Developing Metacultural Writing Competence for Online Intercultural Communication: Implications for English Language Teaching

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Abstract

The internationalization of higher education has brought students from different countries into direct contact with one another. One of the scenarios is intercultural communication among international students in an online environment mediated through institutional e-learning systems, for example, Moodle and Blackboard. In this paper, I analyze data from an Australian university course online discussion forums involving written communication among international students. I extend the notion of 'metacultural competence' (Sharifian, 2013, pp. 8-9) and propose that international students should also develop 'metacultural writing competence' for intercultural communication. I also explore the implications for university students and lecturers, who engage increasingly in intercultural communication through writing in English.

Introduction

Globalization has been a driving force for the internationalization of higher education. University students and lecturers extend their social relations beyond territorial space. In particular, students have become increasingly mobile in pursuing their higher education degrees and learning experiences. As a result, intercultural communication among international students in any given tertiary institutional context is increasing. New research on online exchanges across cultures through English has been gaining momentum.

'Online intercultural exchanges have been a developing focus of research in the field of learning technologies and ELT' and teachers become increasingly able to 'connect learners in different parts of the world with the dual aim of improving their linguistic competence and developing their intercultural knowledge and skills' (Hockly, 2015, p. 81). Institutional e-learning systems, such as Moodle and Blackboard, provide an opportunity for 'online intercultural exchanges'. Increased interaction among international students through university course-related online discussion forums has

placed new demands on both lecturers and students, such as how to communicate across cultures when writing in English, and how to negotiate intercultural relations and identities through online learning activities.

This paper aims to explore metacultural writing competence for effective online intercultural communication. Metacultural writing competence is derived from 'metacultural competence', which refers to 'a competence that enables interlocutors to communicate and negotiate their cultural conceptualizations during the process of intercultural communication' (Sharifian, 2013, pp. 8-9). Such competence involves students' awareness of cultural differences, and the ability to explain and negotiate in intercultural communication. In this paper, I review relevant literature on intercultural communication, and analyze data from online discussion forums. I explore the implications of developing metacultural writing competence for students and lecturers in a tertiary education context. I argue that it is equally important for students to develop metacultural competence in their face-to-face interaction as well as written communication in English across cultures.

Literature review

The globalization and internationalization of higher education have become a catalyst for rethinking theories and practices of teaching and learning. O'Dowd's (2013, pp. 130-131) research shows that online intercultural exchanges help enhance the development of intercultural competence of students because 'they can provide learners with the kind of knowledge not usually found in coursebooks or standardized learning materials; they can provoke critical cultural awareness through interactions with "real" informants from the target culture; and they can help make learners aware of cultural differences in communicative practices and pragmatics.'

In addition, Xu's (2013, p. 4) research on globalization, culture and ELT shows that Chinese learners and users of English conceptualize globalization as both international 'mobility' in terms of studying abroad, and social or professional upward 'mobility' in terms of joining social elite groups or seeking promotions. Through globalization, Chinese learners and users of English 'add a global element to their Chinese identities and become Chinese global citizens'. One of the prerequisites of becoming a global citizen is to acquire an international language in order to engage in global interaction. The current *de facto* international language is English. Hence, intercultural communication has been largely mediated through English as an international language (EIL). Sharifian (2009, p. 2) conceptualizes EIL as 'a paradigm for thinking, research and practice', emphasizing that 'EIL calls for a critical revisiting of the notions, analytical tools, approaches and methodologies within the established disciplines.'

Different approaches characterize the research of language acquisition and intercultural communication. Traditional approaches use a number of different theories, for example, 'linguistic competence' (Chomsky, 1965), 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1972), and 'maxims of politeness' (Leech, 1983). There are also macro-cultural approaches: for example, Hall's (1976) 'high-context' cultures where more implicit communication occurs, for example, Chinese, Japanese and Italian cultures, versus 'low-context' cultures

in which things are explained more explicitly, for example, Australian and German cultures, and Hofstede's (2001) 'dimensions of culture', for example, individualism versus collectivism, and long-term orientation versus short-term orientation. In addition, emerging paradigms have also been adopted to analyze intercultural encounters. Such areas of research include the study of varieties of English: World Englishes, and Cultural Linguistics, a branch of linguistics that explores the relationship between language and culture. As far as ELT and intercultural communication research are concerned, O'Dowd (2013, p. 133) suggests that 'online cultural exchanges' in educational contexts present a model that 'focuses not only on the development of learners' linguistic and intercultural competence, but also on developing online literacies necessary to socialize, learn and work in today's information society'. Such 'online literacies' are closely related to metacultural competence, which is the topic that this paper attempts to explore.

Sharifian (2013, pp. 8-9) claims that metacultural competence consists of three elements: conceptual variation awareness, or the awareness that varieties of a language encode different cultural conceptualizations; conceptual explication involving the ability to explain and clarify relevant cultural conceptualizations; and conceptual negotiation, which enable interlocutors to negotiate intercultural meanings.

This paper proposes that students need to develop metacultural writing competence for effective online intercultural communication, and that this competence can be developed through raising the students' awareness of such a competence in their online communication. Xu's (2012) research findings regarding blended teaching and learning in higher education show that students participate more proactively in an e-learning environment than they do in classroom face-to-face interaction. This is because the students' roles change from mere learners to more active 'topic contributors, meaning negotiators, information providers, strategic communicators, and monitors' (Xu, 2012, p. 3). According to Yandell (2013, p. 54), taking more active roles enables students to explore and interrogate 'their own relationships and identities', and the 'social dynamics of the class'. The evolving social dynamics of the class make the development of metacultural writing competence essential for effective online intercultural communication.

Methodology

This paper reports upon research on the intercultural communication among international students, who were taking the course of Managing Intercultural Communication in a university in Australia. This course is offered to both local and international students in a blended mode of classroom face-to-face lectures and seminars, and online computer-mediated communication through Moodle discussion forums. The course is campus-based, in which all students meet face-to-face on a weekly basis during the semester and they also participate in online discussion forums mediated by the course lecturer throughout the semester. Since this paper focuses on online intercultural communication, the research data were collected from online discussion forums. There are two major forums throughout the course. One is an ongoing asynchronous open discussion forum (hereafter referred to as Forum 1), and the other (referred to as Forum

2) is a synchronous discussion forum with specific discussion topics designated for a particular week during the middle of the course. The participants in the course discussion forums include Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Indonesian, Saudi Arabian, and Australian students, as well as students from a number of other nationalities. They are advanced learners and users of English, taking the course as a core unit of their Applied Linguistics degree program.

The purpose of Forum 1 is to create a channel through which the lecturer and the students can communicate about course related issues and subject content knowledge on an ongoing basis. The forum is asynchronous. This allows flexibility and sufficient space for the students to participate in the interaction according to their own pace and needs. The topics for this forum vary from week to week, including questions from the readings, naming and addressing practices in different cultures, politeness across cultures, Leech's maxims of politeness, Hofstede's dimensions of culture, and intercultural communication at work. Throughout the course, the students and the lecturer together produced a total of 89 posts in Forum 1, and the total number of words was 17,841, with each post ranging approximately from a couple of words to 350 words. The average per post was 200 words.

The purpose for Forum 2 is to maximize the students' participation in the discussion of a number of key topics throughout a designated 2-hour synchronous online discussion forum in a week during the middle of the course. The rationale behind this synchronous online discussion forum is that, according to Xu's (2012, p. 3) research findings, students participate more proactively in course related online discussion forums than they do in classroom face-to-face interactions, and that their roles change accordingly from passive learners to active contributors. The discussion topics mostly address Hofstede's work on 'national cultural differences'. Some specific discussion questions include 'do you think Hofstede's work on national cultural differences may lead to cultural stereotyping?' and 'what do you think about Wierzbicka's criticisms about Hofstede's model arguing that it contains Western bias and extreme polarities?' Altogether, 63 posts contributed by both the students and the lecturer were investigated. The total number of words in these posts was 8,567, with approximately 136 words per post.

Data analysis

For the purpose of this paper, data excerpts were selected, which demonstrate the students' metacultural writing competence. Based on Sharifian's (2013, pp. 8-9) definition of metacultural competence, I rename the three components as 1) awareness of intercultural differences, 2) intercultural explanation ability, and 3) intercultural negotiation ability.

Awareness of intercultural differences

Awareness of cultural differences as the first component of metacultural writing competence refers to the awareness that one language can be used in writing by different speech communities to encode and express their respective cultural conceptualizations. Such awareness is illustrated in Example 1, and it can be developed through engaging in written intercultural communication.

Example 1

J (Japanese): When a Korean ferry had rollover accident in April, many students sent massages to their parents from the ferry and they wrote 'I love you'. My question is: in your culture, do you say 'I love you' to your parents?

C (Chinese): In a situation like that, I would say, Mum and Dad, I miss you! ('Love' can be a very strong word in Chinese culture, so we tend to say, I love our country, or I love Beijing etc. for loving people, we have an alternative word, xihuan, similar to 'like' or 'having an affectionate feeling towards').

J: In my culture, 'love' is also a really strong word and we do not really use it (now, I started to wonder when Japanese use 'love'?). But yes, younger generation use it but when they write or say it, they use it in English which is 'love' but not in Japanese. Also, if I were in that situation, I would say 'Mum, Dad, thank you.'

Example 1 shows that the Japanese participant was aware of possible intercultural differences in responding to a given situation. In this example, given that the accident took place in South Korea, and the two online discussion participants are also from East Asia, it is clear that conceptual cultural differences exist, for example, people in crisis may say 'I love you' to their parents, or 'Mum, Dad, thank you', or 'Mum and Dad, I miss you'. In addition, the awareness of such intercultural differences also motivated and triggered the participants to initiate new topics for intercultural communication.

Intercultural explanation ability

Intercultural explanation ability as the second component of metacultural writing competence consists of a conscious effort to clarify in writing relevant conceptualizations that people from different cultures may not be familiar with. Such an ability is based on the awareness of intercultural differences, and it can be developed when appropriate intercultural communication tasks are designed and assigned to students. Example 2 shows how the students develop their intercultural explanation ability to communicate naming conventions across cultures.

Example 2

S (Saudi Arabian): I think our naming conventions do not differ much from other cultures. That being said, we do have some conventions, which I think might be interesting. For example: married males and females who have been blessed with children may be called by their first born in this form: 'father of' or 'mother of' (eldest son or daughter). In my case, my father would be called 'father of Abdulrahman' because I am the eldest son.

A (Australian): Traditionally in Australian-Anglo culture the first name (or Christian name) is the name of an older relative, i.e. Grandfather, Aunt etc. However more recently it is increasingly common for children to be given a unique name, or possibly a name spelled in an unconventional way, for example, Alysyn instead of Alison. This seems to be a trend taken from Hollywood celebrities.

T (Thai): In English, the word 'aunt' normally refers to the sister of your father or mother. However, in Thai, there are separate words for the big sister of your father or mother which is 'Pa'[pǎ:] and the little sister of your father or mother which is 'Na' [ná:]. The terms 'Pa' and 'Na' can be used with not blood related members as well. For instance, when I talk to my mother's colleague, I will use 'Pa' if her colleague is older than my mother or around the same age as my mother. I will use 'Na' if her colleague is not much younger than my mother.

Example 2 demonstrates that the participants were not only aware of cultural differences in naming conventions, but they also developed an explanation ability to make other participants understand what they deemed to be their own culture-specific conventions. In the example, all the participants took advantage of the written medium, for example, they spelt out specific names such as 'Abdulrahman' and 'Alysyn'. The Thai participant even adopted the phonetic alphabet to explain address terms used in Thai culture. This shows that intercultural explanation ability is an important element of metacultural writing competence.

Intercultural negotiation ability

Intercultural negotiation ability as the third component of metacultural competence refers to the ability that participants develop to negotiate intercultural meanings, or to seek clarifications when participants feel that 'there might be more behind the use of a certain expression than is immediately apparent' (Sharifian, 2013, p. 9). Such an ability encompasses the awareness of intercultural differences and explanation ability. Example 3 centers around the negotiation of the expressions 'native speakers' and 'non-native speakers' in terms of whether they have more advantages over each other in intercultural communication and English language teaching.

Example 3

T (Thai): I think native speakers hold more advantages over non-native speakers, particularly during intercultural communication in a language which is not the first language (L1) of some speakers.

A (Australian): I think it's broadly correct that in a debate, discussion or negotiation conducted solely in English, the English L1 speaker is likely to have certain advantages. However I'm not convinced that this necessarily equates to greater power and/or influence in an economic or political sense. I often feel disadvantaged when dealing with people around the world by the fact that I have only one method of effective communication (i.e. English), whereas they may have 2 or 3 languages where they can communicate effectively.

I (Indonesian): Native speakers of English seem to have more benefits than non-native speakers. Even though Kirkpatrick (2007) has clearly argued that native speakers of English are not always better than non-native speakers of English at teaching English, many people, perhaps including myself, are still likely to believe that the native speakers of English are more qualified in teaching English than the non-native speakers of English.

> *C (Chinese): Yes, Kirkpatrick's argument is highly relevant. He seems to be keen on multilingual education. His latest argument is that ELT is not about teaching 'English' to non-native speakers of English, but about teaching different L1 speakers to become multilingual speakers of their L1 plus English.*

> *I: Oh I see. Wow it's quite surprising though. Then, it's not implausible that the variety among many Englishes will lead to mutual unintelligibility just like Latin language :)*

> *C: Yes. Referring back to Kirkpatrick (2007), he also raised the issue of the 'tension' between identity and intelligibility. When people intend to show their 'identity', they tend to speak varieties of English, but when they want to communicate, they would choose to speak a more 'intelligible' variety of English. We cannot underestimate people's ability to switch between different dialects or different varieties of English. For example, a lot of Singaporeans could speak basilect, mesolect, and acrolect of Singaporean English(es). :).*

> *I: Yes, I strongly agree with you. It also possibly prevails towards Broad, General and Cultivated accents in Australian English.*

Example 3 is an extended discussion on the issue of whether native speakers of English have more advantages than non-native speakers of English. The Thai and the Indonesian seem to think that native speakers of English have more advantages than non-native speakers, however, the Australian and the Chinese have managed their counter arguments by either referring to their own experiences and viewpoints or referencing other researchers' views. Such a negotiation ability goes beyond the awareness of intercultural differences and the intercultural explanation ability presented above, as it enables the participants to negotiate and co-construct meanings in writing across cultures to clarify specific arguments and conceptualizations.

Implications for English Language Teaching

Developing metacultural writing competence for online intercultural communication in tertiary e-learning environments has implications for English language teaching, in particular, for students and their lecturers, who engage increasingly in online intercultural communication through writing in English.

First of all, it is not only important for international students with various linguistic and cultural backgrounds to build up their linguistic and communicative competence in English, but they should also develop their bilingual and multilingual metacultural competence. Metacultural competence should be developed alongside the students' linguistic and communicative competence for both intermediate and advanced learners and users of English. The goal of developing metacultural writing competence in the higher education context is to equip international students with sufficient bicultural and multicultural knowledge to engage in online intercultural communication competently. Rather than simply conforming to the cultures of English-speaking countries, international students should become aware of intercultural differences, for example, high-context versus low-context cultures and individualism versus collectivism, maintain

their own cultural traditions and identities while learning English for intercultural communication.

Secondly, metacultural writing competence does not only involve students' bicultural and multicultural knowledge, but also their intercultural presence and academic stance through intercultural explanation and negotiation. International students may come from either high-context cultures, in which they tend to rely on implied meanings and indirect statements, or low-context cultures, in which they tend to rely on explicit meanings and direct statements. They should develop their metacultural writing competence by enhancing their awareness of intercultural differences and improving their abilities to explain and negotiate across cultures. One of the effective ways is to participate proactively in online discussion forums to boost their intercultural presence among themselves and put forward their academic stance through active engagement in intercultural explanation and negotiation.

In addition, to maximize participation in online intercultural communication, international students, who are increasingly accustomed to social media networking such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Viber and WeChat, should become aware that metacultural writing competence goes beyond mere online chatting. Advanced-level competence is essentially about developing critical thinking skills, and acquiring intercultural knowledge so as to engage in deep-learning through collaboration, explanation, and negotiation among international students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It is worth noting that metacultural writing competence is not exclusively for advanced learners and users of English. If online discussion forums are properly set up and scaffolded by the lecturers, they can serve as an effective means for intermediate learners and users of English to develop their metacultural writing competence.

Developing metacultural writing competence also has pedagogical implications for teachers in the ELT profession in multilingual and multicultural societies, for example, they may design discussion topics that are relevant to their students' respective cultures in addition to the cultures associated traditionally with English-speaking countries. They may also nurture their students' critical thinking skills by exploring controversial issues: whether native speakers have more advantages over non-native speakers of English. They may also encourage their students to use local varieties of English: Australian English, Indonesian English and Chinese English, to renegotiate, and co-construct their relations and identities in online intercultural communication.

Conclusion

The academic world is hybrid and dynamic, particularly in the online learning environment. Presenting relevant data analysis, this paper has explained metacultural writing competence, and argued that it is essential that students become aware of differences across cultures, and develop their own intercultural explanation and negotiation abilities for online intercultural communication. In conclusion, developing metacultural writing competence alongside linguistic and communicative competence is highly relevant to English language teaching in multilingual and multicultural societies,

with significant implications for international students and teachers in the ELT profession worldwide.

About the Author

Zhichang Xu is a lecturer in the English as an International Language program at Monash University. He has a disciplinary background in Applied Linguistics and Intercultural Education. His research areas include ELT, World Englishes, and intercultural education.

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