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# Toward an Intercultural Stance: Teaching German and English through Telecollaboration

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We discuss the challenges of Web-based teaching for language teachers and then describe in detail an extended episode of misunderstanding that occurred between 2 students discussing their versions of history during a classroom-based, asynchronous telecollaborative project between learners of German in the United States and learners of English in Germany. We argue that discussion of such moments of miscommunication can be valuable learning opportunities for both students and teachers. They open up for explicit discussion what usually remains invisible in cross-cultural communication: the nature of the subject matter, the conditions of cross-linguistic exchanges, the nature of language as discourse, and the goals of foreign language education. Our analysis suggests that as students explore the nature of language and communication across cultures through their technology-mediated interactions, teachers are pivotal in helping them take an intercultural stance.

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MANY VOICES HAVE IDENTIFIED CURRENT challenges in language teacher education, often with different opinions about addressing them (e.g., Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Luke, in press; Reagan, 2002; Reagan & Osborn, 2002), but in no other place is the need for re-envisioning the role of language teachers more visible than in the domain of technology-mediated language learning. Web-based technologies have been advocated as particularly promising examples of computer-based learning with the potential to enable language students to interact across geographic, linguistic, and cultural lines. In this increasingly complex landscape in which technology is used to foster communication across cultures, language teachers often encounter learning scenarios that may well extend beyond the known terrain of their current roles.

In this article, we present the challenges of Web-based teaching for language teacher education, then describe in detail one instance of cross-

cultural (mis)communication as it occurred during a telecollaborative project<sup>1</sup> between learners of German in the United States and learners of English in Germany. We then describe how the teachers handled this particular episode and reflect on what other measures educators might take in technology-mediated learning contexts, not so much to prevent miscommunication from happening, but to help the students learn from the experience. This project is grounded in data taken from students interacting in one form of telecollaboration, asynchronous (delayed-time) writing, but we believe the issues we address also find resonance with discussions involving other forms of technology-mediated learning.

## CHALLENGES FACING TEACHERS IN TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED LEARNING CONTEXTS

The traditional role of the instructor as a tutor and transmitter of knowledge in a teacher-centered classroom no longer suffices in classrooms without walls where no single person's expertise can match the richness of cultural

resources and contacts accessible through the Internet. Neither can the view of the teacher as facilitator, common in learner-centered, communicative approaches to language instruction, necessarily prepare students for the kinds of challenges posed by global communication. As recent research has demonstrated, cross-cultural understanding does not automatically result from contact in synchronous (real-time) or asynchronous (delayed-time) communication (Fischer, 1998; Kern, 2000; Kinginger, Gourves-Hayward, & Simpson, 1999; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002), a finding that has dampened enthusiasm for learner-centered views that tout instructors as “guides on the side” rather than “sages on the stage” (Fitch as cited in Tella, 1996, p. 6).

Some researchers have argued that teacher involvement, far from being peripheral in online learning, has been made even more important, precisely because students engage across complex linguistic and cultural lines in their computer-mediated discourse (Belz, 2002; Kern, 2000; Ware, 2003). Müller-Hartmann (2000) stressed the importance of strong collaborative partnerships between instructors in his study showing how teachers can provide learners with positive intercultural experiences by organizing tasks around the joint reading of literature. But, in a later study examining telecollaboration between university students in Germany and the United States, Belz and Müller-Hartmann (2003) offered a candid account of the tensions that arise when instructors collaborate across geographic, social, cultural, and institutional lines. Different educational traditions, different goals of foreign language education, and different expectations on the part of the students put into question traditional foreign language pedagogy, revealing its deep cultural, philosophical, and political underpinnings. So how should teachers prepare for teaching via the Internet?

Some educators view the computer as offering a respite from teacher-led learning. For example, von der Emde, Schneider, and Kötter (2001) described the use of a Multiuser Domain, Object Oriented (MOO) for a synchronous exchange between university students in Germany and the United States. They demonstrated how students used the chat room provided by the MOO to play with language, discuss texts, conduct collaborative research projects, and build a sense of community. Other researchers have offered teachers a more structured environment for the development of cross-cultural competence. For instance, Furstenberg, Levet, English, and Maillet (2001) in their longitudinal study of *Cultura*, a Web-based, mul-

timedia platform for cross-cultural exploration, documented how French and American students constructed one another’s culture through joint exploration of a range of cultural material. In this endeavor, the instructor was closely involved in helping the students structure, interpret, and reflect on their learning as they navigated through their experiences. Yet other scholars have offered teachers the linguistic tools to make sense of on-line interactions. In her thorough examination of the linguistic dimensions of online language learning, Belz (2003) showed how instructors can help raise their students’ awareness of culturally specific discourse styles by showing them how patterns of discourse affect their intercultural interactions.

Although these accounts have posited an affirmative vision of how language instruction can be re-envisioned to promote online learning, they have not addressed the growing concern that Web-based, globalized communication may actually place new and unanticipated demands on foreign language teachers. Kramsch and Thorne (2002) stressed that it is not merely the particular linguistic choices that students make on a turn-by-turn basis in their online discourse that contribute to intercultural understanding and misunderstanding. Genres, defined as “the collective conventions of a discourse community” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 292)—in other words, which types of texts and communicative activities engaged in by whom, with whom, and under which circumstances—play a crucial role as well.

When computer users from different cultures communicate online with one another, they may have different views on what genre (discourse type and discourse style) is appropriate for the exchange. These differences play into what Thorne (2003) has termed “cultures-of-use” (p. 38). As he demonstrated with examples from three case studies of computer-mediated intercultural engagement, the medium is not a neutral factor in online intercultural encounters; rather, cultures-of-use, much like communicative genre or context, differ across cultures. Students are influenced by their previous experiences with Internet communication, and these prior uses affect their communicative choices. Teachers also bring their own experiences with and assumptions about online communication, which influence their comfort level in classes that incorporate online intercultural interaction.

Another added demand for teachers is the high level of engagement on the part of the students that online communication entails. Ware (2003) found that many students viewed their

participation in a classroom-based exchange primarily as a performance for the teacher and only secondarily as a space to engage in language learning with peers from the target culture, particularly when that learning led to awkward moments of miscommunication.

Finally, the demands for greater critical awareness of the international and global dimensions of language teaching (cf. Chavez, 2002; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Luke, in press) intersect in interesting and often conflicting ways with the local dimensions of language. In a world of globalized communication, the voices of local debate are in danger of being silenced by a communicative fetishism that both prizes and trivializes communication (Cameron, 2002). The medium itself imposes communicative norms that, instead of being regarded and respected as culturally and contextually specific, tend to be built around a Westernized view of "effective communication." Such a view, Cameron contended, is not "socially, culturally, or ideologically neutral" (p. 80).

Teachers are called upon to develop a critical awareness of language and to reflect on the ultimate goals of language education. So how should teachers face these challenges and paradoxes? With the following analysis of a misunderstanding between two students writing in a telecollaborative project conducted by the first author, we offer a complex, and perhaps representative, example of the kinds of conundrums that teachers can face when using cross-cultural collaborative electronic communication in their classes.

## LANGUAGE LEARNING ONLINE

The episode of misunderstanding that follows was taken from a qualitative study of a telecollaborative project involving 9 university students in the southwestern United States studying German and 12 students in northeastern Germany studying English (Ware, 2003). The first author was the instructor of the English class taught in Germany, and, as the principal investigator, she collaborated closely with the instructor of the German class taught in the United States.<sup>2</sup> The project was designed to examine how participants on both sides of the exchange engaged with language learning online and how they evaluated their experiences in the exchange. The interactional transcripts were triangulated with individual and focal group interviews of all participants, tape-recorded in-class discussions during the period of the exchange, and observational fieldnotes taken in both Germany and the United States.

The misunderstanding under analysis occurred between a German student, Marie, and an American student, Rob (all names are pseudonyms). During the first week of the exchange, they were writing about a conversational topic introduced by Rob, which was related to recent German history but was not related to the course assignment. In a series of messages that spanned five turns<sup>3</sup> in that first week, the misunderstanding between Rob and Marie seemed to deepen rather than find resolution, and the week ended in disengagement on Rob's part. He posed no further questions to his group for the remainder of the exchange, nor did he directly address his peers by name. None of the triangulating evidence indicates that either Rob or Marie differed significantly from their peers in their interactional styles to suggest that the misunderstanding might have arisen out of personal communication style; rather, both appeared quite representative of their in-class peers, as will be examined further in the next section.

## *Course Design*

The students in the study interacted for 3 weeks by writing on an asynchronous discussion board, to which they were required to post messages at least two times each week. The decision not to use synchronous writing was made because of the logistical impossibility of scheduling both groups to be online at the same time due both to the lack of overlap in class schedules at each university and to the limited hours of Internet access available to the German participants outside of scheduled class time. Although the students had the option of initiating synchronous (real-time) chatting on their own, none of the students used that function, mainly because of similar access constraints. Certainly, the misunderstanding might well have taken on a different tenor altogether, had it taken place in real time online. Therefore, the research design choice for using asynchronous writing proved to be a salient factor in the outcome of this study.

Using Blackboard, a Web-based interface that allows for asynchronous and synchronous discussions, the collaborating instructor and the first author developed a structure for the 3-week exchange that asked students to discuss texts related to the course topic of language in the media.<sup>4</sup> In an attempt to generate the kind of discussion among students that demonstrated their active involvement in responding to each other's comments, we looked at the amount of time it would have required for the students to read

and respond to messages from all students in both classes. Therefore, we divided the larger groups in the American and German classes into smaller discussion groups of 3 to 5 students, who would together comprise a total of five groups that would remain constant across the 3-week period and who might develop more personal interactions. The students were assigned to groups based on their responses to a questionnaire about their language learning experiences, their interests, and their expectations for the exchange. Although the students were encouraged to read the messages posted by students in other groups, they were required only to respond in writing to the students in their smaller discussion groups.

Students were required to write to their discussion group at least two times each week using the asynchronous discussion board, and they were asked to alternate between their native and target languages with each assignment. For example, students in both classes were to write only in German in response to the first assignment, and then only in English for the second assignment. By the end of each week, then, they would have written in both languages, a requirement that, based on positive student feedback after the exchange, allowed both groups sufficient practice in the target language.

To prepare the students for the exchange component of the course, we first acquainted them with the design of the Blackboard interface. For the American students, this preparation presented no particular problem, because all of the students had previously used Blackboard in their university coursework. The German students, who had never used Blackboard, were given several computer lab sessions during class to help familiarize them with the interface. Second, we provided the students with a logistical overview of the exchange that included hard copies of the course readings and an outline of all writing prompts for the exchange. Furthermore, in order to facilitate communication in their first few encounters with their online partners, we had each group fill out a language and culture survey, the results of which were compiled and given to the students as their first joint text for discussion. Finally, throughout the duration of the exchange, a significant portion of the face-to-face class time was used to discuss questions or to comment on issues that arose in students' online discussions.

#### *Sites and Students*

Because of the limited overlap between the German and American academic calendars, or-

ganizing the online exchange required a degree of flexibility. We decided to schedule the exchange in March, which was the middle of the American academic spring semester and the middle of the German academic winter holiday. This choice worked particularly well because at the German site, the university offered a 3-week intensive English seminar at no cost to a cohort of 1st-year students who were enrolled in a newly established Bachelor of Arts program. Participation in the intensive English course was entirely voluntary for the students, but because of increasing pressure to develop fluency in English, approximately 75% of the cohort chose to participate.<sup>5</sup> The German course at the American university was an upper-division, advanced level German language course focused on the study of German in the media. It fulfilled the university-wide substantial writing component because of its emphasis on writing in German. The curriculum was structured around an analysis of visual imagery and texts from different media with a focus on the differences and similarities in the language features.<sup>6</sup>

Although the participants in this study were similar in many ways, a description of the two focal students in this article, Rob and Marie, highlights some of the differences. First, in terms of experience with either living in or traveling to the country where the target language was spoken, Rob, like 6 of his American peers, had spent more than an academic year living in a German-speaking country. Marie, however, who had never been to an English-speaking country, was typical of her German peers, of whom less than a quarter had spent more than 1 year in a study abroad program in an English-speaking country. Furthermore, the German students had more years of experience as foreign language learners (8–12 years) than most of the students in the American class (2–7 years), and all of the German students had studied a third or fourth foreign language, whereas only the two international students in the American class had experience learning a third language. Finally, Marie was similar to 88% of her peers in never having used technology-enhanced learning in a classroom setting, whereas Rob and his peers all had some experience with technology in the classroom.

#### *Background to the Five-Turn Episode of Misunderstanding*

In four of the five discussion groups that were formed, the first week of the writing went

smoothly, but a five-turn episode of misunderstanding occurred in Rob and Marie's group. Their group, comprised of 2 American students and 3 German students, found the initial part of the exchange not as fruitful as they had hoped, and the first week ended in frustration and disengagement on Rob's part. Although the other students in the class were not actually part of this group's online discussion, the Blackboard interface allowed them to "eavesdrop" on the dialogue. Even students who did not read outside of their groups were aware of what was taking place because the misunderstanding later became a topic for in-class discussion at both sites. Although they commented on the dialogue in class, none of the students intervened online during this episode because they were writing only in their assigned groups. By the end of the semester, the five-turn episode turned out to be so memorable for the other classmates that they referred to it later in the semester, but did not understand what had caused the misunderstanding.<sup>7</sup> It could not be easily explained by many of the traditional explanations: negative first language transfer, differences in cultural pragmatics, lack of sufficient contextualization, limited vocabulary, or different norms of interpretation.

The messages leading up to the misunderstanding were upbeat and personal. The group's first assignment was to discuss in German the results of members' language and culture surveys.<sup>8</sup> John, in the American class, initiated the discussion by writing in German about his daily life and about his response to the assignment. Steffi and Marie, who sat side by side and discussed their messages as they wrote, posted the second and third messages in German. As with John's message, their writing was personalized but also addressed the assignment. They asked several questions of both John and Rob, and then ended their messages with enthusiasm for a response from them both: "*So, ich bin gespannt mehr von Dir (und von Rob?) zu hoeren! Liebe Gruesse.* (So, I'm looking forward to hearing more from you [and from Rob?]. Warm regards.)" Rob, who posted the fourth of the group's messages, wrote in English, not in German as requested by the assignment. Much like his peers, he also included personal information in his message, but he deviated strongly from the task by failing either to address the assignment or to respond to his group's previous questions and comments.

#### *"East-West Conflict"*

Under close analysis, the trigger for the episode of misunderstanding could be said to originate

with Rob, who neither addressed the assignment nor wrote in German as was requested. Instead, his message was marked by a stream-of-consciousness tone, in which he switched topics several times in 17 sentences.

Subject: Tuesday, March 5

Well, I guess it is already Wednesday the 6th for you guys. I am not sure to which one of you I am supposed to be writing to, but I guess that will clear itself up in time. I am not sure I will be able to hold an interesting discussion today because I have had a very bad and long day and have a lot of work to do. Are you guys excited about doing the email exchange thing? Do you have much contact with Americans? There was an American army base in the town I was in [in Germany] and so many people there thought that all Americans were so loud and obnoxious. I soon learned that there were many American bases throughout Germany and unfortunately many similar Americans. I learned German fast and with a good accent just so I would not be related to them. But I am not sure how all that is in *der ehemaligen DDR* [the former German Democratic Republic], I mean, with the American bases. Do you dislike being called that? If so, what do you prefer, if anything? Many people in the US are proud to be from certain states [like ours] or even from the North or the South. We are such a big country that we need to divide ourselves up in order to define ourselves and relate to others. I remember, before I left Germany last summer there was this horrible song on the radio about how everything in Osten was better than everything in Westen. Do you recognize this song? There was also something about how those in Osten could kiss better than those in Westen . . . I thought it was a terrible song.

Rob's message differs from the previous three in his group because he makes no attempt to address his partners by name or to comment, even briefly, on any of the topics previously initiated by others in his group. Instead, he anchors his message deictically by aligning himself as a peer, using *you guys* as an informal term of address. He apologizes in advance for not being "able to hold an interesting discussion" by appealing to their own similar time constraints when balancing academic obligations. However, in the context of the online exchange, such an appeal might be interpreted differently. The German students, who are participating voluntarily during their semester break, might not view the exchange as merely an academic obligation among other daily tasks.

In his second information-seeking question, "Do you have much contact with Americans?" Rob introduces the topic of his experience in Germany. Concerned with the reputation of Americans in the German cities that have American military bases, he disassociates himself

from the “so loud and obnoxious” Americans. In the next lines, he resituates his online partners as information providers and himself as an information seeker: “But I am not sure how all that is in *der ehemaligen DDR*, I mean, with the American bases. Do you dislike being called that? If so, what do you prefer, if anything?” He admits uncertainty (“I am not sure”) and requests information in two direct questions. However, it remains unclear what kind of information this embedded question seeks to find: “I am not sure how all that is.” There is no clear antecedent to which his use of “that” can be tied. He immediately backtracks to clarify the ambiguity of his statement: “I mean, with the American bases.” Nonetheless, it is unclear whether or not this remark is a question, an assertion, or a mere string of free association. Instead of providing more context to clarify how he might intend these particular acts to be interpreted, he backtracks once more by asking if the German students do not like the label *ehemalige DDR*, and if they prefer some other name.

Rob’s attention to the potential face threat of using terms like *ehemalige DDR* is important, because he demonstrates knowledge that the East–West relationship may well be wrought with tensions, and that he may have trod too heavily on potentially volatile territory by labeling his partners former East Germans. His codeswitch to align himself with authentic German speakers and his rather dismissive parenthesis “if anything” may well backfire as a threat to his partner’s face. However, he does not drop the theme of East–West relations and instead aligns himself once more as having insider knowledge about the tensions by making reference to a song that was viewed controversially by people in Germany. He takes the stance that it was a “terrible song,” and ends his message rather abruptly with those words. In sum, he has opened a number of topics, yet has not committed to any particular stance on any of them. His social acts of asking direct and indirect questions do not provide much contextual information for his partners to make many inferences about how much or how little Rob knows about each of these issues.

Rob, by relating his experience and requesting information about former East Germany, opened the way for his partners to interpret his questions as genuine invitations for new knowledge. Marie and the others in her group could assume: (a) that Rob did not in fact have complete knowledge of the postreunification state of affairs in Germany with respect to American military bases; and (b) that he was genuinely interested in knowing more from his partners’ perspectives about

topics related to German popular culture, such as the “terrible” song he references.

Marie was the first in the German group to respond to Rob’s message. She offered, in a message three times as long as his, lengthy responses to each of his seven questions. She also included an explanation of her personal views on postreunification Germany. Her message as a whole can be interpreted as engaging in a detailed discussion on issues that she perceived to be of relevance both to Rob and to herself:

Subject: East–West Conflict

Hi Rob,

this is Marie. I read you letter today and I have been a little suprised. You have made the experience, that the Germans think or thought the Americans are abnoxious? Why that? Because of the role they played after 2nd worldwar? Actually the US was a occupation power after the 2nd worldwar. Do you experienced any anger or something like that?

Now a little history lesson: After 2nd worldwar the former 3rd empire was splitted up by the Allies into two parts. Western Germany was controlled by the US, France and England. The Eastern was controlled by Russia. The ideas of order weren’t not the same in each part of Germany. So they argued with each other, then came the wall and the cold war (is this the right word?) So there can’t be any army-base in the eastern part of Germany. Nowerdays there are also no army-bases in the East.

Now about your question, if we are interested in having an one to one email? I thought our group is the kind: small group discussion. Or didn’t I understand you? Do you like to write email to private email account? I have no contact to Americans. In former times I had a pencilfriend in America. Her name was Jamie but I think we don’t fit together. She had some strange ideas about the world I couldn’t handle with.

Well, I was born in the former GDR. Now I’m just a German girl. We have also federal states like you in the US. I live in the new federal state of Mecklenburg/Vorpommern. It was created after the reunification. It is situated in the northeast you might know.

Nowerdays there even several conflicts between East and West. The younger generation is more progressiv than the older people in Germany. Many of the old eastern and western people couldn’t handle with the new situation. After the wall broke down many of eastern Germans lost their jobs. Today we have the highest number of unemployed poeple. We never knew that in our former state. The social system in the GDR was bad but there weren’t enemployed people. That’s just one reason for bitterness here.

To my point of view the reunification was just fine. Now there are so many abilities for me. I’m really happy and glad. Everything in the GDR was strictly organized. You have to do this, you are going to work there, you won’t have the chance to do the A-level.

Today it is possible to do what you want. Just having a little American dream. For instance: go on holiday maybe to the nonsocial-states. People from GDR were always controlled by our secret service: STASI = *Staatssicherheitsdienst*. My boyfriend has relatives in the western part of Germany. When his aunt send a package to his family in former times those packages were always opened by others first. To see if there is anything hostile in it. He also told me when he was about the age of 10, 4 years before the wall came down, the principal took his pullover away. On the pullover was an eagle, some football players and the US flag. He had to go to the principal and to explain who gave him the pullover. There are so many things like that.

Today it is like in America maybe. We are allowed to do what we want, to go where we want and to say what we think. We are just glad. There are always good and bad things.

To my mind it was the best that could happen to us.

The song of Mr. Niemann is just a reaction to the snippy western people. Some of them think they are better than the eastern ones. It's a little revenge. He said in an interview, that he couldn't believe it, that 10 years after reunification so many prejudices are still existing. I think he is right. Both sides of Germany (it is stupid to think in sides) had pros and cons.

What do you think is Bush a warhawk. We had a little discussion in class about. Write me your opinion.

Greetings Marie

In the full text of her message, Marie addressed all seven of Rob's questions. The manner in which she provided her answers, sacrificing brevity in order to provide context for an in-depth explanation, can be potentially interpreted as didactic, or as Marie later confided in an email to her instructor, as perhaps "very teachful." Rob could, of course, interpret her lengthy expansion on his questions as a positive gesture on Marie's part to commit time and information to crafting a response carefully. However, it seems that Marie misinterpreted the ambiguity of his questions as lack of knowledge, which made her lengthy responses potentially face-threatening in the asynchronous medium of their interaction. Here, in a medium that allows conversations to unfold under the eyes of other classmates, she appeared to be tutoring a 4th-year university student majoring in German on the basics of the period following the Second World War—knowledge that he felt he already had.

In this respect, drawing on their research in topic establishment in conversational discourse, Keenan and Schiefflin (1976) might explain Rob and Marie's misunderstanding as a two-way process of underestimating, or overestimating, someone else's knowledge. One can easily imagine that

in a face-to-face interaction, Rob and Marie would not have encountered this particular difficulty in establishing the appropriate amount of context, even if they encountered a far deeper incompatibility of worldviews. Marie could have looked quizzically at Rob's mention of American army bases in East Germany, and had they chosen to explore their different perspectives, both could have come to realize that they had a different conception of what the presence of American troops in Germany after the war might mean historically for an American and for an East German. But then again, face-to-face interaction can also be more conducive to dropping topics rather than exploring them, because certain topics would entail a loss of face.

The misinterpretation of the word *little* in Marie's message seems to exacerbate the misunderstanding further, and by implication, leads the two away from the opportunity to develop a conversation that explores their two different versions of history. In English, the word *little* can act to belittle, so that the phrase *a little history lesson* appears to pass a negative value judgment on Rob's knowledge of Germany. However, *klein* in German can be used to mitigate the force of words. Marie's attempt to lessen the threat to Rob's face by mapping the German use of *klein* onto English *little* fails to achieve the desired result. Judging from Rob's response, in which he sarcastically reviled her use of the term, Rob has interpreted the word *little*, according to English-speaking norms, as an insult.

Subject: Re: East–West Conflict

Dear Marie,

Thank you very much for the little history lesson, but unfortunately I was already aware of that. My only question was whether the American army bases had moved into the old eastern part of Germany since die Wende. Maybe because you did not grow up around any of these bases, you do not have the same experiences as the people in West Germany do with the soldiers. And yes, I met many people that did not like Americans at all, and on several occasions was not allowed into certain clubs because of the nasty reputation some Americans had for drinking too much and fighting. On one occasion, I was told to leave a store only because I was American. As I said, I learned to speak German very fast and with a good accent, so that later I was able to avoid these problems. As far as Bush is concerned, I would apologize for his being elected as our president, but, as I was in Germany at the time of his election, I was not able to vote and therefore am not guilty of his being elected. Now that he is president, all I can do is hope that he does what is right instead of criticizing him.

Rob points out that his “only question” was about whether American army bases had moved into the eastern part of Germany. Thus, what had been an ambiguously written question in his first message about the military bases in former East Germany is now recast as an indirect question that is no less ambiguous (Did Rob really think American troops were entitled to occupy the eastern provinces of Germany after 1989?) He attempts to continue the conversation with her by answering her question about his own experience with anti-Americanism.

In Rob’s answer to Marie’s question about the U.S. president, it is unclear whether he offers an answer, excuse, apology, or warning. He implies with the words “not guilty” that he would not have voted for Bush, yet his comment about not criticizing the U.S. president can be seen as a pointed directive at Marie to back off the topic. However, her previous request for his opinion about the president was ambiguous. Was she criticizing President Bush or simply requesting Rob’s opinion, when she wrote: “What do you think: Is Bush a warhawk?” His comment about not criticizing the president may have been intended as less a pointed admonition of Marie and more a preclosing move (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) that would bring what was for him an uncomfortable topic to an end by resorting to a general truism.

Marie’s response was terse and was characterized by the kind of ambiguity found in Rob’s previous apologies.

Subject: Re: East–West Conflict

Good morning Rob, it’s about 7 and it’s my birthday.

Probably my English knowledges are to blame for the misunderstanding, I’m sorry, I wouldn’t teach you. Your answer in order to Bush sounds a little bit sulky. I don’t want to attack you. Or was it just ironic? My English seems to be that bad that I maybe can’t hear those fine differences.

Have a nice day

Marie

First, by greeting Rob by name and sharing the news that it is her birthday, she sets an intimate and friendly frame for the apology to come. She then blames her English skills for the misunderstanding—not the content of their conversation, the manner in which they have been interacting, or their superficial treatment of historical events. She lends ambiguity to the apology, however, by stating that her English skills are only “probably” to blame, which does not show that she assumes full responsibility. She leaves Rob with the task of deciphering both what she intended

by her apology, as well as what his next conversational move should be, and he responds with a short one-line acknowledgment:

Subject: Re: East – West Conflict

happy birthday, and no, your english is not bad at all.

The last message by Rob marks the end of this episode between them. In it, he acknowledges her birthday, and he comments on her English skills. He does not comment on her reintroduction of the topic of the president, given that he had already attempted to close down that topic of conversation by resorting to a truism in his previous message. His brevity mirrors her short message, and with this last posting, the 1st week of the online exchange comes to a close.

#### *The Aftermath: Peer Evaluations of the “East–West Conflict”*

The subject heading that reoccurred throughout this exchange, “East–West Conflict,” provides a sadly ironic frame for this misunderstanding. Marie initially wrote it as the subject heading in her first reply to Rob, and it was maintained throughout the exchange, serving as a metacommentary on the developing conflict between the participants themselves. Rob’s reaction to this episode of misunderstanding was to withdraw from the online interaction. By the end of the exchange, his messages, already shorter than those of the others in his group, dropped in length by half. He also asked no further questions of his partners. Furthermore, he did not address his peers with the terms *you* or *your* for the rest of the 3-week period. It is difficult to know, without his direct input, what his reaction to the misunderstanding was. Though he had agreed to a postexchange interview, he canceled and did not reschedule. Marie, however, continued to write prolifically and ended the exchange feeling positive, though frustrated that her online partners, as she later commented in an interview “never had time. ‘Sorry, I have no time’” to write.

The asynchronous medium, because other students in the class were encouraged to read responses across all five groups, opened up the “conflict” between Rob and Marie to public interpretation and scrutiny. Indeed, their misunderstanding had already been talked about during in-class discussions, so when the instructor in the American class asked her students to select a few passages from the online discussions and compare the different interactional styles of the students, several students chose the misunderstanding

between Rob and Marie. Rob himself selected the passage from Marie that used the word *little* and offered the short comment, "*Ich glaube, dass jeder Germanistik Student etwas davon lernen konnte. Wir sollen alle unsere Geschichte kennen.* (I think that every German student can learn from this. We should all know our history.)" Did he intend this as a tongue-in-cheek admonition of Marie, because his peers had discussed this passage in class and could share in his sarcasm? Or was it a sincere acknowledgment that Marie had indeed taught him something about "our" history? The possessive pronoun in *our history* seems to express a belief in the objectivity of historical accounts that are commonly shared across cultures, whereas this online exchange shows poignantly how culturally contingent history actually is.

Matt, an international student in the American class who had spent several years living in (former West) Germany and attending a Gymnasium there, recast the misunderstanding as a boxing match. First he cast Marie in a negative light, describing her as someone who "probably knows more Russian than German."<sup>9</sup> Then he showed Rob emerging as the winner in a series of verbal hits and punches.

*\*\*\*Runde zwei zwischen Rob und Marie. Es war bisher sehr unterhaltsam, aber leider neigt dieser woertliche Schlagabtausch seinem Ende entgegen. Hier entschuldigt sich Marie aber kann sich dabei einen weiteren Schlag an Rob nicht verkneifen, nachdem die Glocke gelaetet hat. Dafuer werden am Ende Punkte abgezogen!*

(Round Two between Rob and Marie. It was very entertaining until now, but unfortunately, it looks like this hitting match of words is coming to an end. Marie apologizes but cannot resist a further hit to Rob after the bell has rung. Points will be taken off at the end for that!)

Ruth commented in her interview about how the misunderstanding was handled in their face-to-face class discussions.

I thought from the beginning that she didn't intend anything negative by what she was saying, but we had this whole big discussion. . . . She said, "Maybe you don't know your history," and he was like, "Excuse me, I think I do know my history." But I think it was just—she didn't translate it very well, what she intended to say. That's just my third-party observation—assumption actually. People were just kind of in an uproar about it—you know, "Oh, they think we don't know our history."

In his postexchange interview, Ned viewed the lack of face-to-face contact as partially responsible: "The fact that we didn't see each other in person made it that we sometimes expressed our

opinions more openly." Using Rob and Marie as an example, he suggested that it probably would not "have happened if people were sitting there face to face."

On the German side of the exchange, Heiko suggested in his interview that the misunderstanding was not due to the medium, but to language transfer issues. He found it "interesting" how one could "misunderstand, like Marie did, so just writing your thoughts in English, they make maybe another sense. Like in German, you think like this and you say that in English and maybe somebody gets offended." Marie herself wrote to the first author later and explained that her desire to avoid misunderstandings might have, ironically, been the very cause of the conflict.

I wanted to avoid misunderstandings. I felt like I had to explain everything, because I wanted him to understand what I was trying to explain. I had a long time to think about it and in the end I can't say what made him angry. I read the letter once, twice, again an again. I cannot say. . . . My big explanations maybe? My writing sounds very teachful, don't you think so? I wrote him so many things, he had already known, because he had spend time in Germany before. . . . Could this be the reason? Write me your opinion.

#### CONSIDERATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS

Data such as those presented above usually make teachers either indignant or anxious. The indignant ones wonder why the students were not adequately prepared by their teachers beforehand. Why were Rob and Marie not taught the history of their partner's country? Why had the ideological values of the GDR not been explained to Rob? Why was Marie not briefed on Americans' patriotism and loyalty to their elected government? Would any of this have happened if the exchange had taken place, as the teachers had planned, according to their structured assignments? Why was the assignment not more tightly structured or, possibly, monitored by the teacher? Other teachers are likely to be made nervous by the realization that they cannot prepare for the unexpected, that there is no single truth to be taught, and that the fallout between Rob and Marie could hardly have been avoided. They may fear that they are inadequately prepared themselves to mediate between what looks like two versions of history, two incompatible personalities, two different uses of the same English language.

The temptation in cases like this one is for the teachers to feel guilty at having let such an incident happen and to try to avoid it in the future.

There are certainly steps teachers can take to prepare for teaching via the Internet. Pedagogical precautions can be taken to reduce the number of such possible misunderstandings, and in this case, many were indeed taken. For example, the students had received carefully constructed assignments and clear directions that were based on pedagogical suggestions found useful in other telecollaborative projects (Furstenberg et al., 2001). They were to begin the 1st week of the exchange by focusing on the results of a culture and language survey that they had filled out, not by entering immediately into more ambiguous terrain such as the “East–West conflict,” which was a topic that Rob introduced in lieu of adhering to the assignment. Marie composed her response to his “off-task” posting then passed it by several of her German classmates, who discussed many of the differences in language registers she and Rob used, such as the use of the informal and formal forms of address and the tendencies toward directness and indirectness. In retrospect, one can see that the teachers could have done more for this project in teaching via the Internet. They could have taken a more systematic approach to peer review in order to ensure that all messages were “pre-viewed” before being sent, or they could have used more tightly focused in-class discussions to examine messages against a “cultural rubric” in order to help the students evaluate the messages from different points of view. Indeed, more research needs to be done on different pedagogical approaches to telecollaboration and their potential impact on student interactions.

But focusing only on pedagogical precautions would be a lost opportunity for both teachers and learners. Telling incidents such as these are among the most valuable learning opportunities in a communicatively oriented curriculum, and they are valuable precisely because they cannot always be avoided. Even the most tightly constructed tasks can be subverted. Even the most insightful in-class discussions about different cultural interpretations can only focus on a small number of the actual messages exchanged by all students in two classrooms. Incidents such as the one between Rob and Marie bring to the fore the kind of knowledge a language teacher might, ideally, need when teaching language for intercultural competence. These incidents open up for explicit discussion aspects of teacher preparation that usually remain invisible in cross-cultural communication: the nature of the subject matter, the conditions of cross-linguistic exchanges, the nature of language as discourse, and the ultimate goals of foreign language education.

### *Nature of the Subject Matter*

In face-to-face language education, the subject matter usually comprises the standard pronunciation, syntax, and vocabulary of a standard national language, the communicative strategies necessary for clear, concise, and effective information exchange, and knowledge about the culture, usually conceived of as the national social institutions and dominant ways of life in a given country. All of these educational matters become problematic in online language education. In the current case, Marie certainly had the strategies necessary to bring her message across in a clear, concise, and effective way in writing, even though she had not had opportunities to communicate face-to-face in English. The problem started in uncertainty about the genre of the activity and about the identity of the native speaker at the other end of the Internet. As previously observed (Kramsch, A’Ness, & Lam, 2000; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Thorne, 2003), the electronic medium tends to blur genres that are usually kept separate in face-to-face interaction. The type of exchange in which the students were engaged was fundamentally ambiguous: It was a private dialogue between two students, but it was also a dialogue on which an unknown number of others eavesdropped; it was a classroom assignment, but Rob had changed the assignment into a chatty get-to-know-each-other conversation; it was a written exchange but in the form of a spoken chat. How free did the students feel to ramble along, to say whatever they wanted, to be provocative, to jest, to flirt as the medium often encourages computer users to do? And to what extent did the transformation of a classroom assignment into an Internet chatroom exchange not only change the rules of the game but also create the misunderstandings witnessed in this exchange? What students perceive as appropriate uses of the Internet can differ interculturally, as Thorne (2003) suggested, and contribute to how students choose to interact online.

In addition to the important aspect of genre, the second aspect of language learning that is problematized here is the notion of *native speaker*. Suddenly the abstract entity *native speaker* becomes a flesh-and-blood individual sitting at a terminal thousands of miles away. This individual does not resemble the “standard” native speaker presented in language textbooks. Here, for example, Marie calls herself “just a German girl,” in other words, not “East German,” and Rob calls himself “American” but not of the “obnoxious” kind. From the start, the simple denominations *German* and *American* become charged with

memories and emotions. Rob and Marie speak of two different versions of national history as perceived through two different lenses and political ideologies. For the teacher, it would seem as if the online subject matter includes, besides the standard grammar and vocabulary, also the history of World War II as told from both the American and the German perspectives, the history of the relations between East and West Germany, the current status of German reunification, as well as the history of the United States (e.g., Is it true that, as Rob said, the United States divided itself up into states "because it was such a big country?"), and the presence of American and Russian military bases in Germany. To be able to manage these online subjects, a teacher would need to develop a kind of double vision in order to see both countries, both from the inside and from the outside, and would need the ability to see things and events from both sides.

Such a vision, as we argue later, cannot be expected of teachers when they start out in the profession. But it should be developed through readings, sojourns in the target culture, encounters with native speakers, and discussions with the students themselves across different learning environments and over the course of a teacher's career. When teaching from a textbook, the teacher can introduce the students to the standardized view of a language and a culture as it is promoted by educational institutions and native speakers alike. When teaching in a study abroad context, a teacher has available a multiplicity of semiotic resources to diversify the standard and enable students to relativize what they have learned in class. With online teaching, however, the indeterminacy of both situational context and genre, as well as the added semiotic load carried by the words on the screen, require the teacher to have extra knowledge and imagination to fill the gaps.

### *Conditions of Cross-Linguistic Exchanges*

Online encounters such as the one in this study make immediately apparent how imperfect a communication tool language is. Even though the two partners here wrote in a common code, English, they intended to say different things. *Obnoxious* for Rob meant something else for Marie. *Warhawk* had different connotations for the two of them. *A little history lesson* had the potential to sound quaint, condescending, or even offensive depending on the context. Thus, online teaching upends fixed rules of use. Marie might have thought her

problem was a matter of choosing the correct word ("is *cold war* the right word?") or of using the right grammar ("my English knowledges are to blame"), but, as Rob realized, the misunderstanding was not a linguistic but a semiotic one. Teaching language online requires seeing language not as a closed set of linguistic structures, but as an open set of semiotic signs whose meanings can only be negotiated, not codified.

Such negotiation is no easy matter. Teachers trained in the communicative approach are familiar with the phrase *negotiation of meaning*, but that phrase has come to include clarification requests and comprehension checks of a merely informative kind, as in "does *kalter Krieg* translate into *Cold War*?" It does not include the negotiation of connotations and historical values that are associated with these terms. In order to arrive at those meanings, each partner would have to (a) assume that there are fundamental cultural and historical differences worth exploring, rather than rely upon the illusion of commonality offered by the communicative approach and the computer medium; (b) assume good will on the part of the other; and (c) suspend judgment and adopt a tell-me-more attitude when faced with misunderstanding. Negotiating meaning in this manner would also entail negotiating the very nature of a pedagogy of negotiation. The teacher would cease to be the only one responsible for devising an appropriate pedagogy of intercultural competence. The burden would also fall on the students. When dealing with incidents such as this one, the teacher becomes one person among many to reflect upon the pedagogy and design of all such online projects.

Ultimately, online language teaching confronts teachers with the challenge posed almost 25 years ago by Breen and Candlin (1980), when they dared to suggest that a syllabus cannot be drawn up ahead of time but has to emerge retroactively from the communicative needs of the moment: "Language learning may be seen as a process which grows out of the interaction between learners, teachers, texts and activities" (p. 95). Content within a communicative curriculum "would not necessarily be prescribed by purposes but selected and organized within the communicative and differentiated process by learners and teachers as participants in that process" (p. 102). Their view of the negotiation of meaning is also closer to the one we advocate for the development of intercultural competence: "Communicating is not merely a matter of following conventions but also of negotiating through and about the conventions themselves" (p. 90).

*Language as Discourse*

As mentioned previously, the primary difficulty of online communication is that the speakers themselves are invisible; only their words appear on the screen, bearing the full weight of their historical, ideological, social, and cultural density. Language, as it appears on the screen, has to be taught as discourse, in other words, as meaning beyond dictionary definitions and propositional content. In the absence of context, language learners have to negotiate new ways not only of interpreting the content of utterances, but also of navigating interactional pragmatics. Interactional anonymity and the illusion of ubiquity and simultaneity have brought about a fundamental uncertainty about communicative intentions, truth of utterances, relevance, and norms of interpretation. As Crystal (2002) said recently in a plenary address, educators are dealing “with a totally different world, for which we will need an empirically informed Internet pragmatics. Communication breakdowns online make visible the discursive aspects of language that we generally take for granted: speech acts, conversational maxims, footings, stances, and facework.”

The computer screen, which displays what people “say,” makes it difficult, in the absence of non-verbal and paraverbal cues such as gestures or intonation, to remember that people “do” things with words (Austin, 1962). Which speech act is realized by Rob’s utterance, “I have had a very bad and long day”: a statement of fact? an appeal for forgiveness? a complaint about the assignment? It is probably all three at once. And when Marie asks, “What do you think is Bush a warhawk” (without a question mark), is she really requesting his opinion, or is she showing off her newly acquired vocabulary item, or even just “doing” conversation? She herself would likely not know which move, or combination of moves, she was making. A discussion of speech acts could provide a good entry point for discussing the ambiguities of this exchange. Grice’s (1975) conversational maxims of quantity (be concise), quality (be sincere), relevance (be relevant), and manner (be clear) could provide some additional metalanguage for students and teachers to use in discussions of what might be going on in this exchange. To what extent does Marie’s volubility break the maxim of quantity? To what extent is it the sign of her excitement at using this “sexy” medium or of her own personal style? Do Rob’s disclaimers at the beginning break the maxim of sincerity, or are they a way of showing camaraderie? Does Rob’s mention of the East German song break the maxim of rele-

vance or is it meant as an ingratiating move? And to what extent do expectations of abiding by the cooperative principle remain valid for Rob and Marie online as they would for Rob and Marie in face-to-face interaction? These questions do not have clear-cut answers and would be worth discussing in class.

In addition to Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle meant to ensure conversational efficiency, we would have to take into account other maxims that secure conversational smoothness. Lakoff’s (1973, 1990) maxims of politeness would be quite appropriate for online exchanges such as the one in this study: distance (be courteous), deference (avoid conflict by ceding terrain or removing speaker from the interaction), and camaraderie (be nice). Rob’s initial attempts at self-deprecation could be seen as a desire to come across as open and nice, even if what he wrote was not sincere. Marie’s choice of the diminutive *little* in front of the *history lesson* and the subjectless sentence, *Now a little history lesson* rather than: *Let me give you*, might be understood as a sign of deference, given the possibly face-threatening correction she was about to present.

Beyond the nomenclature of pragmatics, a teacher can use the sociolinguistic notions of *footing*, *stance*, and *face*. If we understand *footing* (Goffman, 1981) as positions that speakers take toward one another in interaction, then one can only feel sympathy for Rob, who, in his initial posting, had difficulty finding the right footing. Given that he did not know his German interlocutors, and did not know how they felt about Americans or about the assignment, he tried several speaker positions, self-deprecating disclaimers, tentative assertions, open-ended questions, and utterances that distanced him from “obnoxious” Americans in order to show himself as a plain, simple, “folksy guy.” The notion of *stance* (Ochs, 1996) is useful for interpreting how Marie positioned herself toward the truth of her utterances (epistemic stance) and their emotional intensity (affective stance). For instance, when she said “I’m *really* happy and glad,” one can talk about her affective stance vis-à-vis German reunification, although her sincerity is questionable given that two lines above she mentioned the bitterness caused around her by the very same reunification. The word *really* normally indexes an epistemic stance of certainty, but in this context without further clues it becomes somewhat ambiguous.

Finally, we can consider this exchange and its outcome from a perspective of facework (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Considering that the other members of the group were eavesdropping on

the conversation even if they did not take part in it, Rob's risk of losing face was not insignificant. Marie's "little history lesson" clearly impinged on his autonomy as the well-educated adult he considered himself to be and was thus a threat to his negative face. In addition, it made him look dumb, thus threatening his positive face. Similarly, Rob's rebuttal of Marie's remark about Bush as "a warhawk" was possibly perceived as a threat to Marie's positive face, in other words, her pride at being up-to-date on current events in her English class.

Seeing language as discourse does not yield the key to the "truth" of this exchange, but it gives teachers and students the tools to talk about what was going on from an interactional, not merely a linguistic, perspective (Scollon & Scollon, 2000). It allows the class to negotiate an interpretation of the potential meanings of the exchange. It is true that such discussion makes no guarantee that misunderstandings will not occur again, but because of its nature, language education cannot expect such guarantees. What viewing language as discourse can do, on a much larger scale and in a more concentrated way than even study abroad, is bring together teachers and students from different countries, histories, and cultures to discuss their differences and the role played by the electronic medium in highlighting these differences.

#### *Computer-Mediated Communication and Standards for Foreign Language Education*

Computer-mediated communication (CmC) confronts language teachers with the ultimate *raison d'être* of language teaching. For what reasons are we teaching foreign languages? The National Standards propose that by learning a language other than their own, people "gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures," "develop insight into the nature of language and culture through comparisons of the language and cultures studied and their own," and "participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world" (ACTFL, 1996). An incident like the one we have discussed brings to the fore the relationship of language and culture, or *language relativity*. In other words, it shows how the words we use are a window on how we think, even if there can be no one-to-one equivalence between an utterance and the thoughts behind it. Such an incident also shows the cultural relativity of our students' own linguistic and interactional behaviors, which they might have assumed were universal, just because a computer is a computer all

over the world. What CmC requires, even more than more contextualized forms of interaction, is a "decentered" perspective, in which one person must imagine the other person for lack of being able to hear, see, or touch him or her. If there is one thing that online teaching requires, it is a supplement of imagination: a willingness to imagine another person as different from oneself, to recognize the other in his or her historicity and subjectivity, and to see ourselves through the eyes of others.

By presenting us with only words on a screen, CmC forces teachers to see culture as embedded in language as discourse. Many teachers still feel that they do not have time to teach culture; many students feel that culture takes time away from the "real" thing, that is, grammar (Chavez, 2002), or that it is not relevant to the goals of language teaching (Kubota, Austin, & Saito-Abbott, 2003). The incident discussed in this article shows that, whether students and teachers want it or not, culture is inescapably part of language as discourse, in other words, language is social semiotic practice (Kramsch, 2002).

Finally, CmC debunks the myth of the happy "participation in multilingual communities" promoted by the National Standards. The term *community* carries connotations of harmony, warmth, and empathy that are not necessarily present just because several people converse online. Community is something that has to be achieved through a willingness to see beyond the dictionary meanings of words and to engage in mutual negotiation. This negotiation can lead to asking big questions like "What was the difference between the American and the Russian occupation of Germany, as seen from the United States? From East Germany?" or "Why is there now so much unemployment in the Eastern provinces of Germany?"

#### TOWARDS AN INTERCULTURAL STANCE

Given that encounters such as the one we have discussed in this article are unavoidable, the question becomes: How can we harness these incidents to foster our students' cross-cultural growth? These exchanges, to be sure, afford both teachers and students the opportunity to learn more about historical facts, linguistic features of speech, and discourse pragmatics, as well as about the expectations of genre and the constraints of the medium. These types of knowledge can be the objects of explicit instruction for foreign language teachers and their students in such courses as Language Awareness, Discourse Analysis, or Applied

Linguistics. The theoretical knowledge gained in these courses can provide conceptual categories and tools to analyze the transcripts. But such an analysis requires tact, sensitivity, and trust among the participants, and a willingness to abandon the normative schemas of thought that are customary in foreign language education in institutional settings. Any metalanguage applied to a person's spontaneous communicative discourse runs the risk of being perceived as a criticism in the name of some ultimate truth or accuracy held by the teacher or some expert disciplinary authority. That such a truth does not exist has been amply illustrated here.

What the teacher, then, has to model is less a body of knowledge than an intercultural stance (Kramsch, 1999) in order to face these challenges and paradoxes. This stance or *savoir être* (knowledge of how to be), a phrase that Byram and Zarate (1994) used to describe intercultural attitudes toward self and other, includes the willingness to engage with the students in an exploration of difference rather than in an assumption of similarity (Bernstein, 1996).<sup>10</sup> It entails discussing jointly with the students ways of conducting this exploration and ways of imagining the logic of another person by interpreting his or her utterances, according to evidence from external facts and from the on-going discourse, not random speculation. As students explore the nature of language and communication across cultures through their technology-mediated interactions, teachers will be pivotal in helping them take such an intercultural stance. They can help their students develop a decentered perspective that goes beyond comprehending the surface meaning of words to discovering the logic of their interlocutors' utterances. Their reflection on the logic underlying language will help them understand better their own reasoning and the cultural context from which it comes, as well as the viewpoints of others. It is this reflection that frames and fosters the intercultural stance of language learning.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term *telecollaborative project* to refer to a technology-mediated language and culture exchange in which language learners write to one another in both their native and target languages. Telecollaborative projects involve the use of both synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (delayed-time) writing, as well as teleconferencing functions that allow for the exchange of visual and aural communication. In this article, the term *online* is used with reference both to the asynchronous project under discussion, and to synchronous writing. Given that each of these two modes has distinct properties, however, we attempt to make clear the constraints and resources particular to asynchronous writing.

<sup>2</sup> Of particular importance to the research was capturing the perspectives of the students on both sides of the exchange, so the first author used the logistical disadvantage of the limited overlap between the American and German academic calendar as an advantage in order to travel between both countries to collect qualitative data at both sites. A German professor at the American university taught the American class, and the first author taught the 3-week Intensive English seminar in Germany. Through dissertation funding provided by the Berkeley Language Center at the University of California at Berkeley, she was able to spend the weeks before and after the exchange in the German class at the American university, which allowed for the collection of several layers of ethnographic data at both sites.

<sup>3</sup> We use the term *turn* in asynchronous communication for messages posted to the discussion board that are directly addressed to a particular person or group and that fulfill the communicative purpose of taking up a position in a conversational chain of messages. The type of turn-taking structures found in delayed time writing clearly differ from real-time chatting or face-to-face conversation, and we are not attempting an analysis of those differences here. However, the students referred to their discussions on Blackboard as *turns*, and they held expectations that their partners would take their turns in alternating succession. We later use the term *utterance* not from a face-to-face framework that insists on oral language, but from a sociocultural perspective that includes the written word as a viable way to take up a conversational position. The ambiguity of these terms reflects the ambiguity of the medium itself, which can have both oral and written features, depending on how the individual who is writing orients himself or herself to the medium.

<sup>4</sup> The texts were drawn from a range of German-language and English-language media sources, including print newspapers, newsmagazines, and online media. In both the German and the American classes,

strong emphasis was placed on strengthening the students' academic writing in the foreign language, so the syllabus contained several writing prompts requiring students to analyze and evaluate a series of articles. Our intention was for the students not only to interact socially online about topics of their own choosing, but also to engage with their virtual partners as peers, each contributing their own culturally specific interpretations of joint texts.

<sup>5</sup> Students in the Intensive English course received a total of 60 contact hours of instruction across the 3-week period of the exchange. Because few of the German students had access to the Internet at home, their class time was structured to allow them to write to their partners in the computer lab. They spent approximately 6 hours each week in a computer lab, 2 hours in a language lab, and 12 hours in the traditional classroom.

<sup>6</sup> Like most semester-long courses, this course offered 3 credit hours for 60 contact hours of instruction spread across the 15-week academic semester. Because the students met for only 3 contact hours a week, they were required to write to their German partners on their own time outside of class. Given that all of the American students had a personal computer at home and the university was fully equipped with several networked computer labs, this requirement posed no access problems for them.

<sup>7</sup> In the postexchange interviews, the first author conducted a stimulated recall with Marie using the transcript from this episode. At the time, Marie stated that perhaps she had come across as too teacherly. The lack of a postexchange interview or email with Rob is problematic, because his interpretation of the episode remains unknown. He preferred not to schedule a postexchange interview, hence his position cannot be clarified. No reference to this episode was made in class during the 3 weeks of the exchange, but Rob and another student, Matt, both wrote about it on Blackboard in the weeks after the exchange.

<sup>8</sup> The students had been asked to complete a language and culture survey in their native language before the beginning of the online exchange. The survey was administered in German to the German students and in English to the U.S. students. The structure of the survey was taken from suggestions in the *Cultura* project (Furstenberg et al., 2001). It included both such culturally loaded words as *democracy* and *freedom* that the students were asked to define, and the beginnings of sentences that the students were to complete (e.g., "A good student is someone who . . ."). The answers were compiled into one document that juxtaposed the responses so that the students could discuss how words that were supposedly the same could evoke different cultural connotations.

<sup>9</sup> Matt seems to have picked up, during his years in Germany, a western German prejudicial discourse against Easterners as being less German and more "Russian."

<sup>10</sup> Bernstein (1996) defined the difference between two pedagogic models. The competence model is based on an assumption of commonality and similarity among

learners who all have access to the same innate competence for language acquisition. The performance model is based on an assumption of difference among learners who have been socialized under vastly different social, economic, educational, and cultural conditions.

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## Congratulations to Mildenberger Prize Awardees

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The Modern Language Association awarded the 2003 Kenneth W. Mildenberger Prize to Janina Brutt-Griffler for her book *World English: A Study of Its Development* (Multilingual Matters Ltd.). Ken Hyland received an honorable mention for his work *Second Language Writing* (Cambridge University Press).

Readers are encouraged to consult these outstanding contributions to the profession.

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