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**Cross-cultural online communication:
from interactional to transactional writing**



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The choice of lexicogrammatical features in a particular writing depends on the peculiarities of communicative context that can range from interactional to transactional situations. Non-native students, however, tend to be less sensitive to the variations of lexicogrammatical features expected by interactional/transactional characteristics of a text (Shaw & Ting-Kun, 1998). The acquisition of this sensitivity is important for the students of *the Faculty of Modern Languages (FML)* of the *University of Latvia*, as their needs (Kramiņa, 2000) range from the English language teaching to various target groups to translation of texts of different disciplines and genres, which requires language use variations that cut across these genres. The multi-purpose needs of the students of *FML* can be addressed through involving them into writing activities that range from transactional to interactional written communication, as they must practice writing in a range of genres to capture the language variations. One of the ways how to provide such practice is the application of technology-enhanced, cross-cultural writing activities by placing students in contact with authentic audience and authentic target language exposure: participation in online cross-cultural communication with the students of *Mars Hill College (USA)*.

The topicality of the contextualization of linguistic features in technology-based writing correlates with the assumption (Chapelle, 2001; 2002) that language learning and cross-cultural potential (or according to Chapelle *positive impact*) are essential qualities of technology-enhanced activities. These qualities of technology-enhanced writing skills development have been made obvious by researchers. Davis & Thiede (2000), who have explored the linguistic complexity (lexical and syntactical) in students' asynchronous discussion postings, conclude that the examined *EFL* students' electronic conferences include language learning as well as adjustment to the communicative situation. Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth (2001) have focused on the research of students' contextualization shift in their email-based

and word processed academic essays. They point out that the frequency rates of linguistic features in email-based essays show that the writers have tended to express their stance more overtly than the writers of word-processed essays, which indicates the contextualization shift. However, Kern & Warschauer (2004) conclude that more recent research on technology-based communication tends to expand the language learning contexts to intercultural learning. The present study, therefore, addresses the involvement of the students of FML of the University of Latvia in authentic, cross-cultural writing sessions that aim at the development of three electronic text-types (biographies, online discussion, informative texts) requiring a shift from interactional to transactional writing.

Cross-cultural writing sessions brought together the students of Mars Hill College and the University of Latvia. These sessions were hosted by Mars Hill College on Blackboard-based online course *Connecting Mars Hill College and the University of Latvia*. The first session, trial run, was launched in 2002. It was aimed at the piloting of the stages of the longitudinal activity. The smooth flow of the trial run inspired the integration of the cross-cultural communication into the respective courses of both institutions during the three subsequent years: 2003, 2004 and 2005. The collaborative writing sessions were integrated in course *English Academic Writing at FML of the University of Latvia*.

The scenario of writing sessions (Table 1) comprised three stages: pre-activities, writing-session activities and post-activities. The pre-activities and post-activities were specific for each of the institutions and aimed at smooth integration of the cross-cultural writing into the respective courses of both institutions.

During cross-cultural writing activities, the student groups from both institutions were divided into smaller groups of four or three students. Each small group of students from one institution collaborated with a small group of students from the other institution and worked at the same theme. The themes for cross-cultural writing session were discussed with the students before the session and were chosen by the students' themselves:

- Trial run: Mars Hill College/University of Latvia; traditions, food;
- Session 1: traditions, pop-music, leisure time activities; academic community; tourist attractions, contrasts of where we live;
- Session 2: academic community, leisure time, family, music;
- Session 3: sport, political system, gender roles, family.

The activity stage included four overlapping sub-activities (Table 1):

1. Weeks 2 and 3 were devoted to individual development of biographies and posting of the biographies in the site of the Course Documents created to host the students' biographies from both institutions who worked at the same theme.
2. Week 4 envisaged reading of the biographies of the students from the other institution who had initially chosen the same theme; starting cross-cultural online discussion via Discussion Board among the small collaborative groups of the students from both institutions who shared the same theme. The discussion focused on the students' interests set out in the biographies as well as the theme that the groups from both institutions had chosen. The online messages were collaboratively brainstormed, and therefore expressed the ideas of the whole small groups of students from the respective institution.
3. Weeks 5 and 6 included collaborative work within the thematic group of students from each of the two institutions at the development of the text for the informative presentation on the theme that they had chosen; posting of the presentation in the Course Documents created for hosting of the presentations and biographies of the students from both institutions who worked at the same theme. The writing process of the informative text overlapped with the online discussion via Discussion Board that had started after the posting of the biographies and continued until the closing of the cross-cultural writing session.
4. Weeks 7 and 8 were devoted to reading of the informative presentations developed by the students from the other institution who had worked at the related theme. Online discussion focused on the issues provoked by the presentation.

The longitudinal cross-cultural writing sessions that included all the previously considered activities, covered 9 weeks within the 16-week course of *English Academic Writing*. The activities of cross-cultural sessions were integrated within weekly 90-minute classes, and alternated with the regular *English Academic Writing* course activities. Accordingly, only three of the 90-minute classes were fully devoted to the cross-cultural activity.

The goal of cross-cultural writing sessions was two-fold. One of the goals, cultural enrichment, was shared by both institutions: Mars Hill College and the University of Latvia. The other goal was specific for each of the two participating institutions. The specific goal of *FML* of the University of Latvia was the writing skills development, namely, the contextualization of language variations in the three text-types developed during cross-cultural writing sessions.

The purpose of the first cross-cultural writing activity, biographies, was to introduce oneself to a comparatively narrow audience - the students of both institutions who had chosen to work at the same theme. Biographies functioned as the opener of the subsequent cross-cultural communication. The students' biographies comprise two functions: emotive (communication of the inner states and emotions of the addresser) and referential (carrying information by description of persons, things and events).

The aim of the second cross-cultural activity, asynchronous discussion was online interaction in order to learn more about the interests and hobbies of the students from the other institution (hence Mars Hill College) who had chosen to work at the same theme as well as obtain more detailed, culturally specific information about the chosen theme, studies, as it is seen from the text included in the example.

Example

Hi! We were glad to receive a message and question from you. Primary education (9 grades) is obligatory. Secondary education depends on the choice of a person. People are not required to graduate high school (or in Latvia it's called secondary school), but it's important if they want to have a good job and career. There's a great choice of tertiary institutions in our country. A good education is what companies look for when they seek employees.

The purpose of the third activity of cross-cultural writing sessions, informative texts, was the collaborative development of a text for the thematic presentation. The presentations were envisaged for posting in *Course Documents*, so that the students who had chosen to develop thematically related presentations from both institutions could view them. Moreover, the presentations were meant for preserving in Course Documents to use them as an input material during the future cross-cultural writing sessions. The presumable audience of the informative texts was wider, more distant and the texts themselves more permanent than biographies and discussion postings. This gave the students the possibility to reflect about the contextualization of the informative texts in which writer/reader relationship is comparatively distant, and thus requires a shift from interactional to transactional functions.

Accordingly, the students have contextualized the texts that aim at conveying specific information on a particular topic (referential function). These texts exhibit the lexical complexity that is required to transmit information on a particular theme and the students have managed to display considerable lexical diversity within the theme they worked at. Therefore the texts are predominantly transactional.

Apart from the exploration of students' lexical variations pointing to the contextualization of the three cross-cultural communication situations, their overall attitude towards these sessions was explored during the follow-up reflection of 44 students who had participated in the writing sessions. The students were encouraged to reflect and rate the usefulness of the activity from the perspective of its cross-cultural enrichment according to a five-point usefulness scale. Accordingly, 66% of the students have rated these cross-cultural writing sessions as useful or very useful and only 34% of the students as neutral. Moreover, none of the students has indicated a negative attitude towards these cross-cultural writing sessions. The students' overall positive attitude as well as their attempts to correlate the language use according to the communicative purpose of a particular instance of written communication brings out the possible usefulness of this authentic cross-cultural communication.

The four cross-cultural writing sessions as well as the overall attitude of the students towards these sessions prompt the language learning and cross-cultural potential of this technology-based activity.

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Appendix

Table 1: Stages, activities and duration of cross-cultural writing sessions

Stages of the cross-cultural communication session	The activities of the cross-cultural communication session	Weeks and time allotted for each activity
Stage 1: pre-activities	Discussion of the goals, exploration of Mars Hill College web site and the outcomes of the previous sessions, brainstorming for biographies.	Week 1: 90 minutes
Stage 2: activities	Writing process of the biographies	Week 2: 60 minutes followed up by individual writing process
	Writing process of the biographies, posting of the biographies	Week 3: 60 minutes followed up by the final refinement of the drafts
	Reading of the biographies of Mars Hill College students, starting collaborative online discussion, collaborative brainstorming for the expository text	Week 4: 90 minutes followed up by collaborative brainstorming and online discussion
	Collaborative work at the expository text, asynchronous online discussion	Week 5: 90 minutes
	Collaborative editing, arrangement of the text in the presentation, asynchronous online discussion	Week 6: 45 minutes
	Reading of the presentations of the Mars Hill College students, asynchronous online discussion	Week 7: 30 minutes
	Collaborative asynchronous online discussion	Week 8: 30 minutes
Stage 3: follow-up activities	Reflection on the insights gained during the cross-cultural session.	Week 9: 90 minutes