PREPARING GLOBALLY DISTRIBUTED VIRTUAL TEAM MEMBERS TO BRIDGE BOUNDARIES OF LANGUAGE DIFFERENCE

A graduate program teaching case

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This teaching case describes an elective course in an online graduate program in technical and professional communication at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. The course was developed to prepare students to negotiate the boundaries of language difference. The theoretical framework for the course was based primarily on translingual literacy theory (Canagarajah 2009a; Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011), which challenges the monolingual orientation to communication that is prevalent in the United States. Course topics included language change, writing systems, World Englishes, editing for global audiences, and contrastive rhetoric. Through a series of scaffolded explorations, students developed and implemented strategies for interacting on an internet site using an unfamiliar language.

Keywords. Translingualism, Language difference, World Englishes, Workplace writing, Globalization, Virtual teams, Machine translation, Experiential learning.

Members of globally distributed virtual teams are likely to encounter language difference among team members because such teams are culturally diverse (Angouri, 2013; Brandl & Neyer, 2009; Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen & Piekkari, 2006; Gibbs, 2009). The language difference might be limited to variation in pronunciation or word choice, such as occurs between Australian

English and British English, or it might be as extensive as the difference between German and Mandarin Chinese. Even though English is widely used as the *lingua franca* of electronically-mediated global communication (Duff, 2005; Newton & Kusmierczyk, 2011), the performance of global teams may be hindered by the lack of English language proficiency of one or more team members (Chen, Geluykens, & Chong 2006; Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen & Piekkari, 2006; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012).

Language difference within globally distributed virtual teams may result from geographical separation, but due to the increasing transnational flow of ideas, resources, and people, the teammates who use different languages may be located in the same home office (Dutton, 1998; Roberts, 2010; Ryan, 2013; Thomas & Gregory, 1993; Vertovec, 2007). Effective, inclusive workplace communication thus requires that members of globally distributed virtual teams possess attitudes, strategies, and language technologies that will help them to bridge language differences.

This teaching case describes an online graduate course that was developed and taught at the University of Wisconsin-Stout to prepare students to meet the challenge of communicating in multilingual environments. Drawing on research and insights from three academic fields—technical communication, applied linguistics, and rhetoric and composition—the course prepared students for an unusual culminating assignment in which they achieved sustained interaction on a non-English-language blog or online forum. This teaching case explains how it was possible to prepare students to communicate across language difference, and it highlights the positive learning outcomes that resulted from the assignment. The Appendix and References sections provide materials that can be adapted for use in a range of educational settings.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the course relied primarily on translingual literacy theory (Canagarajah, 2009a; Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011), which is an alternate approach to thinking about language difference. It is an approach that

attempts to more accurately describe what actually happens in real-world communication among people who do not share a strong command of the same language. The course design also drew upon the scholarship of World Englishes (Jenkins, 2009; Kachru, 1992) in order to provide a global context for the language that would be most familiar to students, English. Finally, basic theories of contrastive rhetoric (Connor, 2002; Connor, Nagelhout & Rozycki, 2008; Thatcher, 2004), and technical communication (Bokor, 2011; Ehrenreich, 2010; Fraiberg, 2013; Holdaway, 2010; Kohl, 2008) guided the course's focus on written communication. To integrate such theoretical perspectives into the course and to prepare for the final project, students discussed a range of cross-disciplinary readings and explored language features and language technologies. In the final project that challenged them to achieve sustained interaction on an internet site using an unfamiliar language, students not only learned about translingual literacy theory, they put it into practice.

Defining Translingual Practice

Translingual practice refers to both written and oral communication in which people who may not be native speakers of the same language employ all of their language knowledge and their full range of communicative resources to achieve mutual comprehension. In other words, it describes communication that is not limited by the notion of a person having one "native language." Translingual practice includes the strategies, languages, signs, and genres that people can use to communicate effectively in global contact zones. This approach to communication sees language difference as a resource more than a barrier. For example, Canagarajah (2013c) describes a code-meshed, "unconventional" essay written by a multilingual student in a U.S graduate course as one example of translingual practice in written communication (p. 1). Likewise, he points to a successful transaction between a Catalan-speaking passenger and an Italian-speaking cab driver as an example of translingual practice in oral communication (p. 4).

Other labels have been used by scholars across the disciplines to refer to cross-language meaning-making in language contact zones (Bailey, 2007;

Blommaert, 2008; Canagarajah, 2006a, 2009b; Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García, 2009; Jacquemet, 2005; Jørgensen, 2008; Pennycook, 2010; Pratt, 2010; Young, 2004). In addition, the term *translingualism* has been used by a range of scholars who might interpret the term in slightly different ways. This teaching case relies on the meaning of translingual practice as developed in a series of publications by Canagarajah (2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2014) and on the similar definition articulated collaboratively by leading scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition (Horner, Lu, Royster & Trimbur, 2011). The reason for this choice is that these early and rigorously developed definitions of translingual practice focus on written and oral communication in academia and the workplace.

Translingual Literacy Theory

Translingual literacy theory is rooted in applied linguistics research and has also received significant theoretical attention among writing specialists in the field of rhetoric and composition (Canagarajah, 2013b; Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011; Horner, NeCamp, & Donahue, 2011). The translingual paradigm acknowledges that communication across language difference is a normal occurrence throughout the world (Canagarajah, 2009a). It seeks to discover and promote effective strategies for cross-language communication and to recognize and amplify the meaning-making that language difference affords. As Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur (2011) assert, "[A translingual approach] sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening" (p. 303). Thus, a translingual orientation requires a shift in perspective, one that may challenge people who have been educated to believe that the only means for cross-language communication is reliance on translation or achieving native-like proficiency in the relevant languages.

A translingual perspective relies on the foundational assumption that communication is social. Meaning is not constructed by one individual and then transferred to another individual; it is a social activity. As Canagarajah (2014)

notes, "Translanguaging is social. My successful communication depends on you." This idea grows out of research into the ways that multilinguals negotiate meaning when conversing in English. This research shows that participants in multilingual conversations work together to achieve intelligibility (Canagarajah, 2009a, p. 19). As Canagarajah (2009a) demonstrates, the term *translingual* exists not only as an adjective or as the noun *translingualism*, but it has also come to be used as a verb, *to translanguage*. It is something people do, when needed.

Translingual practice is not the only solution to the problem of cross-language communication. It will not replace translation or make learning foreign languages obsolete. It also does not eliminate the very frequent need to produce grammatically perfect discourse. Nevertheless, including translingual practice in the repertoire of communication practices does conflict with a monolingual orientation to communication because it rejects the expectation of linguistic homogeneity and standardization in every communicative situation. For this reason, a translingual orientation is not always readily accepted among educators despite its widespread application in practice.

Translingual literacy theory repudiates the monolingual, native-speaker ideal of language use that is prevalent in the United States. Despite the increasingly global flow and functioning of people, information, resources, and economic production, United States education at all levels most often enacts a monolingual "English only" orientation (Horner & Trimbur, 2002; Horner et al., 2011). This monolingual perspective views languages as discrete, fixed systems and assumes that an individual's identity is associated with one "native" language.

A monolingual orientation produces the expectation that people identify with one, fixed native language and learn and use other languages one at a time. Two related assumptions can hamper communication across language difference. The first is an uncritical affirmation of "Standard English" (or a standard for any other language) and the expectation of grammatical "correctness" (according to the standard) in all types of communication (Horner & Trimbur, 2002; Horner et al., 2011). The second inhibiting assumption is that advanced fluency in another language is required in order to attempt communication in that language (Canagarajah, 2013c; Horner & Trimbur, 2002).

The course that is described in this teaching case, ENGL 712 Communicating in Multilingual Environments, was designed to unsettle the assumptions of a monolingual orientation in order to equip professional communicators with the language awareness, attitudes, and skills that would enable them to collaborate more effectively with colleagues in linguistically diverse global teams. This preparation was achieved through readings, investigations of language change and variation, observations of multilingual interactions, and participation in an online conversation using a language other than English, which was the language of instruction for the course.

Defining Language Difference

ENGL 712 focused on language difference as difference in systems of linguistic elements (vocabulary and syntax.) However, this distinction is an artificial one because the linguistic system of a language cannot be dissociated from its cultural home. This is because language and culture are inextricably intertwined. Language behavior is flexible, variable, and strongly influenced by a communicator's personal history and social identity (Chambers, 1995; Labov, 1972). A person's cultural background fosters unspoken or even unconscious assumptions about language behavior and communicative practice, and these assumptions have a critical impact on communication (Connor, 1996; Hall, 1976; Hoft, 1995; Thatcher, 2004). Nevertheless, differences in the purely linguistic elements are complex enough to warrant specific attention apart from the influence of cultural assumptions.

In addition, cultural issues are often addressed in intercultural communication courses, while the problem of communicating across differences in language as systems of linguistic elements is rarely attempted outside of courses focused specifically on translation (Bokor, 2011; Flammia, 2005; Maylath, 1997). While acknowledging the importance of cultural issues, ENGL 712 emphasized strategies for communicating across differences in language as systems of linguistic elements.

Precisely defining what constitutes language difference can be a thorny issue. On the one hand, the system of linguistic elements labeled "Japanese" is obviously different from the one labeled "English." On the other hand, recognizing when the differences between World Englishes become significant enough to impede mutual comprehension is not as straightforward. In fact, some of the most problematic misunderstandings may occur among team members who use different varieties of one language (Chen, Geluykens, & Chong, 2006; Gilsdorf, 2002). For example, phonological and lexical differences can cause problems, such as when a speaker of Singapore English remarks, "We use to have meetings on Mondays." A team member who speaks American English would likely conclude that the Monday meetings no longer occur, when in fact the Singapore colleague meant that meetings are usually held on Mondays. The misunderstanding may not be immediately apparent to either team member because the linguistic construction used seems comprehensible to both of them, (even though it is not grammatically perfect in American English). Anticipating and negotiating a range of language differences was thus a key learning target for ENGL 712.

Course Content

ENGL 712 was an online seminar in the University of Wisconsin-Stout's graduate program for working professional and technical communicators. Students from Florida to Oregon were able to participate in the course by means of the Desire2Learn (D2L) learning management system. Students exchanged ideas and discussed readings on a D2L discussion board. In addition, students shared observations and plans for the culminating assignment, the Multilingual Interaction Project (MIP), on a course wiki hosted by Wikispaces. The course introduced students to theories and concepts relevant to communicating in multilingual environments, including

- principles of language variation and change,
- different perspectives on the global role of English,

- the implications of different writing systems for electronic communication,
- contrastive rhetoric,
- research on writing in the global workplace,
- translingual communication strategies.

These six units and the culminating MIP assignment are described below.

Unit 1: Language Change

Language change was the first topic covered in ENGL 712. Students began with nontechnical readings and a short exploration of the history of an interesting word of their choice, using the Oxford English Dictionary as an etymological resource. This activity allowed students to start with something familiar and then expand their understanding. Beginning with the topic of language change at the outset of the course challenged the perception of language as an isolated, fixed, "pure" system. Instead, students saw that "languages" interact and are shaped by social circumstances. Students then completed the first "Language Exploration" assignment in which they observed language change by comparing texts from different time periods about a similar topic or event. They selected texts from either the *Time* magazine corpus or from historical and current newspapers accessed through the university library. Readings about the history of English and audio clips of Old English and Middle English complemented this assignment.

The texts selected for these readings were relevant excerpts from Allan, Bradshaw, Finch, Burridge, and Heydon (2010), Curzan and Adams (2012), and Rickerson and Hilton (2006). One goal for this unit was to use English as a case study of language change. Another goal was for students to think about how all languages change over time, and to note how language contact and the political relationships between speech communities contribute to language change. Optional background readings about general topics in linguistics and linguistic terminology were provided for interested readers. These texts were also drawn from Allan et al. (2006) and Rickerson and Hilton (2006).

Unit 2: Writing Systems and Electronic Discourse

In the second unit of study, students read about and reported on different writing systems. Students were required to investigate a writing system that does not use the Roman alphabet (e.g., abjad systems, syllabic systems, and logographic systems). They also discussed the differences between spoken and written language, noting how electronic discourse tends to blur this distinction. This unit built on the previous one about language change as students noticed that the written code tends to be more stable over time than spoken discourse. The unit also gave students the opportunity to think about the affordances of language systems other than English, and to consider how language technologies have influenced language use.

All of these topics were relevant to communication across language difference because they prepared students to grasp key assumptions of a translingual orientation toward communication. By gaining awareness of different writing systems, students realized that human communication can employ a range of semiotic resources (such as writing systems), and that a writing system is not the language itself, but an artifact rooted in a particular time, place, and purpose. They also learned that communication does not have to be restricted to one kind of code or semiotic system; adaptation is possible. Additionally, they realized that, as literate English users, they had already developed different ways of using language, including registers and genres that were appropriate for writing and others suited for speaking. Acknowledging that they were already negotiating these kinds of language differences was a step toward bridging other kinds of language difference.

Unit 3: World Englishes

In the fourth week of the semester, students began a series of readings about World Englishes drawn mainly from Jenkins (2009), a "flexi-text" in the Routledge English Language Introduction series that can be read topically across

eight different strands[1], or comprehensively through an introduction, development, exploration, and extension of all eight strands. For the purposes of ENGL 712, we touched briefly on the first two strands (historical, social and political context, and pidgins and creoles), but spent the most time on strands four, five, and six (these strands focused on variation in Englishes across the world, the standardization of different Englishes, and English as a *lingua franca*). This focus was selected because these strands were sufficient to introduce the concept of World Englishes, and there was not time to cover the entire textbook. Appreciating the worldwide variation in Englishes not only prepared students to communicate with users of different Englishes, but it also continued to disrupt a monolingual orientation to communication. Additionally, the study of World Englishes reinforced the social nature of language change, and illustrated both the arbitrary nature and the social role of language standards.

Unit 4: Writing in the Global Workplace

The fourth unit of study focused on writing in the global workplace. An introduction to Kohl's *Global English Style Guide* (2008) was central to this unit. In addition, students read research reports about editing texts for international audiences and using machine translation (Leininger & Yuan, 1998; Rychtyckyj, 2007). Students then applied Kohl's editing strategies to evaluate the global readability of a marketing text. They also carried out a limited usability test of an edited portion of their own academic writing. Students who were non-native English speakers and who were enrolled in an advanced English as a Second Language (ESL) writing class were recruited to read and evaluate three versions of each excerpt of academic writing: the original English text, the edited English text, and a machine translation of the edited text (translated into the ESL student's home language). This language exploration assignment presented the

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[1] The eight strands are (1) historical, social and political context, (2) pidgins and creoles, (3) debates about English today, (4) variation in Englishes across the world, (5) the standardization of different Englishes, (6) English as a *lingua franca*, (7) Asian and European Englishes, and (8) the future of Englishes in the world.

graduate students in ENGL 712 with their first opportunity to experiment with communication across language difference. Because ENGL 712 was offered in an online format, students were not able to meet in a face-to-face setting with the ESL students who evaluated the texts. Instead, the instructor collected ESL student feedback and relayed it to the ENGL 712 students.

Unit 5: Contrastive Rhetoric

The fifth unit of study considered the topic of contrastive rhetoric from three perspectives. First, students were introduced to the topic of contrastive rhetoric and important criticisms of it in Atkinson (2004), Connor (2002), and Kaplan (1966). Next, they used the notion of contrastive rhetoric as a means of examining the strategies of multilingual writers when reading articles by Canagarajah (2009a, 2006b), Kachru (1992), Thatcher (2004). Finally, students selected one research report from Section II, pages 45-191 of Connor et al. (2008) to read and summarize for the class. Each of these research reports investigated the differences in a specific genre (such as newspaper editorials) from different parts of the world.

Key learning goals of this unit included

- Learning strategies for reading research articles, a key genre for graduate students.

- Recognizing the role of genre and culture in shaping written communication.

Awareness of the contributions of genre and culture to communication practices is crucial for people working in globalized virtual teams who may come from different cultural backgrounds and who may collaborate in the creation of a range of genres. These topics may be more fully covered in intercultural communication courses; however, reminding students of this issue allowed them to integrate concepts related to culture and genre with ENGL 712's primary focus on language as a system of linguistic elements.

Unit 6: Translingual Approaches to Language Difference

In the sixth and final unit, students read and discussed the Horner et al. (2011) landmark articulation of translingual literacy theory, as well as a few related articles about approaches to language difference (Horner & Trimbur, 2002; Jacquemet, 2005; NCTE, 1974). By this point in the semester, students were ready to comprehend the new term "translingual" and the related theoretical arguments because they had been exploring key concepts of translingual literacy theory since the first week of the semester. The readings applied directly to student experience because at that time students were also fully engaged with the culminating project of the semester, the Multilingual Interaction Project (MIP).

The Multilingual Interaction Project

The MIP was more lab experience than seminar paper. (The assignment description is included in the Appendix.) The project was scaffolded in a series of small steps as students moved from observing non-English language websites in weeks 5-7, to developing strategies for participation in weeks 8-11, to achieving sustained interaction on a website using an unfamiliar language during weeks 12-14. Students completed a weekly record of their experiences (a kind of "lab notebook" that each student kept and submitted electronically to a dropbox), submitted a progress report midway through the project, and summarized and reflected on their experience in a final report. Throughout the project, students shared their experiences, suggestions and mutual encouragement through discussion board interaction with classmates and posts to a shared project wiki.

Machine translation was an essential aid to communicating online in a language other than English in the MIP, so students were guided in its use. Before attempting to participate in a non-English language online discussion, students carried out exercises using machine translation. For example, after studying strategies for editing English-language texts for maximum readability and efficient translation, students tested the effectiveness of their edits by soliciting feedback from non-native English speakers about the English-language versions and a machine-translated version of a text. Students also carried out

repeated cycles of machine translation, translating a text from English to a target language and then back into English as a way to estimate the comprehensibility of the machine translations. The goal of these exercises was to introduce students to the usefulness and limitations of machine translation.

Despite its shortcomings, machine translation was an essential component of the MIP because language technologies, including machine translation, have become an essential part of translation and localization practices in a globalized workplace (Kohl, 2008; GALA, 2010, Nov 22; GALA, 2010, Dec 15). In addition, the quality of machine translation continues to improve even as its availability increases. The quality of translations produced by statistical machine translation tools—Google translate is one example—depends on having a massive database of parallel translations in multiple languages. As more content is added to the database, the quality of the translation produced can improve, especially when qualified community members help add to and correct the parallel translations (Google Translate, n.d.). The availability of such tools increases as their creators add features and platforms. For example, when this article was being written, Microsoft was publicizing progress in research toward real-time machine translation of spoken conversation using Skype (Microsoft Research, 2014) and Google was announcing improvements to its phone app (Gilsinan, 2015).

The increasing availability and effectiveness of machine translation technologies means that members of globally distributed virtual teams must be ready to choose and apply them appropriately. Machine translation will never replace the need for human translation. However it can be used to translate materials that are not important enough to merit the expense of human translation, and machine translation can be used when a general understanding of the communication is needed quickly and there is not time for a full and accurate human translation.

The need for machine translation in the MIP was one reason why it was so important to expose and critique a monolingual orientation to communication early in the semester. Machine translation was not proposed as a solution to language difference, but as a limited tool that could play a role in an overall multilingual communication strategy. By the time students had to make public

posts online in a language other than English, they were aware that successful communication across language difference can occur despite a lack of grammatical correctness if all parties involved are willing to work together to achieve intelligibility. The MIP put students in the position of having to participate in this kind of negotiation of meaning.

Initially, several students were wary of using machine translation because previous, foreign-language teachers had strenuously warned them not to use it. Their teachers had emphasized that machine translation was unreliable, and that their translated texts were very likely to fall short of grammatical correctness. Interestingly, a student who was initially the most resistant to using machine translation was the only one who was bilingual. (She was required to make MIP posts in an unfamiliar third language.) In her early non-English posts for the MIP, she explained that she was using machine translation and apologized for the grammar errors that her posts might contain. Her classmates eventually persuaded her that adding the apology was not a rhetorically effective strategy. This bilingual student's behavior suggests that a person's desire for universal grammatical correctness—part of a monolingual orientation to communication—does not necessarily correspond to the number of languages that a person can use.

Although the MIP seemed like an impossible task to students, their ultimate response to the project was positive. For example, one student noted:

> The MIP immersion process provided insights that the typical read-about-it and write-about-it approach to learning could not have; it gave students direct exposure to the social challenges and human emotions of a linguistic outsider wishing to engage authentically in a global conversation.

Another student explained:

> …as we come to the end of the [MIP] project, I am pretty positive that without this exact type of assignment, none of us (I know I never would have, at least) would have ever really taken the leap to do something like communicating in a language you don't know how to speak, much less write in. We would not have

connected the dots between our readings and an actual understanding of what it means to work in multi-lingual environments.

These students articulated key learning outcomes for the course. They were pushed outside their comfort zones, but in a tolerable way. And they communicated successfully despite being a *linguistic outsider*. This experience might engender empathy, creativity, and persistence in future translanguaging opportunities in a globally distributed virtual team, which would be especially valuable when someone else on the team might be the "linguistic outsider."

Conclusions

The content of ENGL 712 surprised students and challenged them to think in new ways about communicating with colleagues from different language backgrounds. However, it was the trial-and-error experience of communicating online in a language other than English with people they had not previously encountered that caused students to marshal their own unique set of language resources into a translingual communication strategy. This experience prepared these students for today's workplace because it mirrored some of the same tensions that they are likely to face when working on globally distributed virtual teams. These students will have more realistic and empowering expectations for communicating in multilingual environments because they will not be limited by the inhibiting expectations that result from a monolingual orientation to communication. The following conclusions highlight specific observations about what made the course successful and about the value of ENGL 712 for future members of globally distributed virtual teams.

ENGL 712 Meets an Unrecognized Need

This course met needs that the students who enrolled in it did not recognize that they had when the course began. The course changed the way students thought about workplace communication by challenging the monolingual paradigm. A monolingual orientation can be so pervasive that it is taken for granted, invisible.

Without being offered an alternate perspective, students may not be able to imagine that any other approach would be possible. At the beginning of this course, even though the syllabus clearly stated that "students will develop effective approaches for participating in a multilingual, interactive blog or social networking site," students did not expect that they would actually be required to communicate in a language other than English. They believed that "multilingual" interaction would occur in English, or that it would be a topic to read about rather than an activity that they would carry out themselves. In addition, students did not appreciate the range of language resources that they already possessed. When required to communicate in a language other than English, high school foreign language classes became relevant, and the taken-for-granted ability to shift between academic and social registers became a generalizable skill.

World Englishes and Global Editing Practices Are Unfamiliar Topics

The sequence of readings for the course worked well. One student commented that the assignment sequence "create[d] a 'just in time' learning experience. Questions form in my head and suddenly the next set of readings speaks right to those questions." The two topics that generated the most engaged discussion among students were the topic of World Englishes and the readings about editing for global readability and machine translation. Students were not familiar with the concept of World Englishes, despite the fact that scholarship in this area has been flourishing since the 1982 publication of Kachru's seminal book *The Other Tongue*. Likewise, despite its prevalent use among large, globalized organizations, students were also unfamiliar with the concept of controlled authoring and editing for translation. Knowing about World Englishes will likely prepare students to be more accepting of the different varieties of English that they encounter among members of globalized virtual teams. Being familiar with editing for global readability and translation will help students to communicate more successfully in writing with clients and colleagues from other language backgrounds.

Experiential Learning Is Vital

Crucial to the success of this course was its experiential aspect. The MIP report was perhaps not as lengthy as the typical graduate school seminar paper, but completing the project produced a paradigm shift in the way students thought about multilingual interaction. Leading up to this culminating project, the language exploration exercises lured students out of their comfort zones in a gradual way. The first two language explorations raised students' awareness of what language is and how it works. Then the third exploration that involved editing texts for a real audience of ESL readers provided direct preparation for the MIP because it offered interaction. This exercise could have been made even more valuable if the students had been able to present the texts to the ESL students online in real time using Skype, Blackboard Collaborate, or another virtual meeting software so that students could have directly observed the ESL students' reactions and could have received their feedback firsthand.

Process Is More Valuable Than the Product in ENGL 712

Within the MIP itself, setting a low expectation for "sustained interaction" and allowing ample time to achieve that goal was important. The process required a "trial and error" approach. The students learned to seek out topical, discussion-board websites rather than blogs, though the range of possible interactive sites is varied and will continue to change. Conducting a series of reviews of multilingual websites was a valuable first step in the MIP, even though students often did not discover suitable websites for interaction this way, which was the original purpose of this step when the assignment was created. Nevertheless, conducting the website reviews provided valuable practice navigating websites in languages other than English, and these reviews affirmed the tentative, "trial-and-error" approach that was needed for finding and posting to interactive, non-English language websites.

Requiring students to interact on a non-English-language website, the final step of the project, was a risk, but it paid off. Even students who struggled with finding a suitable site and an appropriate "presence" when using a different

language did eventually benefit from the experience. One student commented, "My personal experiences, at first, were rather frustrating. However, after receiving great feedback from my instructor and my peers, I was able to get more successful results." In ENGL 712, the goal was not for students to produce high quality posts in an unfamiliar language. It was instead for students to recognize that interaction across a substantial degree of language difference is possible. This experience, and the shift in thinking that it engendered, helped to prepare students to work across boundaries of language difference as future members of globally distributed virtual teams. ■

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Appendix

Multilingual Interaction Project (MIP) Assignment Description

Overview of what you will do:

Stage 1 **Exploration**

> Visit and review multiple multilingual websites. I will provide a list of suitable web sites, but you are more than welcome to explore beyond it and add to the list

> The list of suitable web sites will be provided on a course wiki. The wiki will be for our class only; it will be closed to the public

> You will post three website reviews to the wiki

> You will begin to keep your record of experiences in Stage 1, and you can do this on an individual page in the wiki or in a separate Word document.

Stage 2 **Interaction**

Achieve sustained interaction on a multilingual website of your choice

Write a report about your experiences

Learning Goal for the MIP

Each student will develop and practice strategies for communicating online across language boundaries.

Behavioral Goals for the MIP

Each student will…

Explore different types of multilingual websites and review three of them. The reviews will be posted to a class wiki.

Achieve sustained interaction on one site that uses at least one language that is unfamiliar to the student. Sustained interaction is defined as a minimum of three posts or comments made on different days, preferably with response from another user of the site. Sustained interaction might require attempts at involvement on more than one website.

Keep a record of experiences. Think of your record as a "lab notebook" or as a reflective journal in which you can write about your intentions, plans, actions, and results of attempting to communicate on a multilingual site. The purpose of this record of what you see and do is to gain insight about the nature of multilingual interaction and to develop strategies for cross-language communication that you can use in the future.

Create a written progress report in Week 11 of the semester

Summarize your experiences in a report that will be shared with the class. You can use graphics, audio, and video in your report if desired.

About the author

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