Computer-mediated Communication: Texts and Strategies

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ABSTRACT
This paper considers evidence of the collaborative construction of texts and the use of communication strategies in asynchronous computer-mediated exchanges. A classroom model of communicative competence (Savignon, 1983, 1997) provides the theoretical framework for discussion. The data consist of two bulletin board discussions between a class of German students of English in a Gymnasium and a class of US students of German in a Midwestern high school. The discussions were analyzed for evidence of the collaborative construction of text and context (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992) and strategies used to sustain the collaboration. The analysis illustrates the cohesion of the postings on both a micro- and a macrolevel. The texts also offer evidence of participant use of strategies to mitigate potential conflict. As an opportunity for the interactive construction of both text and context, computer-mediated communication (CMC) of the kind documented in this pilot study would appear to have potential for promoting intercultural exchange and participation in the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning essential to the development of communicative competence. Analysis of such intercultural exchanges may also shed light on the process of communicative norm negotiation and stabilization.

KEYWORDS
Collaborative Text Construction, Communication Strategies, Asynchronous Computer-mediated Communication

INTRODUCTION
From an early focus in the 1960s on sentence-level syntax, research in what is widely referenced as “native” language development has come increasingly to be concerned with discourse-level analysis of negotiation in defined contexts of situation. Research in second or foreign language learning has similarly expanded its focus to encompass the negotiation of meaning in culturally and socially mediated contexts. These contexts now include electronic communication environments. This pilot study looks at second language learning and peer collaboration in bulletin board discussions as an example of asynchronous intercultural computer-mediated communication (CMC).

Initially, asynchronous CMC was seen to be a much faster form of the old-
fashioned letter, or snail mail. Today, however, CMC has evolved as a genre of its own. Though in some ways a hybrid of spoken and written language, as suggests the very use of the terms chat and discussion to characterize written interaction (Murray, 1985; Uhlino, 1994; Pellettieri, 2000), the medium has its own discourse features. These features will vary according to the type of communication that is chosen, and their emergence will undoubtedly influence human communication more broadly in the years to come.

Since the late 1970s, a meaning-based perspective on language development has transformed underlying notions of language teaching in many ways. Use of the term communicative competence (Savignon, 1971, 1972) to represent an ability to engage in what would come to be termed the “interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning” (Breen & Candlin, 1980) was influential in reframing language development and language use to include functions as well as forms. Subsequent contributions to both the theory and practice of communicative language teaching by applied linguists such as Widdowson (1978), Canale and Swain (1980), and Savignon (1983) challenged the prevailing view of language ability as consisting of four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and components (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) and encouraged teachers, curriculum designers and test developers to consider the discoursal and sociolinguistic features of language use. Today, texts and contexts (Halliday, 1978; see below) are at the center of discussions of language learning.

**COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION (CMC)**

For those who have access to and know how to use them, computers have definitively redefined some of our most common communicative activities. In language learning and teaching, as in other pursuits, there is considerable debate concerning the best ways to use the new technology (e.g., see Bush, 1989; Herron, 1996; Kern, 1996; Warschauer, 1995; Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Kinginger, 2000; Musumeci, 2002). In contrast to pre-network computer-assisted language learning (CALL), the theoretical foundations for network-based language teaching (NBLT) are social as well as cognitive. While both involve interaction, the interaction in CALL is with a computer; in NBLT, the interaction is with people. The distinction is important for SLA research (Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

Uses of NBLT have focused primarily on creating discourse communities. Brammerts (1996), for example, describes the creation of the International E-Mail Tandem Network, a project funded by the European Union that involves universities from more than 10 countries. Developed to promote “autonomous, cooperative, and intercultural learning” (p. 121), it constitutes an extension of the tandem learning initiated in the 1970s in an effort to unite many states in a multicultural, multilingual Europe. Pairs of learners from different language backgrounds create a “learning partnership” in the pursuit of the mutual development of both communicative and intercultural competence. The network has expanded to include a number of bilingual subnets (e.g., Danish-German, French-
English, German-Arabic), each with a bilingual forum to provide an opportunity for questions and discussion (see also Wolff, 1994).

**STRATEGIC COMPETENCE**

The concept of strategic competence is an essential component of communicative competence. Drawing on the Savignon (1972) study of classroom learners, Canale and Swain (1980) defined strategic competence as the ability to compensate for lack of vocabulary or an incomplete acquisition of morphosyntactic rules. Communication strategies have since come to be defined more broadly. They highlight the interactive nature of all successful communication, in first as well as in second language use (e.g., see Duranti & Goodwin, 1992). Irrespective of overall competence, a speaker/writer needs strategies to cope with any number of potential limitations, including unfamiliarity with—or lack of experience in—a given context, uncertainty as to participant roles, and impairment of language skills due to physical or emotional factors. For a listener/reader similar conditions can apply. Perhaps a text is incoherent or simply assumes unfamiliar linguistic or background knowledge. For any number of reasons, strategies such as guessing, circumlocution, or requesting clarification can be useful. In recognition of their importance, communication strategies now figure prominently in didactic materials and guides for language learning (Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002).

Less experienced users of a language, in particular, need strategies to cope with unfamiliar structures or lexical items as well as with matters pertaining to appropriacy and overall text organization. Compared with face-to-face communication, not only does asynchronous CMC allow more time for the expression or interpretation of meaning, but the written nature of CMC necessitates strategies to compensate for the lack of nonverbal cues as well as suprasegmentals like tone or intonation. Thus, strategic competence in CMC includes the development of learning strategies as well as communication strategies and, as holds true in other modes of communication, is inextricably tied to the development of grammatical, discoursal, and sociolinguistic or sociocultural features of communicative competence (Savignon, 1983, 1997, 2002).

As teachers, our goal is to give learners the tools they need to think and to learn independently, to discover their style of learning, and to take responsibility for that learning. CMC projects are claimed to encourage such responsibility. Participants in CMC have been seen to take an active role in discourse management (Butler, 1992; Beauvois, 1992, 1997; Chun, 1994). As they interpret texts and, in turn, decide how they wish to respond, participants may find that they can make use of words and structures from prior postings; or they may wish to look up words or review some grammatical concepts in order to express themselves more clearly (cf. Brammerts, 1996). The text that is constructed along with the context of that construction are the result of collaboration among those involved. As we shall see in the data, participants in CMC interactions also use diverse strategies to keep the conversation going and to mitigate potential conflict, especially when the topics being discussed are of a controversial nature. Through engagement
in interaction, learners inevitably encounter strategies used by other participants and have an opportunity to adopt these strategies in their own postings, if they wish, as well as to experiment with yet other strategies.

**COHESION AND COHERENCE: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS**

Text coherence is the relation of all sentences or utterances in a text to a single global proposition. The establishment of a global meaning or topic for a whole passage, conversation, book, and so on, is an integral part of both expression and interpretation and makes possible the understanding of the individual sentences or utterances included in a text. Local connections or structural links between individual sentences provide what is sometimes referred to as *cohesion*, a particular kind of coherence. Some examples of the formal cohesive devices that are used to connect language with itself are pronouns, conjunctions, synonyms, ellipses, comparison, and parallel structures. The identification by Halliday and Hasan (1976) of various cohesive devices used in English is well known, and their work has influenced text analysis as well as teaching and testing materials for English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL).

Kaplan’s (1966) study of contrastive rhetoric is an example of discourse analysis applied to paragraph organization in the ESL context. His familiar diagrams illustrating what he considered to be dominant patterns of formal written discourse in major language groups are an attempt to represent how thought patterns are structured in formal academic style. To be sure, the models he proposes reflect a cultural bias to the extent that paragraph construction in English is represented as a straight line from which other patterns appear to digress. Nonetheless, they represent an important early attempt to deal with meaning beyond sentence-level structure.

Retaining an emphasis on sentence-level grammatical features, however, the dominant second language acquisition research paradigm has served to bolster a structural focus, obscuring the discoursal and generic dimensions of language acquisition. It comes as no surprise therefore that the documentation of cross-varietal differences of English focuses most often on sentence-level lexical and syntactic features. In language testing, attempts to represent norms for a standard English for international communication, for example, the ETS Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), reflects this emphasis (Lowenberg, 1992). The hegemony of essentially Western conventions at the levels of discourse and genre is less easily represented or challenged. Pressures for a “democratization” of discursive practices (Fairclough, 1992) have in some settings resulted in genre mixing and the creation of new genres. In professional communities, however, conformity to the practices of an established membership continues to serve an important gate-keeping function (Foucault, 1982). The privilege of exploiting generic conventions becomes available only to those who enjoy a certain stature or visibility. With particular reference to the academic community, Bhatia (1997) summarizes the situation as follows:
Much of the academic discourse still fails to acknowledge the sources of variations, especially those of marginality and exclusion, giving the impression that there is, or should be, no variation in the way genres are constructed, interpreted and used (p. 369).

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

The electronic bulletin board project that is the focus of this study took place between two groups of students, one a class of English as a foreign language (EFL) students at a German Gymnasium, the other a class of German as a foreign language (GFL) students in a Midwestern US high school. The German participants had completed 12 years of schooling and had been studying English for 8 years. The US participants were enrolled in a third-year German language class. The project was initiated by the teacher of the German students. The goal for the German participants was to become familiar with CMC and gain exposure to natural and contemporary use of American English along with insights into US culture. The US students were eager for contact with German teenagers and anticipated that this contact would subsequently lead to an exchange in German with German students less experienced in the use of English.

Altogether, four topics were discussed: “The American Dream - A Thing of the Past?” “The Death Penalty - An Inhuman Punishment?” “Drinking and Driving Age,” and “The Kosovo Conflict.” Topics for discussion came from both groups. For the purposes of this study, discussions of two of the topics were analyzed in detail: “The American Dream - A Thing of the Past?” (henceforth AD) and “The Death Penalty - An Inhuman Punishment?” (henceforth DP). Both topics were proposed by the German group. The discussion of the American Dream came from a question that was raised by a student in the EFL classroom.

Discussions of all four topics overlapped and took place within a period of about three weeks. For the discussion of the American Dream, there was a total of 20 postings, 4 of which came from the German students. The Death Penalty prompted 24 postings, with 8 postings from the German group. The discussions of topics not analyzed for the study included a total of 11 postings for The Kosovo Conflict, 3 of which were from the German students, and 18 postings for Drinking and Driving Age, with 5 from the German students. The disproportionate number of postings from the two groups was deemed significant, and a follow-up written teacher questionnaire was used to explore the probable cause.

The research questions that informed this study of intercultural CMC are three.

1. What evidence can be found in support of the claim that the collected bulletin board postings on a single topic qualify as a cohesive, coherent text?

2. What discourse features can be identified that reflect participant engagement in terms of sustaining a collaborative dialogue?
3. What are the implications of the findings with respect to the nature of the potential contribution of CMC to the development of strategic competence within a general framework of communicative language teaching?

In the examples that follow, individual postings are identified by topic, (AD or DP), group (GER or USA), and by the sequence in which they appeared. GER 6, for example, would be the sixth posting from a member of the German group of participants in a given discussion. The postings included in any one example are in most instances sequential but are not necessarily contiguous in the bulletin board postings themselves. The month and day of each individual posting cited is shown in brackets. Throughout the discussion, italics have been added to indicate the focus of analysis.

COLLABORATION IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF TEXTS AND CONTEXTS:
GLOBAL COHESION

The most micro of cohesive devices contributing to global cohesion is on the lexical level, the uptake of lexical items. Participants occasionally pick up words or terminology used in prior postings and then reuse them in their own postings. These words may weave like a thread through the discussion, contributing to its global cohesion much in the same way as can be seen in written discourse (Hoey, 1991). The repetition of a word cannot always be assumed to signal the uptake of a lexical item. Sometimes there is a limited choice of words to describe a certain idea. In the DP discussion, for example, terms like death penalty, inmate, and death row are expected collocations for this topic. In this case, repetitions are most likely due to the absence of suitable alternatives. However, other repetitions seem to represent lexical choices. Such words or phrases are picked up and used in subsequent postings, possibly because the participants felt that they best represent a certain idea. Through their use in subsequent postings, these words or phrases become part of the participants’ specific vocabulary for the topic. In the case of L2 learners, such repetition associated with meaning in a given context offers an obvious opportunity for association and, ultimately perhaps, acquisition. The example below illustrates lexical uptake.

Example 1

a. DP GER 1: [3/12] Death Penalty - an inhuman punishment

b. DP GER 3: [3/15] [...] Finally, I think nobody has the right to kill other people but to kill a person because of mercy is inhuman and should never be a law in certain democratic states or countries. [...]  

c. USA 2: [3/17] [...] I can see both sides of the death penalty. I believe when discussing this inhuman treatment you must think about the victims of these people.
d. USA 4: [3/18] [...] Basically, I think the death penalty is wrong and *inhuman*.

e. USA 6: [3/19] The death penalty is *inhumane*. [...]

The first extract in this example (1a) is taken from the Death Penalty (DP) discussion. It is in fact the title of the discussion as it appeared in the planning message. In a subsequent posting (1b), a German student repeats the word *inhuman* to describe capital punishment. Two postings later (1c), a US student repeats the word *inhuman* yet again. The word clearly has a powerful influence on the discussion. Interestingly, it is altered over the course of the discussion. Several postings later, USA 4 (1d) qualifies the death penalty as *inhumane*. This new word is then picked up by USA 6 (1e), who begins his posting by using the word in the first sentence. The fact that USA 6 uses a term that did not appear in the discussion until the posting from USA 4 offers evidence of possible lexical uptake by this participant.

Example 2

a. AD USA 13: [3/26] Many years ago, the “American Dream” was to have a job, own your own house, have a spouse, and have a nice *picket fence*. Unfortunately, this is not the case anymore. Not many adults are in a job they really like, fifty percent of American marriages end in divorce, and what about a *picket fence*? Nope, they are against the rules of the country or subdivision in which you live.[…]

b. AD USA 14: [3/27] […] I don’t want the *house in suburbia* with a *white picket fence*, 2.5 *children*, a pure bred dog, a minivan and a husband who goes off to the office every morning while I stay at home and vacuum my pearls. […]

c. AD USA 16: [3/29] […] After the second world war the dream became a *suburban house*, a *white fenced-in yard*, a car, and *2.5 children*. […]

This second example for uptake of lexical items appears in the discussion of the American Dream (AD). In the first excerpt (2a), USA 13 brings up the metaphor of the *picket fence* as a feature of her interpretation of what the American Dream used to be. She uses the word twice, which may have strengthened the word’s influence on subsequent postings. In the next posting a day later (2b), USA 14 repeats the same expression, taking up the metaphor of the domestic, middle-class life introduced by USA 13 and adding the adjective *white*, which he apparently associates with these middle-class homes. The next mention of the term occurs two postings later (2c). USA 16 picks up almost the exact same sentence in a summary of the ideas contributed previously and reuses the word *fence* introduced in 2a, repeating the adjective used in 2b but changing the noun so that *white picket fence* becomes *white fenced-in yard*. In addition, USA 16 also chooses to reuse the description of the middle-class house (*house in suburbia* becomes *suburban house*) and the notion of having *2.5 children*. 
These occurrences provide support for the claim that the members of the discussion group are strongly influenced by prior postings and that the language they use is also influenced by postings from the other participants. Those immersed in US culture may be familiar with the association of the American Dream with a picket fence, but the collocation is by no means obligatory. Similarly, 2.5 children is familiar as the oft-cited statistical average number of children in the nuclear US family of the 1950s. Its mention here serves to suggest that the participants take in what the others post and incorporate some of what they have read into their own postings, either explicitly or implicitly. Thus, anything that they have heard or read could potentially become a part of their vocabulary for this particular topic. For language learners this association of words with contexts offers an obvious opportunity for general vocabulary building. The use of culturally specific lexicon and metaphors by the US participants offers an additional advantage for the German participants; they gain access to texts that exist in an L2 culture and from which the US participants draw in their postings. (Kramsch, 1994).

The previous example from the AD discussion could also be seen not simply as lexical uptake but, rather, as uptake of a whole idea together with the lexical item. Occasionally, participants will repeat ideas mentioned previously and incorporate them into their posting without making any changes. A strategy that is used often and can be seen as evidence for global cohesion in the project is the restating or rephrasing of ideas in later postings, citing one or two new ideas or mentioning personal experiences.

Example 3

a. AD GER 4: [3/30] […] The American Dream is a concept relative to time period. In the early industrial age it possibly meant any type of opportunity for advancement. Of course immigrants of that period came from the static society of Europe where there were no chances of advancement. The dream changed, to being a baseball star, to having a house in the suburbs.[…] Furthermore, I would hope that America is not characterized by the American dream because it represents the pinnacle of stupidity. That is having money and success as the end of one’s life.

This example is the final posting in the AD discussion. All of the ideas mentioned at the beginning are ideas that had been stated in earlier postings (change over time: GER 2, USA 1, USA 3; reference to societies from which the immigrants came: GER 1, USA 3, USA 16; Joe DiMaggio as an example of the American dream: GER 3; middle-class suburbia: USA 3, USA 4, USA 14). He simply repeats them in his own words as a summary of the previous discussion before going on to express his own views.

One strategy used by discussants to make their contributions original, or to support the view they are restating, is to provide examples. The discussants do not simply repeat an idea; they strengthen the argument by contributing additional support. Examples for this can be found in both discussions, but one example
from the DP discussion is particularly compelling. Earlier in the discussion, the idea of the inhumanity of the death penalty was brought up (see GER 3, USA 2 in Example 1). USA 3 then repeats the idea of the death penalty as an inhuman treatment. In support of his argument he adds the example of a case in which the death-row inmate was not killed by the first electric jolt and suffered for another 8 minutes before a second jolt killed him. USA 3 found the news item on the Internet and, after citing it, restates his conviction that the death penalty is an immoral and inhuman form of punishment.

There is a continuum of sorts between exact lexical uptake and the repetition of ideas in slightly different words. In this second case, ideas are not simply restated and supported by additional examples or other ideas; they are reinterpreted in a slightly different way. This repetition can take different forms and serves several functions. Some participants choose to quote a whole posting in their contributions. In this way, the prior posting becomes a part of their text and serves to introduce the respondent’s own support or refutation of the argument. The following example illustrates how some participants restate an idea in order to argue for its reformulation.

Example 4

a. AD GER 1: [3/12] In our opinion, the American Dream is a thing of the past that has no relevance to modern industrial America. In the past people immigrated into the USA because they lived in poverty in their home country. Many of them had not enough to eat and their only way to survive was to leave their homes. America was the “promised land” because everybody had enough food and got land to cultivate. But today there are more people who live a poor life than in other countries. The American dream being rich in a short time is only a dream. There are the same chances than in other modern industrialized countries. What is your opinion?

b. AD USA 1: [3/19] […] The American Dream still exists today though. Today’s society is not based on a strong back and work ethic but on information and education. If one takes the time and effort to gain an education, then the possibilities and opportunities are endless. In this respect, the American dream is very much alive. I don’t think that the educational opportunities within in the United States can be equaled in other industrialized nations. While its public education system may be ailing, American colleges and Universities still command world respect. Many foreign students come to the United States to study; these are the immigrants of the 21st century; for them, the American dream is real.

Excerpt 4a is the first planning message for the AD discussion and introduces the topic. The subject marker our indicates the source of the information and shows that what GER 1 writes was influenced by a class discussion on the topic. Her conclusion of what she heard and what she thought is that the American Dream is the acquisition of money and status and no longer exists.
USA 1 then chooses to quote the whole planning message. He begins by saying that he disagrees with this characterization and the claim that the American Dream is outdated. He then refers directly to GER 1’s comment about other industrialized countries. However, he adds new dimension to the argument by claiming that the notion of the American Dream is not characterized by amassing money. Education is now the focus, and, in his opinion, the US is still superior in this respect. The posting by GER 1 clearly prompts some deeper thinking about the subject because it confronts him with a denial of an ideal with which in all likelihood he has grown up. Consequently, USA 1 has to find good arguments in order to successfully counter the argument put forth in the planning message.

ASSESSMENTS AND COLLABORATION

Assessments in CMC are handled much the same as in conversation. Part of the act of assessment in a discussion can consist of agreeing or disagreeing with a previous assessment, with agreement being the preferred next turn. This feature can be seen in both discussions under analysis. In fact, many of the characteristics noted by Pomerantz (1984) for conversation appear to be applicable to the CMC texts in this study. For example, Pomerantz claims that it is essential for the participants to have participated in a social activity to be able to contribute an assessment, but, at the same time, the assessments are an integral part of the social activity itself. Similarly, in the bulletin board postings, the assessment of the issues in question and the assessment of the arguments presented are at the core of the discussions. In order to soften disagreements or negative assessments, a number of writers resort to the use of concessives or partial agreements followed by contrastive connectives.

Postings from both German and US participants evidence a deliberate use of strategies to mitigate potential conflict to keep the channel of communication open. In the majority of cases, the strategy used to express differing opinions, or a change in the interpretation of an idea, is the use of contrastive connectives and concessive transition markers. For example, an idea mentioned previously is rephrased and followed by but, however, or the like. As will be seen below, this strategy is an effective way of connecting ideas and introducing one’s own opinion as something that is relevant for the discussion. In restating a previously expressed idea in order to either refute or reformulate it, participants achieve two goals. First, they situate their message within the whole discussion in order to make sure that the other participants know to what they are referring. Second, they indicate that they have been following the discussion and have taken into consideration all aspects before arriving at their personal conclusion.

Another strategy used to express a personal view, while, at the same time, achieving global cohesion, is explicit reference to other postings. Such reference can take different forms. As was seen above, the participants sometimes quote a previous posting in its entirety and then relate the content of their posting to the text quoted. In some cases, the message quoted is the planning message in which the original problem is posed. In other cases, the writers include contributions by
others that they found particularly interesting or about which they feel strongly. This happens several times in both discussions. Another type of explicit reference is the use of the name of the contributor of the posting or the direct address of the contributor, as in the following example.

Example 5

a. AD USA 1: [3/19] […] While it may have changed a bit over the years, the American dream still exists. […]

b. AD USA 2: [3/19] […] I agree with D. [USA 1] that the American dream still exists today.[…] As D. stated, “If one takes the time and effort to gain an education, then the possibilities and opportunities are endless.”

c. DP USA 8 [3/19] […] In Islamic countries one has heard of the stiff penalties, a few involve death. How much crime is there? From what I understand it is nonexistent. Just consider, a stiffer penalty equals less crime.

d. DP GER 4: [3/22] Hey [name of student], I think in your statement you look at the topic from one side only.

In this example from the AD discussion, USA 2 includes in her posting the whole contribution by USA 1 who, in turn, had quoted the planning message. The interconnection between these three postings becomes yet stronger when USA 2 (5b) makes explicit references to USA 1 (5a). She begins by paraphrasing the ideas introduced by USA 1, using almost identical words. She also makes direct reference to the source of her information by stating the name of USA 1. Subsequently, she uses a direct quote and credits it to USA 1. It is apparent from the way USA 1 phrased his opinion that it is in line with what USA 2 thinks. By quoting him she can give her argument more power, indicating that there are others who share her view. In yet other contributions, participants are addressed directly to indicate that the posting is in immediate response to their particular posting (5c). Such direct address is an obvious form of reference. In this particular posting, to which we will return below, the whole posting is in reference to the one to which the writer is reacting.

Yet another example of personal reference can be seen in one of the titles of the messages. Each message has a topic heading, which is set in the beginning of a discussion and cannot be changed. In addition, each of the contributions has its own title that can be selected by the one who posts the text. As a title for his posting on the DP board, USA 3 chooses: “I’m going to have to agree with [name of the student who posted GER 1].” This is an artful way for him to refer to a previous posting while at the same time showing that his agreement is not without restrictions. The use of titles and other subject headers constitutes a useful tool in CMC, enabling participants to compensate for the lack of prosody and non-verbal cues for indicating illocutionary force.

In addition to ideas or lexical items, the style of a posting, the degree of confrontation, and even the coloring of the opinions offered are sometimes repeated.
or partially reproduced. In the example below, we can see evidence of a repetition of the style and degree of emotion and confrontation between USA 8 and GER 4.

Example 6

a. DP USA 8: [3/19] […] The question is ‘should such a person be allowed to live?’ Weigh the options, if one is allowed to go free this might occur again, costing even more - and money is not the issue! I do not have the statistics but I believe that when one has killed they will kill again. IF there is a way to cure such a person would you be comfortable walking past that person after? You would be betting your life on a cure that just might not work. […] I know this would prove difficult for me. NOT for any fear that I would have for myself but for my family, and friends. […] This is a harsh punishment but it is needed. One last example from real life. In the Islamic countries one has heard of the stiff penalties, a few involve death. How much crime is there, from what I understand it is nonexistent. […]

b. DP GER 4: [3/23] Hey [name of student], I think in your statement you look at the topic from one side only. […] I think your statement is a little naive since you don’t include the possibility that people (even the police) sometimes cannot find the (whole) truth. […] Have you seen the movie “Dead man walking”? […] Besides that, do you think that murder should be punished with murder? […]

In his posting, USA 8 (6a) expresses a fairly extreme opinion, and he does so with strong conviction and a somewhat confrontational style. At the beginning of the message, he makes assertions that are not softened by a marker of personal opinion or other such strategy. He goes on to argue that killers will not reform and thus have to be executed. Although he mentions that the statistics support his opinion, he does not support any of his arguments with sources. His choice of vocabulary is also of interest. He chooses not euphemisms, but strong words like execution, and nonexistent to talk about the death penalty and the crime rate in Islamic countries. Moreover, he types some words in capital letters (IF, NOT), which is the CMC equivalent of shouting, thus further increasing the level of confrontation.

In her reaction to this posting, GER 4 (6b) picks up on some characteristics in the style of the previous message. She addresses USA 8 personally, reflecting the confrontational and direct style of the previous posting. Throughout the message, she continues to address USA 8 personally rather than the entire group of participants, who become, in turn, a sort of second audience. In addition, she chooses words equally as strong as the ones used by USA 8. Instead of execution, she chooses murder (Besides that, do you think that murder should be punished with murder?), making the thought different in connotation but equally strong. This degree of conviction offers evidence that a CMC environment can be conducive
to a very personal engagement. The participants in this example are actively collaborating to create the dialogue, and they bring to it their own experiences and beliefs.

Another feature that can be found in both texts is the use of questions. USA 8’s strategy is to use both rhetorical questions (which he subsequently answers) and questions he addresses to the audience, although his preferred answer is clear. GER 4 employs questions in a similar fashion. Instead of addressing questions to the audience, she addresses them directly to USA 8 in the same way that the whole posting is addressed to USA 8 personally. Since she follows with a synopsis of the plot, the first question she poses seems half sincere and half rhetorical. The question serves to introduce support for her claim that inasmuch as courts and judges are not infallible, the problem is not so easy to solve. Her second question appears to be a direct response to USA 8 as to whether killers should be allowed to live. Again, the preferred answer to this question is obvious and is provided by the questioner: murderers are sick, not evil, so we should not kill them.

**Concessives, Connectives, Agreements, and Disagreements**

There is clearly a potential for conflict in discussions of topics as controversial as the death penalty. However, conflict can occur in any kind of interaction and, Gricean principles of cooperation and face saving notwithstanding (see Grice, 1975, 1981), is sometimes best expressed openly, even if the result is communication breakdown. But intercultural bulletin board discussions between partner classes are in some ways a special kind of interaction. In addition to unequal experience in using the language of communication, participants clearly differ with respect to background knowledge. These differences increase the potential for misunderstandings. When such problems occur there is increased risk of a communication breakdown between the very groups who have initiated the collaboration with a view to increasing their mutual intercultural communication and understanding. The following examples of postings from both German and US participants evidence a deliberate use of strategies to mitigate potential conflict to keep open the channel of communication.

Example 7

a. AD USA 3: [3/19] The notion of the American Dream will be different for every person, but I think that it still exists. […]

b. AD USA 10: [3/26] I think the American Dream is still very alive in this country. It is true that there is a lot of poverty in our country. However, there are many more people who have been successful. […]

Prior to USA 3’s posting in the AD discussion, others had voiced the opinion that the American Dream was dead; and some had said that it was changing over time. USA 3 (8a) thinks that the American Dream still exists, but, instead of beginning by stating this view, he first concedes that the concept is not the same.
for everyone. In this way, he does agree to some extent but then makes clear by his use of the contrastive connective but that this is not his opinion. The same strategy can be seen in several other postings, with the use of contrastive connectives like but or however, for example, AD USA 10 (7b). Moreover, the use of these structures connects information that has been provided earlier with new information that the writers are about to provide in their posting. This is another way for writers to show that they are following the discussion and have taken other postings into consideration in composing their message.

In addition, participants use concessive markers to soften their opinion or to make their views more specific. In the AD discussion, for example, USA 10 (8b) begins her message by expressing partial agreement with something written earlier. With words or phrases like while or it is true that, the writer acknowledges that part of what others have written may be valid. By making it appear as though the writer has looked at the topic from different angles, this strategy not only renders her following statements more convincing, it also softens the message. The writer does not entirely oppose but only modifies what has been written previously.

Use of Reference and Demonstratives to Achieve Neutral Footing and Individualize the Opinion Given

In his analysis of how news interviewers try to achieve neutrality and, thus, avoid conflict, Clayman (1992, p. 163) bases his observations on Goffman’s (1981) notion of footing.

In the course of talking, interactants encounter a variety of assessable matters about which they may express a viewpoint, interpretation, or perspective. But rather than straightforwardly commit themselves to a particular perspective, interactants may choose to be more cautious or circumspect.

Although Clayman was looking at oral interactions in institutional situations, his conclusions can be applied to asynchronous CMC bulletin board discussions. It could be argued, moreover, that caution is even more important in CMC due to the lack of nonverbal cues. What becomes most evident in the postings is the avoidance of strong declarations of fact and the shifting of authorship to outside sources. The results of these strategies are twofold: on the one hand, a more neutral footing is achieved, and, on the other, the views expressed appear to be more generally accepted. Neutral footing is very important for the participants, especially when their views are particularly strong or controversial. An example of this can be found in the DP discussion.

Example 8

a. DP USA 8: [3/19] One could say that to kill another human is wrong. […] One could say that punishing a murder with execution is wrong. […] Of course, one could and should not be punished for this; however, when ones cruelty extend to another then it should be punished.
USA 8 begins his posting by a series of sentences using one as the agent. One
here is used to stand for different groups of people. In the first two instances, it
substitutes for people in general, whereas in the last two sentences, it refers to
those criminals who commit capital crimes. Although only the first two instances
point away from the author of the posting as the origin of the statements, the
subsequent instances help to achieve a more neutral footing simply by suggest-
ing a more general connotation. The writer makes what he expresses sound like
something that other people might say and, at the same time, situates the origin
of the ideas outside himself.

Example 9

a. AD USA 2: [3/19] […] This American Dream is a dream of freedom, success,
opportunity, perseverance, equality, and justice. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke
these words in his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. […]

b. AD USA 13: [3/26] […] It is disparaging to realize how corrupted the Ameri-
can Dream has become. Money is now what drives us. In the words of the hit
80’s movie “Wall Street,” “Greed is good.” […]

Another strategy to achieve more neutral footing is to quote others who have
said something in support of the point the writer is making. Again, the result is
that the authorship is not situated with the writer; he or she is simply repeating
something someone else has said. The AD discussion yields a couple of interest-
ing examples to illustrate this strategy. USA 2 (9a), for example, uses a quote
by Martin Luther King to state his interpretation of what the American Dream
signifies. By using the quote, he not only achieves a certain neutrality, he also
supports his claim by citing a well known person whose ideas and ideals are
respected. Excerpt 9b is an even stronger example of the attempt at neutrality
because here the statement by USA 13 is more controversial than that of USA
2. Instead of saying that he thinks people believe that greed is a good quality, he
cites the well known movie that made this statement popular.

**Use of Subject Headings to Soften the Message**

One strategy for avoiding conflict that appears unique to the bulletin board dis-
cussions under analysis is the use of subject headings, where available, to soften
the message. For these particular discussions, two optional subject headings
could be used in addition to the title or header of the message: the nature of the
posting and the source of information included. The date, including the time of
the posting, was included by default. Participants used the optional subject head-
ings not only to clarify the source of information on which they had based their
contribution but also to mark how they wished the message to be interpreted.
In other words, the message headings serve to provide the CMC equivalent of
*illocutionary force* (see Figure 1).
Figure 1
Use of Message Heading: Comment

Death penalty - an inhuman punishment?

B [...] ‘s opinion
by [...] 

The right to live? I plead for the death penalty for the following reasons: 1. Everybody knows that the death penalty exists before he kills another life. He must be aware of the consequences! 2. The reformation and reeducation of some type of criminal may be possible but a hardened murderer is beyond hope of reform. Are such persons allowed to live and to return to society? Some of them do not show any sign of repentance. What about the feelings of the victims families and friends? I think they want to have the certitude that this person cannot kill again. #. If there is the slightest doubt in the minds of the jury there will be no verdict of guilty. 4. A life sentence is in some ways just as cruel as a death sentence, and there might be some who would actually prefer the latter. Or is a life sentence in practice not more than 25 years - like it is in Germany? In my opinion the newspapers and the public only cause a sensation of the murderer and often forget the victims families and their feelings.

Date: 3/29/2001
Nature: Opposite Evidence
Source: Class Discussion

As for the source of information, the main categories used were class discussion, personal experiences, and Internet sites. The third category varied; some participants named the website, called it Internet resources, or simply wrote in the address of the site they had used. When a participant had used Internet resources, mention of this fact in the subject heading served to achieve a more neutral footing, thus lending credibility to what was written. Because the aim was not necessarily to give accurate information but, rather, to point to someone else as the source of the information provided, the question as to whether or not an Internet source was reliable or gave verifiable information did not really enter into consideration. Even if others did not agree with the opinion expressed, the author of the posting could show that he/she is not the only person who holds a particular view and, in this way, shift responsibility for the content of the posting more towards the source of the information. Much the same effect is achieved by using class discussion as a disclaimer. Here again, the responsibility is shifted
more towards a group of people; the writer does not stand alone in his/her opinion (see Example 4 above).

Similarly, when writers claim personal experiences as their source of information, the credibility of what they write is enhanced. Reference in their postings to something they have experienced seemingly gives them more authority to speak on the subject. An example of this occurs in an AD posting by USA 2. Previously, participants had expressed doubts about the existence of the American Dream, but then USA 2 relates her personal experience of the American Dream. The fact that she has direct experience of it constitutes a powerful argument for the point she is trying to make, namely, that the American Dream still exists, albeit in a modified form.

In addition to enhancing the credibility of a posting, personal experiences can also have a softening effect. Because they stress the individuality of each participant, they create an atmosphere in which everyone is allowed to express an opinion. In claiming not that this is not the only way to look at the topic but, rather, a reflection of a personal viewpoint, a writer appears less interested in imposing a view on others. This might seem a contradiction to the phenomenon of using references to gain credibility and to achieve neutral footing, but, in fact, these two strategies both serve to mitigate potential conflict, although in quite different ways.

As far as the subject heading for the posting is concerned, the most frequent choices were tentative answer or problem/question. It appears that once these categories had been introduced, subsequent postings took them over, and their use became more or less common practice. If neither of these two categories applied, participants often resorted to other as a generic marker or omitted the subject marker altogether. The use of tentative answer or problem/question serves to render the messages less harsh. The word tentative already suggests that the author of the message neither claims to have the ultimate knowledge on the subject, nor thinks that his/her way of looking at the topic is the only way. Characterizing the posting as a problem or question has a similar effect. Something that is called a problem does not yet have a solution, just as question suggests that an answer is still needed. In this way, the other members of the discussion group are encouraged to express their views, even if their views should differ from those that have been posted previously.

These examples show that in asynchronous CMC, especially in bulletin board discussions, the text of the message is not restricted to the actual content but includes other markers as well, most notably the subject heading. As we have noted above, specification of the intent, tone, or content of the message provides an opportunity to compensate for the lack of nonverbal signals. The subject heading does not have to be used in this way, but it clearly offers a potential tool for the participants.
Use of Questions or Comments at the End of the Posting to Soften a Message

An interesting as well as powerful strategy used by some participants to mitigate potential conflict was the conclusion of a posting by inviting comments or thanking the readers for their attention. In the planning messages it was more or less customary for the contributors to ask for the other discussants’ opinions, yet these messages are not the only ones that included such comments.

Example 10

a. AD USA 5 [22]: […] Thanks for taking the time to read this. [name of student]
b. DP USA 1 [3/17]: This is [name] writing. […] I hope I have been informative. Please comment.
c. AD GER 1 [3/12]: […] What is your opinion?

In the AD discussion, for example, USA 5 (10a) thanks his audience for the chance to voice his opinion. In his posting, however, through the use of phrases such as I believe (twice), I know, and my American dream, USA 5 shows himself to be rather positive that the American Dream still exists. Moreover, he includes no phrases that could serve to soften the message but, instead, uses very straightforward language to express a powerful conviction. By concluding with this comment, however, he allows for a shift in how the message is perceived. Without this final comment, the posting potentially could be seen as an expression of an opinion that is unmalleable and considered by the writer to be the only reasonable view. But the concluding remark reduces the possibility of such interpretation. USA 5 makes it clear that he does not want to impose his opinion on others; he is happy if they choose to read it.

Excerpt 10b occurs toward the beginning of the DP discussion and provides yet another example of the use of such final remarks. USA 1 begins his posting by stating his name, although the name appears as a header by default. He then goes on to state three reasons for his stance against the death penalty. Again, the message itself is very straightforward, and his opinion is not softened by any modals, concessives, or the like. Instead of saying I believe, or I think, he uses simple present tense to make his arguments as though they were statements of a general and unchanging truth (for a similar strategy, see Example 3). In addition, he does not indicate any sources for his evidence, making himself appear to be the authority for his claims. All of this results in a very strong and unmitigated expression of his opinion. Then he adds a final comment that softens the tone of the posting. In this way, the message is no longer perceived as a truth excluding all other views but, rather, a statement meant to generate discussion and to invite other viewpoints. As a result, the writer not only decreases the potential for conflict, he helps to further a fruitful and open discussion. A similar effect is achieved by the planning message for the AD discussion (10c).
WHAT THE GERMAN TEACHER HAD TO SAY

At the conclusion of the project, each of the classroom teachers for the two groups of students completed a written questionnaire. The responses of the German teacher are of particular interest for the insight they provide to issues of computer-mediated intercultural communication, second language learning, and norm negotiation, particularly as they are influenced by curricular constraints and participant familiarity with and access to technological tools. (The questions and answers provided below have been translated from German.)

How did you come up with the idea for this project?
After I had visited a high school in Michigan I got in touch with the American teacher. First our idea was to pair up students, one American and one German student each. Then the American teacher had the idea to discuss the topics in a wider forum.

How did you communicate?
The American teacher set up the bulletin board. Each student was given an individual email address. Then students introduced themselves on the bulletin board. The personal email channels were not used much because of student interest in the bulletin board discussions.

How was student progress evaluated?
There was no evaluation. It is not necessary in this medium. If a question is not formulated concisely or clearly, the students get immediate feedback on that from the other participants.

Did this project lead to other projects or activities?
Since the project went so well, I was encouraged to organize a new project this term. I am doing a project with a grade 7 school in England and one with the same Michigan high school in grade 11.

What were your pedagogical goals? On which aspects of communicative competence did you focus?
Well, I had very modest goals at first. I wanted my students to get used to this medium and I wanted to offer them the opportunity to develop friendships with students from other parts of the world. As the project evolved and I kept discussing the developments with my American colleague, I realized what potential this project had. Grammatical problems were only discussed or mentioned when they hindered communication (very seldom!), and it was most important to me that through this project I was able to offer my students authentic and topical material. Here I am thinking especially of one posting in the discussion of the American Dream in which an American student wrote, ‘My dream has come true!’ This impressed my students more than any text in the textbook ever could.

In your opinion, what did your students learn in this project?
Since the project was so short, it is difficult to say. I had a definite time problem
because I also had to prepare my students for the upcoming final exams in English, so I would rather do such a project as an extracurricular activity.

**How did your students react to this project?**

In the beginning, some students weren’t used to this medium and were a little hesitant, but other students were already very proficient at using computers. With regard to researching information on the Net, cross-referencing, links, etc. our American partners were worlds ahead of us. This is something we have to work on.

**DISCUSSION**

The analysis of bulletin board postings of paired groups of students, one in Germany and the other in the US, that constituted the data for this study provided illustrations of collaboration in the construction of texts and contexts. The cohesion and coherence of the postings for a single topic clearly qualify them as a text. The text is situated within the context of the ongoing intercultural collaboration. Participants do not simply produce disconnected and isolated texts; they collaborate to create a network of intertwined postings that make sense only after reading prior contributions. Postings were seen to exhibit qualities of face-to-face interaction that have been identified in other studies of CMC as well as qualities of written discourse. Numerous communicative strategies unique to CMC were also identified.

Discourse features indicative of participant engagement in terms of sustaining a collaborative dialogue were numerous. Explicit reference in a discussion creates a strong impression of collaboration. Through the incorporation of previously used lexical items, ideas, and even entire postings, participants show they were following the discussion. In addition, the use of these cohesive devices serves to strengthen individual arguments. Many participants also searched for documentation on the Internet in order to state their opinions convincingly, providing yet additional evidence that they regarded the discussion as interactive and collaborative. The postings further reflect the use of an array of strategies to mitigate potential conflict and encourage participation in a candid exchange of opinions. This feature may reflect the paired classroom nature of the exchange. The participants clearly considered the discussion to be a joint undertaking and were well aware of the need for collaboration.

The high level of participant involvement documented in this study is consistent with research into CMC projects that has shown the level of learner motivation to be high (e.g., Warschauer, 1996). The collaborative strategies developed by participants in this study are not unlike those that have been identified in other studies of CMC (Kollock & Smith, 1996) and suggest a potential benefit for learners from insights gained into the culture of the partner group (Kern, 1996; Kinginger, 2000; Kramsch, 2000). In sum, the high level of participation observed offers compelling evidence of the potential of CMC to engage learners in the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning essential for the development of communicative competence.
Given the very volatile nature of second language acquisition, it would be presumptuous on the basis of a few weeks of CMC to make any claims concerning the acquisition of grammatical competence. However, learner engagement in meaning and the importance of discoursal, sociocultural, and strategic competence at even the initial stages of communicative language teaching make exploration of the particular nature of CMC all the more relevant to a general theory of second language acquisition. A number of questions come to mind. Among them, how do collaborative strategies become established? Do they differ from one linguistic community to another? If so, what happens in intercultural CMC? How are not only strategies but discoursal and sociocultural norms negotiated? In addition to language background, is gender a variable, both in terms of frequency, length, and/or style of postings as well as gains in overall communicative competence?

CMC is a contemporary medium of communication in its own right, offering new possibilities for intercultural exchange and collaboration. For FL environments, in particular, the incorporation of network-based CMC seems a significant addition to the long-established practices of procuring pen pals and watching news clips and films. Moreover, the opportunity for interpersonal interaction afforded by CMC can take place between persons for whom the language serves as an additional language as well as between learners and those for whom it is a primary language. For English, for example, this means that projects between learners in the different countries within the European Union and/or Asia, the ‘Expanding Circle’ of English language users (Kachru, 1992), are potentially as valuable as learner interactions with those in English speaking contexts, the ‘Inner Circle.’ Similarly, learners in predominantly English-speaking contexts could benefit from interaction with other English language users from a range of cultures.

For this particular project the communicative competence of all participants was high. Participants seemed motivated, and the topics sparked the interest of students in both groups. The topics themselves and the nature of the interaction (the bulletin board) undoubtedly influenced the interaction. Experimentation with other formats and a range of topics is needed to guide the selection of CMC projects most appropriate for a given situation. Analysis of other CMC projects with participants whose communicative competence is less well developed is needed before any assertions can be made as to the relative potential for gains not only in strategic competence, but also in grammatical, discourse, and sociocultural competence. With specific reference to the development of sociocultural competence, CMC would seem to offer a relatively unexplored means of intercultural collaboration and understanding. In those FL settings where teachers typically have limited or distant experience with second language culture, the potential of CMC for promoting intercultural awareness could be even greater.

Not only did German EFL participants in this study gain insights into US culture. The American GFL participants were given a glimpse of US culture from the vantage point of ‘the other’ and were sometimes challenged to reconsider and/or defend their own views. In addition, they gained experience in using English to
communicate with those whose variety of English differs from their own. When such intercultural collaboration is accompanied by encouragement to reflect on differences or misunderstandings, both language learners and their teachers are afforded an opportunity to develop their communicative competence. Such experience would no doubt enhance communication skills in educational and other settings. US undergraduate students at large public universities are often at a disadvantage, for example, in classroom communication with an international teacher whose first language is other than American English.

Inequality of access remains a concern. Although the teacher of the students in Germany initiated the project and proposed the topics for the discussions used in this analysis, there was proportionately more participation by the US students. Given the relatively high English language competence of the German participants and their expressed interest in learning more about US culture, communicative competence per se would not appear to be an explanatory factor. Rather, lack of experience and limited access to computers in the German Gymnasium most likely constrained their participation. This interpretation finds support in the response of the German instructor to a summary questionnaire. In addition to their relative lack of familiarity with CMC, the German students were further constrained by curricular demands to prepare for standardized tests that did not necessarily reflect the same instructional goals as the CMC project. (For discussion of the hold of standardized tests on communicative language teaching worldwide, see Savignon, 2002.)

Access to and familiarity with the needed technological tools looms large, emerging as a central issue in discussions of the potential role of CMC in language learning and language use as in educational settings generally (Hawisher & Selfe 2000). Those with a greater access clearly find themselves in a better position to negotiate communicative norms with which they are comfortable. Future research on texts and contexts in computer-mediated language development and use should therefore consider not only the collaborative strategies themselves in which participants engage, but also the process through which those strategies become established. In addition to access to technological tools and language backgrounds, gender may also be identified as a variable of significance in the negotiation of strategies and norms as well as in the development of overall communicative competence.

NOTES

1 NBLT is a more recent version of the Electronic Networks for Instruction (ENFI).
2 An FL/SL distinction is maintained here for reasons of clarity. In fact, however, with a rapidly increasing global interconnectivity, intercultural exchange, and multilingualism, the distinction is blurred at best.
3 For a critical perspective on the organizational and social impact of new technologies in general as forms of power and authority, see Doheny-Farina (1996).
REFERENCES


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