

Politeness strategies in collaborative e-mail exchanges

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Abstract

Computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) has been the subject of a wide range of studies over the last twenty years. Previous research suggests that CSCL exchanges can facilitate group-based learning and knowledge construction among learners who are in different geographical locations (Littleton, K. & Whitelock, D. (2004). Guiding the creation of knowledge and understanding in a virtual learning environment. *Cyberpsychology & Behaviour*, 7(2), 173). A less known fact, however, is that successful CSCL exchanges depend on the social interaction that takes place among participants. This social interaction is crucial, since it affects both cognitive and socio-emotional processes that take place during learning (Kreijns, K., Kirschner, P., Jochems, W. & Van Buuren, H. (2004). Determining sociability, social space, and social presence in (a) synchronous collaborative groups. *Cyberpsychology & Behaviour*, 7 (2), 156). Nevertheless, its presence in these exchanges should not be taken for granted, since there are certain barriers which may impede interaction; for example, students may not know each other previously (high social distance) and requests and offers which appear recurrently in collaborative learning messages can threaten the participants' negative face (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987). In order to explore how participants overcome these barriers, we have analysed the linguistic features of politeness strategies used in the introductory e-mails exchanged between eleven students and their partners, who are students of English and Spanish, respectively. Our findings show that partners in collaborative e-mail exchanges do not use negative politeness strategies as often as we might expect in encounters where the social distance between participants is high, but they rely heavily on positive politeness strategies, especially those relating to 'claiming common ground', 'assuming or asserting reciprocity' and 'conveying cooperation'. The presence of these strategies would indicate that fostering closeness, solidarity and cohesion becomes the priority to be achieved between the partners, instead of the expected negative politeness mechanisms whose aim is to demonstrate high social distance and, therefore, formality and impersonality.

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1. Introduction

Collaborative learning can be defined as the type of learning that takes place through the exchange and sharing of information and opinions between pairs of students or peer groups. Students work together, search-

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ing for understanding, meaning or solutions and collaboration is thus seen as an act of shared creation and/or discovery.¹ Collaborative work places emphasis on “open[ing] up the minds of members of a collaborative team to each other and to the possibilities that lie beyond the reach of any of the individuals” (Mason, 1970, p. 112). Within the context of electronic communication, collaborative learning can take place without members being physically in the same location. When applied to language learning, we can see that collaborative learning provides students with an excellent opportunity to improve their competence in the second language in authentic contexts through real communication with native speakers.

From the previous discussion we can deduce that collaborative e-mail learning is essentially a social process and participants look for shared understandings through communicative interaction. To reach such understandings, participants need to combine their inputs to produce knowledge that could not have been produced by individuals working alone (Freeman, 1992, p. 65). Thus, the effectiveness of group learning in asynchronous exchanges depends on the social interaction that takes place among participants, that is to say, on whether “a sound social space has emerged indicating the establishment of a community of learning” (Kreijns, Kirschner, Jochems, & Van Buuren, 2004, p. 156). Creating this sound social space becomes a pre-requisite for the success of CSCL exchanges, since it enables “cognitive processes such as elaborating, questioning and defining to take place, all of which are necessary for the social construction of knowledge and competence building”.

However, despite its relevance, social interaction has often been overlooked or ignored by many researchers on CMC, since studies have focussed mostly on educational and pedagogical issues. Elaborating on this, Cutler (1996, p. 320) mentions that “current literature surrounding CMC is almost entirely task-based and focussed on cost, efficiency, and productivity, with little attention given either to the changes affected on people or to the social relations created from using the communication technologies”.

Given that few studies have addressed this issue, we wanted to contribute to current research on CSCL by analysing how participants in asynchronous collaborative exchanges comply with certain social and interactional rules, namely politeness strategies in language use, since these strategies seem to make a unique contribution to the construction of co-operative social interaction (Watts, 2003, p. 47). The correct use of these strategies appears to be an important factor in determining the success of e-mail exchanges, since it minimises the risk of a break-down in communication due to linguistic or cultural misunderstandings. In addition, its importance in this type of exchanges is even greater in view of the fact that non-verbal communication is reduced to the use of emoticons and punctuation marks (exclamations mostly). Finally, collaborative learning involves positive interdependence and mutual responsibility, both of which could potentially threaten the negative face of participants. This final aspect makes the use of politeness strategies in e-mail collaborative exchanges essential.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how collaborative e-mail partners mitigate this threat to each other's negative face by making use of the linguistic features of politeness strategies. Thus, we analysed the introductory e-mails exchanged by a group of eleven students and their partners who have been learning each other's mother tongue via collaborative e-mail since November 2005. These students are specialist learners of English at Nebrija University in Madrid and non-specialist learners of Spanish at Trinity College Dublin.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Collaborative learning

The term ‘collaborative learning’ refers to a mode of learning in which students work in pairs or small groups towards a common goal. When this goal is to learn a second language, we refer to a partnership between learners who are learning each other's mother tongue. These learners meet regularly and work together with the purpose of improving their own communicative competence in the target language and helping their partners achieve the same goal. Kohonen (1992) explains with respect to cooperative language learning that:

¹ See www.unesco.org/education/educprog/lwf/doc/portfolio/definitions.htm.

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