

Computer-Mediated Communication: promoting learner autonomy and intercultural understanding at secondary level

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The use of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has been hailed as a solution to the problem of access to native speakers for language learners. This project was devised to investigate whether regular and structured use of email, here via a bulletin board, might enhance learners' study of French, with regard to developing learner autonomy and intercultural understanding. School-age learners of French and English in four countries (Belgium, England, France and Senegal) were placed in groups of about six, and encouraged to communicate both freely with each other and in response to certain stimuli. An analysis of the discourse via the online messages written by participants finds a high level of response, with learners exercising autonomy in a variety of ways. Learners use both their native tongue (L1) and the foreign language (L2) to communicate, without teacher intervention, with peers in other cultural contexts, and there is evidence to suggest that participation in E-group learning of this kind could develop learners' intercultural understanding.

INTRODUCTION

Use of email, online chat and texting has transformed the way people, and young people in particular, communicate with each other. It is unsurprising, therefore, that foreign languages teachers should be interested in the potential applications of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), both for its potential appeal to young people accustomed to using technology to communicate with their peers, and for its potential in allowing people from all parts of the world to communicate quickly in one-to-one and one-to-many situations. Indeed the use of the internet has been hailed as a potential solution to the problem of access to native speakers. (See for example the National Curriculum for England (1999: 17) which suggests, 'Pupils could communicate by email with speakers of the target language, including those in more distant countries'). For most teachers, access to hardware and computer literacy among young people are less challenging issues than they were a decade ago, but finding the most effective ways of using computers for learning remains a challenge. Research papers focusing on the ways in which the use of CMC for foreign language learning has impacted on HE and adult education programmes

over the past decade are numerous (e.g. Appel, 1999; Truscott and Morley, 2001; Warschauer and Kern, 2000), although investigation of the pedagogical gains from using CMC with secondary school students of foreign languages is less common. This paper describes a project using CMC, developed with a view to improving this group of learners' intercultural understanding and their ability to operate more autonomously as foreign language learners.

BACKGROUND

Computer-Mediated Communication ('communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers' Herring, 1996: 1), can be either one-to-one or one-to-many, and synchronous (taking place in real time) or asynchronous (messages are read and responded to at a later point in time). The project described here is an example of one-to-many, asynchronous CMC. Over the past two decades the large number of empirical studies on CMC and language learning, for the most part conducted within the context of ESL or adult learning, have shifted away from 'learners' interaction *with* computers to interaction with other human beings *via* the computer' (Warschauer and Kern, 2000: 11), and so more sociocognitive approaches (which emphasise the social aspect of language acquisition) have recently been under investigation.

There are a number of features which make CMC a good tool for language learning. First of all, both synchronous and asynchronous CMC offer access to a number of native speakers of the foreign language in both one-to-one and one-to-many situations, and with it not only an opportunity to read and write the language, but to develop intercultural understanding (see Appel, 1999; Müller-Hartmann, 2000; Warschauer, 1996).

Certain features have been noted when CMC is used in one-to-many situations: there tends to

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be more equal participation than in face-to-face discussions, with outspoken students less likely to dominate (Kern, 1995; Sproull and Kiesler, 1991; Warschauer, 1996); as far as linguistic gains are concerned, CMC writing is more complex than face-to-face communication (Warschauer, 1996), yet written email is more informal and conversational than pen and paper written language, and so is a useful bridge between spoken and written language (Warschauer, 2001). In addition, several studies have shown extensive incorporation of new syntactical patterns and lexical chunks (Warschauer, 2001).

With asynchronous CMC in both one-to-one and one-to-many situations, the language used is more complex than oral talk, as there is more time for composing it (Warschauer, 1999). In addition, as a whole corpus of messages is available to be re-read at any time, corrections can be made to others' language, and the whole body of messages are there for perusal and manipulation. Students are able to 'notice input' from others' messages and incorporate it into their own messages (Warschauer, 1999).

With both asynchronous and synchronous CMC, users interact without the benefit of paralinguistic clues, and in one-to-many situations there is often a great deal of ambiguity about who is addressing whom. The issue of 'addressivity' (Werry, 1996), therefore, becomes more important. It is necessary to present oneself, to use the first and second person pronouns, more than is the case in speaking or writing (Yates, 1996), and this offers useful practice of these written forms.

Many of these findings have potential application for the secondary sector, where few studies have been conducted. One interesting study conducted by Tella (1992) into the effects of a semester-long exchange between high school students in Finland and England via email echoed some of the findings above, as well as offering further insights. Here, the emphasis in the classroom shifted towards more learner-centred pedagogy; there was a shift from form to content through the practice of language in open-ended situations; and there were instances of collaborative learning in terms of help with reading strategy and language production.

Salaberry (2001) argues that previous research on the efficacy of the use of technological tools for pedagogical purposes has focused too much on the technical capabilities of the tools and not on the pedagogical aims of using the technology. He also argues that the prime research focus should now be on the interactions between learners as a result of using the technology. With these issues in mind, the project described here explores two key concepts touched upon in Tella's findings (1992). These are key issues for foreign language teachers in the UK today, namely, offering opportunities for learner autonomy and developing students' intercultural learning.

TWO KEY CONCEPTS

1. Developing learners' autonomous use of language

Developing learner autonomy is a key area for foreign language teachers, for unless learners are able to use the language for real communicative purpose and independently of the teacher, we are unlikely to produce learners who can maximise their potential. Macaro (1997) places emphasis on autonomy as a way of 'developing potential' in the learner and provides a framework of 'functional autonomy' which includes:

- *autonomy of language competence*, where learners use their L2 without the help of a competent L2 speaker (usually the teacher);
- *autonomy of language learning competence* where there is reproduction and transference of L2 language skills;
- *autonomy of choice and action* where learners are involved in decisions about their learning; this may be in how, or on what topic, they might work, or perhaps in the establishment of their own ground rules. (Macaro, 1997: 170-1)

It is clear that CMC with native speakers might offer learners the chance to use their L2 independently of their teachers, using the language learned in genuinely communicative contexts.

2. Developing learners' intercultural learning

The teaching of culture imposes a number of demands on the MFL teacher. First is the nature of culture itself, which, far from being static, changes over time and embodies a number of beliefs, meanings and behaviours within any given country (Byram, 1997). Second is the very real danger of stereotyping, where our cultural influences lead us to impose our own meanings on to other cultures (see Kramsch, 1998). Third is the danger that teaching will be focused on the dominant culture, which Byram (2002) highlights in a recent essay in the *Language Learning Journal*:

It is not an oversimplification to say that often young people learn the 'French' of a nation called 'The French' and that it is only after the age of compulsory education that the few young people still studying French begin to understand the complexity of language, people and nation-state. (Byram, 2002: 43)

In addition, Byram (1997; 2002) suggests that MFL education has a wider role to play in delivering moral and political education, because of those disciplines' particular relationship with the development of intercultural competence. He refers to Doyé (1993) who cites Gagel's (1983) distinction between three 'orientations', which all young people should be offered during their education:

- 1) *Cognitive orientation*: the acquisition of knowledge about and understanding of other countries, cultures and societies.

"key issues ... offering opportunities for learner autonomy and developing students' intercultural learning"

- 2) *Evaluative orientation*: reflection on social norms, respect for the norms of other societies and an evaluation of them in an unprejudiced way.
- 3) *Action orientation*: instillation of a disposition to engage with others ['others' for foreign language teaching are usually those from another culture or society]. (Byram, 2002: 46)

Many secondary MFL teachers aim to encapsulate and exemplify all of the above in their lessons, but the teaching of culture at secondary level seems to remain problematic (see Wright, 1996). In practice, perhaps because of time and syllabus constraints and lack of contact with native speakers, developing cultural awareness is often limited to imparting information about the history and social structures of the target country, and an attempt to represent 'everyday life' (Byram, 1997). Learners need to be able to consider the experiences and perspectives of people in other countries and communities at first hand if they are to 'test' the information they have been given about the cultural traits of the speakers of the language they are learning. CMC can provide regular access to native speakers and a perspective beyond that of the dominant culture, by means of easier access to all parts of the world where the foreign language is spoken. Contact does not necessarily lead to cultural learning (see Belz, 2002; O'Dowd, 2003), but it can foster positive attitudes as well as supporting students' knowledge about one another's cultures (Müller-Hartmann, 2000).

RESEARCH QUESTION

With Salaberry's comments (2001) on the need for a clear pedagogical focus in CMC investigations in mind, this study was designed to examine the ways in which use of CMC in asynchronous one-to-many situations might develop intercultural awareness and learner autonomy.

The key research question was: How does use of asynchronous CMC by groups of learners of secondary age from England, France, Senegal and Belgium allow for the development of learner autonomy and intercultural learning?

The approach adopted was influenced by sociocultural perspectives of the role of ICT in L2 learning, deriving from the concepts of Vygotsky (1962), for whom the key to effective learning was the interaction between teacher and learner and between learner and other learners. In this project we were interested in the learning that occurred when students interacted in groups, with L1 speakers playing the role of 'expert' that is more traditionally associated with the classroom teacher.

THE TIC-TALK PROJECT

PARTICIPANTS

The Tic-Talk project (named to incorporate both English and French, the French for ICT being 'Technologies de l'Information et de la

Communication') was undertaken by staff at the University of Cambridge, working with a team of teachers in six secondary schools: three were in England, one in France, one in Belgium and one in Senegal.

The English schools had expressed an interest in working on an ICT project; the French school was a partner school of one of these; while the schools in Belgium and Senegal were invited to join the project through links with members of the team. The 152 learners, whose ages ranged from 14 to 18, with most around 15 years-old, were assigned to 24 groups. All completed a questionnaire, giving their name, age, sex and interests, with teachers providing a general language proficiency level, and this information was used in composing the groups. Wherever possible each group contained learners with common language level, shared interests, one person from each school taking part, and a mix of sexes and ages.

THE TECHNOLOGY

An electronic bulletin board, WebBoard, licensed by the university for educational purposes, was set up for the project. This was a closed board accessed via the internet, where the members of each group could communicate with each other, uploading their own messages and reading and responding to others' messages. Groups had access to their messages only, while staff from the research team and teachers from the participating schools had access to all messages posted, so as to facilitate control and evaluation of the project. All learners had given permission for their contributions to be read by the team.

Learners were given access to ICT in school once a week, with teachers available to answer questions, and logged on to their prospective groups for discussion. During an eight-week pilot, involving 115 learners from the same participating schools, it was discovered that learners experienced some technical difficulties during the pilot, so for the main project each student was given clear instructions via a diagrammatical booklet, in addition to explanations from teachers on how to use the WebBoard to post messages and upload images. The main project ran for ten weeks, and in all over 2,000 messages were posted.

ACTIVITIES

These were devised in face-to-face meetings and online discussions between class teachers and the research team. Given the differences in pedagogical contexts and curricula, as well as our wish to explore ways in which learners express their autonomy, a loose rather than tight format for the discussion groups was agreed. However, we recognised equally that a framework for the interactions was likely to ensure better learning outcomes and a more equal distribution of L1 and L2 responses. To stimulate discussion and attempt a balance in the use of French and English, the first activity or "Strand", as it was referred to during

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the project, required the learners to use their first language (L1) to discuss pictures and texts. These were posted each week on the WebBoard by the Tic-Talk team of teachers. Later in the project, learners uploaded pictures they had found themselves. The pictures chosen by the team were intended to represent images common to all learners, which might encourage discussion. So, for example, the first picture posted was a still from the American TV series *Friends*, the second a portrait of the rapper Eminem, another was a discussion text on ICT's potential for learning. Images uploaded by learners included sporting activities and some current affairs, such as images associated with the 11 September bombings.

The second Strand took the form of an open discussion in the L2 of any issues learners wanted to raise, mainly focusing on interests and events in their own daily lives.

The third Strand required the group to participate in a collaborative exercise, which was the production of a group poem. Learners were expected to respond to the three Strands at least once a week, facilitated by teachers who accompanied their groups to their respective schools' ICT facilities.

Learners had no personal information about other members of their group. This was an attempt to encourage them to find out more about the others present.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Many published studies in this field tend to focus on the most quantifiable and easily measured aspects of CMC, e.g. the amount of communication in face-to-face and computer-assisted discussion, the linguistic features of online discussion 'rather than qualitatively analysing how and in what ways students negotiate meaning with each other' (Warschauer and Kern, 2000: 15). However, the prime advantage for the researcher of asynchronous CMC is that it offers the chance to freeze individual exchanges and engage with them epistemically (Warschauer, 1997).

Bearing the above in mind, our qualitative analysis of the groups does not attempt to count the number of particular interactions (difficult in any case given the freedom offered to groups to engage how they wanted), but rather we attempt to capture the discourse across the groups by presenting 'snapshots' (Lofland, 1971). To come to these 'snapshots' we used a grounded approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), reading and rereading the data, categorising key aspects then selecting four as most representative of the overall discourse in terms of nature of contribution. The 'snapshots' allow us to freeze discourse and analyse it in depth, although we are aware that this very qualitative presentation makes any generalisations we might attempt very difficult. We present chunks of discourse rather than selecting individual statements from the data strands in order to allow the reader to see the ways in which the

interactions developed. Aspects of Macaro's (1997) framework of 'functional autonomy' and Doyé's (1993) 'orientations' are used in the analysis. In brackets after each message is the school of the learner, using the code B = Belgian school; E = English school; F = French school; S = Senegalese school. Pseudonyms are used throughout. All transcripts are verbatim, including use of punctuation, upper/lower case, emoticons, acronyms and shortenings.

DATA STRANDS

Example 1 Group 8 Strand 2

*Hi! It's Amandine again! am I alone in this team?
I will talk about me. I'm a bit tall for my age:
1m70 for 14.5 years old.
I love having fun!
See you soon and write me back please!!!
Amandine (Amandine, F)*

*salut tu dis que tt le monde pensent que t as 16
ans ou 17 and pkoi???????*
socio (Marc, S)

*Hi Marc!
How are you?
You ask me why people think I'm older; I think
it's because I'm taller than other girls of my age,
and because I'm older in my head than the other!
And now, what about you?
Where do you come from, How old are you, How
are you (Physiquement et moralement)
i'm fed up to talk in English!
Bon à + ! Je t'embrasse
Bisous!
Amandine (Amandine, F)*

*BONJOUR JE M'APPELLE WILL, JE'ADORE LE
RUGBY, je jouer a la dimanche et5 lundi et
metrerdi (Will, E)*

*Hi! Will!
How are you?
It's Amandine!
Could you tell me about you please?
Last week I was in holidays, at the beginning of
the week I went to my cousin's Julie she is super!
She is 15 years old! And for you, boys, she is
beautiful!
So kisses
Amandine (Amandine, F)*

*Bonjour, ma frncies eat tres mauvais, je adore le
rugby, ta cousin l'air sympa
i like cheese (Will, E)*

*Hi Will!
How are you?
We just have a big test: 4 hours in french, 2 hours
in history, and 2 hours in maths... horrible!! What
do you think about France and French people?*

"we attempt to capture the discourse across the groups by presenting 'snapshots' (Lofland, 1971)"

*This question is for everybody!
My friend who is next to me asks me if you know
Nick because you have the same level in French!!
And she asks me if you are beautiful so: Are you
beautiful?
So bye and see you soon.
So kisses.
Amandine. (Amandine, F)*

*Hi, Will!
Today, we are the 17 of December and the last
time I saw you on the net was in November and at
the beginning!
WHERE ARE YOU? Will, please, write to me!
Lots of kisses for you!
Amandine (Amandine, F)*

Example 2 Group 22 Strand 2

*Hello Charlotte
How are you? I've got two sisters and two
brothers. Their names are Grégory, Mélissa,
Sandrine; Christophe. I've got two dogs, two
horses and two fish.
My mother is a housewife and my father is an
environmentalist.
J'apprend L'allemand et l'anglais.
Bye (Sophie, F)*

*Bonjour Sophie!
J'espere tout est bien en France. Ici, c'est froid et
il pleut!!! Ma soeur s'appelle Lucy et mes freres
s'appellent Oliver et David. Mon pere est notaire,
et ma mere est vendeuse, dans la pharmacie ou je
travail Samedis. En anglais, nous disons, "My
mum is a housewife". J'aime ecoute de la musique,
particulierement, <>. Mon frere (Oliver) est dans
le nord d'Angleterre parce que il est a
l'universite! ma soeur travaille dans un grande
supermarche s'appelle <>. As-tu visite
Angleterre? Je suis allée en France deux fois.
J'attends ton courrier!!!
A bientôt pour maintenant
Charlotte (Charlotte, E)*

*Hello Charlotte
To answer your question, I've already been to
Great Britain with the school. It was last year. I
visited Bath, London, Brighton, Ringwood. I went
in my pen-friend school. I Like a little bit Great
Britain. It's cold in France.
Bye
Sophie (Sophie, F)*

[Later in same group]

*Hello Vanessa How are you?
In Formu11, my favorite pilote is Coultard and
Hakinen. I hate Shoumacher. I live in France.
What are the names of your cat?
Bye
Sophie (Sophie, F)*

[Same day]

*Hello every one
How are you? Me fine
What do you want for Christmas? I don't know
what I want.
I have a pen friend. She lives in France too but
she lives in department who is call AIN and
me, I live in a department who is call LA
MANCHE.
What do your parents do for living?
My mother is a Housewife and my father is an
environmentalist.
Charlotte and Loubna, what are your favorite
sport? (I don't write Vanessa because I know
your favorite sport). (Sophie, F)*

*Hello Sophie!! i'm fine and you?
COULTARDE AND HAKKINEN??? they are
good pilotes but .. ME ..i préfère shummaker (mais
bon chacun ses gout)
I have got a femelle cat and her baby they
name's: Noisette and Ciboulette!! Do you have
any cat or dog??
BYE (Vanessa, B)*

Example 3 Group 11 Strand 1

*Salut,
J'aime bien cette image car elle est marrante.
L'homme qui veut être heureux demande à un
couple de retraités comment il faut faire, je
trouve que c'est distrayant. J'aime bien aussi le
genre du dessin: il est dessiné d'un coup de
crayon fin mais qui n'est pas fatiguant pour les
yeux. On a plaisir à le regarder. Dans le dessin,
le couple est tout tremblant: c'est très bien
représenté et le dessinateur nous le fait bien
parvenir. (Virginie, F)*

*J'aime bien cette image car elle montre un jeune
qui agresse ses parents, ce qui montre que les
jeunes se "rebiffe" contre leurs parents. Je pense
aussi que cette image que nous, collégiens et
lycéens nous voulons faire les études les moins
longues(ne pas nous casser la tête, en gros!).
(Mathieu, B)*

*HI it' Youssou this photo is very funny. The boy
which is very interesting because he represents
very well the teenagers, he is very independent
very cool. The parents are also a symbol of the
society, they are like lost, they don't know what
to do. So I think that this photo is very realistic.
(Youssou, S)*

*It's a funny picture which you can apply to
England as well as France. The boy is
challenging his parents authority, something all
teenagers do.
Emma (Emma, E)*

Example 4 Group 15 Strand 3

PLEASE HELP ME TO WRITE MY POEM!!!
(Romain, F)

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

DEVELOPING LEARNER AUTONOMY

Throughout the exchanges there is evidence of learners exercising ‘autonomy of choice and action’ (Macaro, 1997). The project gave learners the freedom to decide, amongst other things, on: the language used (L1, L2 or a mixture); the nature of language used (e.g. the amount of ‘netspeak’; accuracy; punctuation); the length of responses; topics; the frequency of messages; to whom they addressed themselves in the group; the images they uploaded. It is clear from the examples above that learners had ‘autonomy of language competence’ in that, although at times reverting to L1, they were using their L2 free from teacher support and intervention. In some cases learners freely requested linguistic or topic-related help from their group partners or offered them help. There is evidence, too, of ‘autonomy of language learning competence’, for example where learners were using language learning skills, such as using context and clues to interpret meaning, when presented with authentic messages in the L2.

Will (Example 1 above) provides a good example of a learner exercising autonomy of language competence and language learning competence. Although at first glance there seems little to praise in the quality of his French, he has read and understood Amandine’s comments about her cousin’s good looks, and is able to reply: ‘ta cousin l’air sympa’. Despite his inaccuracy, he demonstrates comprehension skills, is drawing on previously learned language “l’air”, and using correct grammatical forms (feminine possessive form).

There are also examples of explicit teaching, where participants seem to learn as a result of others’ guidance. In Example 2 above, Charlotte corrects Sophie on her use of ‘housework’ instead of ‘housewife’. Sophie then uses the term correctly during later interactions in her group, following the useful learning strategy of using the correct form often quickly in order to assimilate it.

For the most part, learners responded to the content of the message, rather than adopting linguistic forms used earlier by other learners. However, groups did tend to follow the ‘addressivity’ conventions of the first few learners who logged messages. This meant, for example, that strings of messages went unaddressed altogether, at other times whole strings were prefixed with the same form (see ‘Hello’ in Example 2).

As the audience for their messages was unclear, learners adopted a number of strategies to encourage responses from others. Sometimes they addressed specific people in the group, who had

said something that interested them. At other times learners tried to get as many others as possible involved by asking general questions or addressing individuals who have ‘disappeared’ (see Amandine Example 1: ‘Am I alone in this team?’ ‘Where are you? Will please write to me’). Sophie (Example 2) uses sophisticated communication techniques by asking two named members of the group for their favourite sport, whilst reassuring another that she has already internalised an earlier message where this information was provided. A question put directly to a particular member of a group tended to be most successful in eliciting a reply.

First and second person pronouns were used often, as reported above (Yates, 1996). Particularly useful from a languages teacher’s point of view was the practice they had in forming questions (something which learners may find difficult) largely as a result of seeking to identify the other learners in their group.

Whilst it is difficult to gauge the exact extent of learners’ linguistic gains, they were reading what others have to say, responding directly to what had gone before and using their L2 autonomously. In addition, they were exposed to a far wider range of linguistic contexts than they usually are in many classrooms. The different discourses that went on in the groups included: flirting, arguing, agreeing, telling off, bullying, and selling even!

AUTONOMY OF CHOICE AND ACTION

Despite instructions for Strands 1 and 2 to be conducted in the L1 and L2 respectively, once the project was underway learners began to use whichever language they wished to communicate in, as can be seen above. Learners from all contexts codeswitched, like Vanessa (Example 2), or Amandine and Will (Example 1). The French speakers appeared to make more of an effort to engage in English, even when addressing other native speakers of French. Despite our efforts to group learners according to language level, French speakers seemed on the whole more confident and comfortable using English, with their messages tending to be longer and more accurate.

Some ‘netspeak’ was used, more often by boys, such as Marc (Example 1) who uses the forms ‘tt le monde’ (*tout le monde*) and ‘pkoi’ (*pourquoi*). The most common forms, ‘@+++’ (*à plus tard*) ‘tt le monde’ (*tout le monde*) ‘c’ (*c’est*) ‘dsl’ (*désolé*) were used by French speakers with ‘u’ (*you*) used frequently by English speakers. This did not seem to hinder communication in any way. Learners might have been using contextual clues to work out what these might mean, or might have ignored them as they did not understand them and focused on reading for gist. Both are evidence of language learning skills. A few learners used emoticons (see Romain Example 4). Learners usually used appropriate capitalisation, reasonably accurate spelling, clear punctuation, and wrote literate messages. The discussion in Strand 1 was often

“learners were using language learning skills, such as ... context and clues ... when presented with authentic messages in the L2”

written using more fully constructed sentences, with correct spelling and punctuation (see Example 3).

The rationale for Strand 3, the production of a group poem, was to attempt to establish group cohesion through a creative activity, focusing on aspects of nationality. Arguably, it met with little success in terms of group participation as a whole, with only six groups producing anything. More often than not, one or two learners, nearly always French speakers, attempted to get others to contribute ideas without success (see Romain Example 4). It is possible that this task was not well-structured enough; equally it might be that, given the option, learners were simply not interested enough by this task to attempt it.

DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

There were a number of features of the project which gave learners a real impetus to engage with others, and so developed their 'action orientation' (Gagel, 1983). The first was the need to establish the group's identity. That there were approximately five other people who spoke French and English, living in four different countries, was all that learners knew about the membership of their group. When learners read a message posted by a group member, the name of the sender and the time and date it was posted were given. Initially, therefore, as seen in Example 1 above, learners have to ask a lot of questions to establish group composition, which includes a great deal of personal identification language. Things that would be immediately obvious in face-to-face encounters, such as sex, were not necessarily clear here, which was a spur to communication. There was also a good deal of confusion over nationality, with learners unsure which of them was a native speaker of which language.

The element of flirtation and the ability to play around with identity, not possible in the same way in face-to-face encounters, seemed to engage learners. Group members spent a good deal of time in Strand 2 establishing physical features. Amandine asks Will if he's 'beautiful' (Example 1) and this kind of playful flirtation is a feature of a number of boy/girl interactions. Hidden identities allow for a good deal of playfulness, where learners carry pet names and follow through on themes throughout their interactions. Establishing family, pets, hobbies and visits abroad comprised a good deal of the initial interactions in Strand 2.

The discussion themes were also effective in stimulating engagement with others. Different types of stimuli were chosen by the team in order to trigger different types of intercultural responses. The first type sought to promote intercultural bonding through consensual images, for example, using an image from the sitcom *Friends*. The majority of the participants had watched it, and nearly everyone had opinions on the programme or, if they did not, this in itself

stimulated discussion. A second type of stimulus was used to elicit cross-cultural generational identity, for example, a cartoon drawing of a 'punk' student whose parents are exhorting him to complete his studies, as discussed by the learners above in Example 3. This leads to exchanges in groups about the effectiveness of the drawing itself, discussion about the stereotyping of young people, about the nature and desirability of parental involvement, the nature of the baccalauréat and much more. A third type of stimulus was used to explore cultural differences of opinion through controversial topics. Here, for example, the picture of Eminem led to discussion about violence and women's portrayal in videos, as well as comment on the artist, and about music in general.

There were many instances throughout of learners giving explicit teaching to other learners, either on points of language accuracy as seen above or, more commonly, offering information about their countries. For example, in other groups learners discuss the differences between education post-16 in France and Belgium or the age one can ride a motorcycle, with learners from the same country disagreeing on the details of this law. Learners share thoughts about what other countries might be like and give details about their own countries.

Discussion of social norms is common to all groups. As seen above, learners discuss free-time interests, how they spend weekends and holidays, exams and school, sometimes explicitly comparing what has been said by others with their own context. However, of the three categories in Gagel's (1983) categorisation, the evaluative aspect was less explicitly evident in the exchanges.

Developing understanding of how others view the world through the written words they use, especially when these are in a different language, is likely to be a subtle and oblique process. Learners may well have developed a number of implicit understandings as a result of participation in the project. One of the stimulus pictures used in Strand 1 was of a heavily tattooed and pierced person. French speakers were more likely than English speakers to say that they disliked the look, qualified with phrases such as: '*C'est son choix*', '*Ça c'est peut-être son truc*' and '*Chacun est libre de faire ce qu'il veut*'. (See Vanessa Example 2 above in a different context '*mais bon chacun ses goûts*'). The English learners who commented were less likely to use such qualifiers. As a result, it might be that some implicit understanding about how French speakers view the world (which may or may not be true, of course) has been developed in the English participants in the discourse. Discussion in class where learners share their understandings or hypotheses, which they can then go on to test in future interactions, would seem to be a way of developing learning further through CMC.

“Developing understanding of how others view the world through ... written words ... in a different language, is likely to be a subtle and oblique process”

CONCLUSION

Making use of secondary learners' computer literacy and appetite for communication with other young people via the internet seems an obvious way for foreign language teachers to develop the linguistic and cultural skills of their learners. What remains a challenge is to exploit the technology and most students' desire to use it so that they, functioning as independent and motivated learners, are actively engaged in the learning process.

Although the qualitative nature of this analysis makes it difficult to generalise, we would say that there is evidence that this project using asynchronous one-to-many CMC achieved a number of things. It exposed learners to a range of discourse to which they would usually never have access; it encouraged them to read and respond to messages, thereby developing their ability to interact independently of the teacher; it developed their intercultural learning in a number of explicit and, we would argue, implicit ways (through reading genuine examples of foreign language). The project orientated learners towards communicating with speakers of other languages, allowed them to compare their own norms with others' and provided both linguistic and cultural knowledge.

As far as autonomy was concerned, learners chose what to respond to, what and how much to say, when to use the foreign language and when not. They were free to use 'netspeak' where they wished and they operated independently of the teacher, using varying levels of interlanguage for genuine communication. There were examples of learners learning from each other after explicit recasting of incorrect forms and there was exposure to a wide range of linguistic forms. Pupils asked a lot of questions and had opportunity to practise these forms. However, this increased autonomy meant that some pupils dominated the discourse and others had little to say, and it also meant that some tasks did not get completed when learners chose not to do so.

In terms of pedagogical approaches there are many questions raised by the study:

- How might teachers enable learners to reflect critically on their learning via CMC interaction, so as to develop their intercultural learning and autonomous use of language?
- Should teachers use the interactions (for example, as downloaded text) for more directed language work in the classroom, and, if so, how might this happen?
- How might activities and groups be refined to maximise the involvement of all participants?
- Where on the continuum between fully directed tasks and complete learner autonomy does good learning lie?

The team is continuing to develop this project with secondary learners using asynchronous one-to-

many CMC, involving more schools (for example a bilingual school in Canada), and refining activities and analysis in an attempt to shed light on the above questions.

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