful and the song you chose made it so much fun**[5+]**. We felt like we were walking around your university with you which was really cool! **[6+]**

My group have set up a Facebook page for us allto talk on**[7+]**, so if that's okay with youwe would love for you to join! **[8-/+]**

I'll put the link at the bottom and <u>we can't wait</u> to find out more about you, your university and Mexico **[9+]**.

<u>Hope</u> to hear from you soon! **[10+]**

[1+] on record, positive politeness; informal salutation 'Hey', and the marker 'Guys' as an address form to convey in-group membership

[2+] on record, positive politeness; hedging opinion and exaggeration/ overstatement

[3+] on record, positive politeness; exaggeration/ overstatement by using intensifying modifiers and hedging opinion

[4+] on record, positive politeness; seeking agreement by using verbal hedge 'think' to express a hedging opinion/ inclusiveness by using 'we'

[5+] on record, positive politeness; verbal hedge 'looks' to express a hedging opinion/ exaggeration and overstatement by using intensifiers 'so much fun'

[6+] on record, positive politeness; hedging opinion 'we felt like'/ exaggeration 'really cool'

[7+] on record, positive politeness; stressing inclusiveness, in-group membership and cooperativeness by using 'for us all' and providing a reason 'to talk on' as to why they want the addressee to join the Facebook page which is also another aspect of inclusiveness

[8-] on record, negative politeness; tentative grammatical constructions that minimize imposition over the addressee; not assuming that the addressee is willing to join the Facebook group by using the if-clause

[8+] on record, positive politeness; exaggeration/ overstatement

[9+] on record, positive politeness; exaggeration/ overstatement

[10+] on record, positive politeness; assuming cooperation by using an optimistic expression of response anticipation.

Sample Exchange 1 UDEMS

<u>Hi X</u> **[1+]**, I am Y! It's nice to meet you **[2-]**,

<u>We</u> <u>really don't know</u> why you can't hear the sound in our video **[3-]**, <u>we</u> tried in different computers and we all can hear it well **[4-]**

Did you try watching it in a different computer as well? **[5-]**<u>If</u> it still doesn't work, <u>let us</u> know so we can send it to you another way **[6-]**

[1+] on record, positive politeness; informal salutation, and the name of the addressee (X) as an address form to reflect inclusiveness

[2-] on record, negative politeness; showing difference and being respectful

[3-] on record, negative politeness; the use of the first person plural pronoun 'we' to avoid personal responsibility and the hedging expression 'really don't know'

[4-] on record, negative politeness; pluralisation as a negative strategy of dissociation from the Face-threatening act and which in turn threatens the addressee's negative face

[5-] on record, negative politeness; conventional indirectness by indirectly requesting the addressee to watch the video on another computer/ assuming that the addressee is not cooperative, giving an indirect suggestion.

[6-] on record, negative politeness; if-clause, the speaker is not willing to accept that the sound in the video is not working, and is not making positive assumptions about the addressee.

Sample 2 CUS

Hey X, Y and Z

<u>Me gusta la entrada:)</u> **[1+]** It's very nice to meet you all! Your video looks very good, I look forward to working with you, <u>la Universidad es muy moderna</u>, <u>me encanta</u>! **[1+]**

[1+] on record, positive politeness; use of in-group language: code-switching from English to Spanish/ Use of emoticon to introduce a humorous or playful atmosphere.

UDEMS

British Representation in 'Hooligans' **[1-]**

We know that not all British who like soccer belong to this kind of groups but it is commonly believed **[2-]** that if you are from that country and you like soccer a lot you are 90% related to this environment **[3-]**.

[1-] on record, negative politeness; having in mind that this post was the first post in an exchange in Activity 2, it appears that the speaker omitted the expression of salutation and started directly with a topic introduction 'British Representation in Hooligans'

[2-] on record, negative politeness; being indirect- the speaker is trying to mark the source of knowledge as indirect and that their statement is just a hearsay and they do not know if it is definitely true or not by using an epistemic phrase 'it is commonly believed'

[3-] on record, negative politeness; if-clause, the speaker is not assuming that the addressee belongs to the UK and is a football fan, and therefore they are indirectly referring that the addressee may belong to that group of Hooligans which threatens the addressee's negative face.

Yus (2011) asserts that, due to the "absence of contextual cues that normally facilitate [in physical environments] the choice of a particular (im)polite strategy", Computer Mediated Communication may sometimes contain "an overabundance of overt expressions of politeness" (p.275). In particular, positive politeness strategies that emphasise inclusiveness and identity are often employed to mitigate the force of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) rather than negative politeness strategies as illustrated by the CU students' postings. Most students at CU University would appear to, in line with what Yus states, overuse strategies of positive politeness. Staff and expert students were pleased to see that more politeness strategies had been used in 2014-2015 by CU students, hopefully as a direct result of the cyberpragmatics exercises that were carried out in class to avoid communication breakdown.

UDEM students used more strategies of negative politeness than strategies of positive politeness. Their discourse would appear to be "liminal" in TC terms with reference to the mastering of written politeness strategies. However, it could also be argued that there might be underlying intercultural communicative competence reasons why the UDEM posts come through as more stilted than the CU ones and that the students at UDEM have probably learnt the "Queen's" variety of British English and are not used to written interaction in hybrid academic/informal settings with English speakers. This is however a relevant finding, particularly for staff and students involved in telecollaboration with Mexico and for teachers of English in Spanish-speaking countries.

As for the second part of the study that involved the classification and the analysis of the students' postings in accordance with Sperber and Wilson's Relevance theory (1986, 1996) as applied by Yus (2011) to internet mediated communication, students appeared to utilise a hybrid discourse, somewhere between the stability (and often formality) of typed texts, on the one hand, and the ephemeral (and often informal) quality of speech, on the other hand. Their discourse appeared to be neither spoken nor written but a 'hybrid' of registers (Beauvois, 1998) which combined features of both modalities (see examples below). Students resorted to a number of conversational strategies typical of speech, as shown in the features underlined in the examples one to nine below. In short interactions like the ones below, CU and UDEM students appeared to use similar strategies:A (UDEM): Nice video**!** I liked a lot your university, I hope to see more about you guys **:)**

1. B (CU): Thank you, if you have any questions or queries then do let us know. We are looking forward to getting to know more about you, too **:)**
2. (CU) Hi girls**!** I like your video **:D**
3. (UDEM) Hope to know you all more better in the following activities **=D**
4. (UDEM) I want to know more about British culture because I feel that I know nothing but the accent **:(**
5. (UDEM) **HELLO!**
6. My name is XXX**!Wow!** Your university looks great.
7. (UDEM) **Wow** , your university does sound very big.
8. (CU) **Yeah...** Sorry about that**!**

9. (UDEM) The cathedral is **<u>A-M-A-Z-I-N-G</u>**.
10. (CU): In fact it is the total opposite **<u>hahaha</u>**
11. (UDEM): **<u>jajaja</u>** really**<u>?</u>**

In examples one to four students typed a sequence of characters in order to generate emoticons which are one of the most common ways of connoting typed text with visual non-verbal information (Yus 2011). The most typical emoticons that were inherent in the students' postings are [:)] and [:D] to express happiness and [:(] to express sadness. Students also used textual equivalents of features of face-to-face interactions, such as language games, in order to express intimacy with their counterparts and compensate for the lack of the non-verbal features in the asynchronous online forum discussion. Students resorted to the use of prosodic spellings, such as capitalisation and punctuation marks in order to textually transcribe the prosodic contour of their voice. In sample eight students used both the English and the Mexican forms 'hahaha' and 'jajaja' in order to textually express the sound of their laughs.

The next stage of the research will entail trying to understand if the reading of the intended meanings of these "paralinguistic features" are the same for all participating students (bearing in mind that at CU around 15% of the students are not British). The use of emoticons was used to enhance the relevance of the messages in MexCo, which reflects previous CMC findings (Yus, 2011, p. 168) as emoticons can strengthen the positive connotation of a message by adding supplementary emphasis. Yus (2011, p. 19) argues that what we see in these interactions is a new type of discourse, a new type of 'oralised written text', but others (like Crystal, 2006) disagree. More research is needed in this field.

On a more general level, students' feedback on the online intercultural exchange experience was rather polarised. Some students struggled to make sense of the project and were really challenged by it. They for example stated in their feedback in the anonymous evaluation of the course that they could not see the point of engaging with "foreigners", reinforcing the staff's view that more work needs to be done to develop ICC and cyberpragmatics. However, very positive feedback was also received both from UDEM students and CU students, e.g.:

What I liked the most of the whole semester was the activity with Coventry, which I found really interesting and important. Activities like these ones open doors to a culture´s traditions, daily activities and many more aspects that can´t be taught through books. I enjoyed this course very much (Assessed final reflective report on the project, UDEM student, December 2014).

I have realized the cultures from all around the world are very different and very much alike at the same time. After this course my mind has opened and I have allowed myself to learn how to respect other people, their beliefs, their traditions. People from Coventry University and us are not that different, we learned from the interviews that we think very much alike. Really loved the course (Assessed final reflective report on the project, UDEM student, November 2014).

I found an opportunity to see how other people, living in another country, think, live, the kind of interests they have. When you understand other cultures, you start understanding your own culture more (Interviews, December 2014).

Overall we feel our interpersonal and intercultural skills have been greatly improved through the project. We have learnt a vast amount of knowledge from our Mexican counterparts, as well as establishing a friendship that we have full intention of maintaining (Assessed final reflective report December 2014).

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that cyberpragmatics is a TC and has many troublesome features. It has proposed that the global citizen of the future should be able to master netiquette in international online settings and that it is possible to put in place curricular actions to support the students' difficult journey through the threshold of alien knowledge involved in becoming a global citizen. The involvement of "expert

students" has helped staff with understanding what is needed to create a better learning environment equipped with effective 'scaffolding' infrastructures to make the students' (and often the staff's) intercultural journey less troublesome. Staff and students at CU and UDEM embedded the lessons learnt in the new action research cycle that took place in 2015-2016 and is being evaluated at the time of writing (October 2016). Interesting findings are emerging regarding the use of the pronoun "we" (Orsini-Jones, Gazeley-Eke & Leinster, in press).

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ENDNOTES

1   At Coventry University a BA Honours degree normally consists of 360 credits, 120 per year. Each student normally takes the equivalent of six 20-credit modules (roughly corresponding to subjects on their course) per year.

2   It is to be noted that these are preliminary findings and that the MexCo team is still in the process of classifying the language data through corpus analysis tools.

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