

Intercultural Communication in Online Forums: Exploring New Possibilities

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A large proportion of the world's university student population are required to read and write some instructional material in English (Carey, 1996,1997). Also, a university education now requires at least a minimum degree of familiarity with internet technologies, and in particular, computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools. As the world continues to adopt English as a world or global language of communication, it is inevitable that students will eventually be communicating via internet technologies with populations of students from around the world in English. These facts permit the creation of links for diverse cultures of ESL students from around the globe to employ CMC for their mutual benefit in courses on intercultural understanding and global communication.

This study is part of a large multi-year, multi-course project that has sought to promote interdisciplinary research on developing online courses that can particularly benefit

writing fluency among diverse groups of student from geographically dispersed universities representing multiple ethnicities and cultures. We propose that by drawing on the cultural resources of student's experiences from these varied backgrounds that international CMC forums can attain a level of discussion that draws on contemporary expertise on global issues and can thereby promote authentic intercultural understandings. Furthermore, international students studying related courses on international business, law, science and technology, can be particularly motivated to acquire and express their knowledge in written English because their future academic and professional success depends on it.

This study involved intermediate undergraduate students at three different universities—ITESM-Tec de Monterrey in Mexico, Yakustk State University in Russia, and Ritsumeikan University students from Japan on a 1 year exchange at the University of British Columbia in Canada. The students were enrolled in credit courses taught in English at their respective universities and, as part of their course requirements, participated in an asynchronous threaded discussion forum involving 123 students from the 3 universities. All three courses at the three universities were on intercultural understanding and global socio-political issues and were conducted both face-to-face and online exclusively in English. The purpose of this particular descriptive study attempts to understand the experience of the ITESM participants in this intercultural collaborative activity, from both the instructors' and students' perspectives, and the perception of how this course influenced their academic writing and reading comprehension. In other

papers we have dealt with how online written postings transfers to face-to-face oral production (see Carey, 2002) and how context influences language use in online discussion forums (see Luo and Carey, this volume). The analysis and the emergent themes that arise out of this descriptive account are a critical part of an ongoing larger study that applies multiple methods of analysis to investigate the experiences and interactions of undergraduate students from three extremely different cultural backgrounds in an asynchronous computer-mediated intercultural forum in ESL.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

CMC is useful to both distance courses and mixed mode courses because it is recognized that social interaction is an important aspect of learning (Carey 1999, 2002). Much of this research is grounded in the social constructivist principles of Vygotsky (1978, 1986, Lee and Smagorinsky, 2000). Bates and Poole recently noted that “Online forums provide the opportunity for students to test ideas and build and construct knowledge through collaborative learning. Because discussion is such a critical activity for constructivists, particular attention should be paid to the design of online discussion forums” (Bates, Poole, 2003, p.200). As a result, instructional design models such as collaborative learning, cooperative learning, and problem-based learning, are considered and applied in the design of mixed mode and distance courses that use asynchronous discussion forums for interaction.

A considerable body of literature has also emerged in the area of CMC in second/foreign language instruction (SLA). In much of this literature, CMC is recognized for its value in providing language socialization opportunities via interaction in the target language beyond the classroom. Thus, CMC provides and extends communicative language teaching, where interaction largely serves the purpose of requiring students to use the target language through tasks that are designed to facilitate and encourage language production.

A survey of current research on CMC reveals that multiple approaches are being used to help understand what occurs in CMC and how it can benefit language learning. However, although CMC is being used in diverse ways, with diverse groups of students and what is needed are some insights as to how CMC can be used to optimally promote writing fluency which is fundamental to the academic and career success of international students.

Recently, several formal models for analyzing CMC discussions have been proposed in psychology, communication theory, and distance education and are now being applied to language forums. For example, Weasenforth, Biesenbach-Lucas and Meloni (2002) applied Bonk and Cunningham's (1998) model to analyze threaded discussions of students enrolled in a university ESL course. Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, and Chang (2003) applied Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2001) practical inquiry model to analyze the patterns and types of interactions taking place in online classes and to suggest instructional interventions to increase collaboration in courses. The application of these

models in analyzing online discussions is beyond the scope of this paper but is being addressed in our larger project in a forthcoming paper.

Other critical research has also begun looking at CMC with intercultural online language exchanges. For example, Belz (2003) adopted a linguistic approach to analyzing intercultural competence and the attitudes in email correspondence between two Germans and an American student. Thorne (2003) examined three cases of intercultural communication using CMC tools and found that “individual and collective experience is shown to influence the ways students engage in Internet-mediated communication with consequential outcomes for both the processes and products of language development.” In other words it was the students’ use of the tool outside the course that influenced the nature of their communication in their bilingual exchanges.

Common practice in intercultural research involves the pairing of students in bilingual exchanges through online tasks or discussions in their first or second language. For example, Belz and Kinginger (2002) paired American students learning German or French with German and French students learning English using their respective target language in email and chat. They investigated the development of student use of forms of pronouns of address (tu/vous-du/Sie). They found that “telecollaborative language study provides opportunities for social interaction which differ from those typically presented in the traditional classroom and which speak to a greater variety of contexts for authentic T/V use.” (p. 15). In addition, they observed that this linguistic development took place

through peer interaction with a native speaker, and without rule acquisition.

On the other hand, Kramsch and Thorne (2001) paired American students with French students in a MOO (synchronous), and American and French students in email communication and found that students had “very little understanding of the larger cultural framework within which each party is operating, and very little awareness that such an understanding is even necessary” (p. 20). Students had different styles of interacting which lead to misunderstandings. For Kramsch “Neither the French nor the American students were aware that the global medium only exacerbated the discrepancies in social and cultural genres of communication”(p.22). Furstenberg, Levet, English, and Maillet (2001) paired French and American students and engaged them in online discussions around shared cultural content (*Cultura Project*). The focus of their project was on developing an understanding of the other culture, and not on perfecting the mechanics of second language production skills. Consequently the Americans were writing in English and the French students wrote in French.

In contrast to the above research, we sought to create a language socialization communication situation in which students would discuss and negotiate their understandings of their own culture and identity and how it differed from other members of their ethnic group as well as other ethnic groups. Furthermore, we sought to provide for the co-construction of their understandings of the complexity of their own sociocultural group as well as the differences between sociocultural groups. Our

approach is to emphasize written and ideational fluency rather than mechanics in a second language (ESL) and we chose to give more ownership and control to the students in choosing their topics of discussion. Although we had shared themes, there was great latitude in how students approached and negotiated these themes. This greater autonomy and control that our students had differentiates our study from the more instructor controlled orientation of many other studies.

While there is interest in providing students with opportunities to use CMC in an authentic context (Carey, 1999, 2001, Warschauer and Kern, 2000) what becomes critical is to find topics and to construct online social situations that will maximize the enthusiastic and even heated exchange of ideas that are consistent with language socialization and that are of great importance to the students and their identities. Using constructivist principles, we reasoned that instructors and students could co-create an online community which valued initiating, discussing and negotiating challenging themes of wide interest to the students. This would lead students to attempt to express complex ideas in their second language and thereby promote second language acquisition. Further we thought that each of the participants would be valued for their knowledge and opinions about their particular culture and that their views on issues of socio-cultural importance to global issues would be highly appreciated by the students from other cultures. In this way, each student group could authoritatively critique stereotypes and outmoded thinking about each one of the national groups (including their own) that can lead to lack of intercultural understanding. We also thought this approach would help

promote an online community while exposing students to the ideas of imagined communities and the evolving global community. Therefore, we offered topics and encouraged students to propose new topics that were on issues of critical importance to all 3 cultural populations (eg. Global warming, global terrorism, intercultural marriage, cultural and national identity) in order to foster exchanges that were highly interactive and highly charged due to their relevance to their realities and their future careers. Ultimately, we were able to create a social situation wherein students were eager and highly motivated to push the boundaries of their own expression and thereby acquire new vocabulary and language idioms.

In summary, an examination of the literature in this area shows that although researchers have looked at individual aspects of CMC, none have attempted to look at it in a more integrated and multi-faceted investigation that we feel the complexity of intercultural communication in a second/foreign language warrants. Because space does not permit to elaborate on all of the diverse aspects of this larger study that includes the 3 cultural groups, we will specifically delineate details on the characteristics of the ITESM Mexican student participation in this study.

BACKGROUND

Characteristics of the institution

The ESL students involved in this research project were undergraduates taking an Advanced language through content English course at ITESM-Tec de Monterrey University in Hermosillo, Mexico. ITESM is an elite private university with 30 campuses across Mexico. It has a unifying mission of creating global leaders and citizens. As a result, technology is integrated at every level of the curriculum. English is taught as a second language and students are expected to graduate with TOEFL scores above 550 and be capable of communicating in English in the globalized business world. In applied linguistic terms, students are expected to have achieved both a high level of linguistic competence as well as intercultural competence and multiliteracies. The location of this particular campus is also significant, since it is located in one of the most economically advantaged Mexican states, and it's capital (Hermosillo) is located only 3 hours south of the US border with Arizona.

Characteristics of the students

The students in this study largely came from elite families, which constitute a culturally and ethnically homogenous group. The close proximity to the US meant that most had spent some time in the US on vacations or exchanges, and many regularly crossed the border for family visits or shopping trips. Many of the students had spent the majority of their education in bilingual schools, and thus had been exposed to English from an early age. Given the nature of the schools they had attended, as well as the ITESM system, the students were generally technically proficient and had reliable access to computers

and high speed internet both at home and at the university. Students in this study had very good oral English skills—they could comfortably express themselves and participate orally in class, but had relatively weak writing skills. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is regularly used in their undergraduate courses, since all ITESM courses at this campus had an online component. As well, this particular group of students were avid users of MSN chat, which formed a large part of their social communication outside of classes. However, although they were comfortable with this type of communication tool, their use of it was in Spanish, not English.

Characteristics of the ITESM instructor

The instructor was a Canadian and a recent graduate with a Masters in Language Education on autonomous online SLA from a Canadian university. She spoke English as a first language and had learned French while doing her undergraduate degree and 3 years of her graduate degree at a French speaking university. Her own struggles and successes with learning second languages influenced her beliefs about how languages could be acquired more effectively, and under what conditions languages are best learned (Morgan, 2000). Her teaching position at ITESM gave her considerable freedom in constructing a course where the focus of class time adopted a communicative approach based on language acquisition through content. In addition, the instructor was very techno-positive—her own language learning experiences had shown her that internet technologies could greatly assist the language learning process, by providing access to authentic

content in the target language, and opportunities (through CMC) to communicate with native speakers in the target language.

The instructor consistently created online activities that would push the communicative abilities of the students in discussing concepts of high importance and affect to promote SLA (Carey, 2001, 2002). For example, topics that were being discussed in class, such as environmental issues, globalization, and cultural identity, were presented as new threads on the forum where they could be discussed in a more global perspective. The instructors also posted many messages in response to students' posted questions to support their online negotiations.

Description of the course

Two ITESM groups totaling 37 students were enrolled in Advanced English A, the final required English course for graduation. One of the challenges in delivering this course was the considerable range of linguistic ability in the groups—language proficiency at ITESM is measured using the institutional TOEFL, and the students in the two groups ranged from a high 300 level TOEFL to a high 600. However, the majority of the students fell in the low 500 range, and achieving the required 550 score for graduation presented a considerable hurdle, despite the fact that most of the students in this group had been learning English for 10 years or more.

The course content and goals were to encourage understanding of current global issues through discussion and debate, and to develop academic reading and writing skills. The design of this course adopted a ‘language through content’ approach to ESL, and materials and assignments were designed to be both authentic and relevant to academic language development. However, it was recognized that while these students enjoyed high interaction and oral activities, they generally didn’t like writing academic papers. Furthermore, as is the problem at many universities around the world, the temptation to cut and paste text from the internet in constructing academic papers presents a challenge to instructors who have little time to verify whether a student’s writing is original. This created a challenge in the course design, leading to the question of how academic writing could be more interactive, in order to develop English writing fluency.

Therefore, given the content of the course and the university mission of creating ‘global’ literate citizens, as well as the challenge of creating authentic yet academically relevant writing activities, we set up an intercultural CMC forum to engage the Mexican ITESM students in online discussions about global issues with Russian and Japanese students. This course was specifically designed to promote written interaction by scaffolding from the more oral form of writing using CMC to more formal academic writing. The instructors at the respective universities also believed that having the students voice their multiple individual and cultural perspectives on these issues would provide a more authentic and relevant opportunity for the students to engage in a dialogue about topics of interest to them and thereby improve ESL writing. It is important to note that we sought

not to produce strict grammatically correct writing, but to increase fluency of ideas and written expression.

METHOD

The international partners in this study were all undergraduates studying ESL/EFL at their respective universities. The addition of the online forum supplemented their face-to-face classes. They came from a variety of disciplines such as engineering, international commerce, and international law, and they ranged in age from 18-22. Thirty-nine students were from Yakutsk State University in Russia, 47 students were from Ritsumeikan University in Japan, who were completing a year abroad at the University of British Columbia. The 37 Mexican students were randomly distributed into the international groups of 15-18 students, and instructors from each university—1 in Russia, 1 in Mexico, 2 in Canada—were assigned to a group in the role of moderator. The forum was hosted by UBC using WebCT software and server.

The forum was scheduled to run for 8 weeks, and the Mexican students were required to write a minimum of 5 messages a week and to read 50 a week, for 25% of their grade. It was expected that this requirement would take about 3-5 hours of their time per week, in addition to the 6 hours of face-to-face class time per week.

The quantity of messages read and written for each student was tracked using WebCT's built in student management system. In addition, students were told that they would also be graded on the quality of their messages, which would be evaluated for language accuracy as well as content. This requirement was included to avoid students posting messages that simply expressed "I agree" or didn't contribute anything to the discussion. Students could participate in threads of interest or start their own thread, and could also 'eavesdrop' or participate in the discussions of the other groups. Therefore, students had a considerable amount of freedom in the participation requirements of this forum.

In addition to an analysis of online postings, personal interviews with volunteer students were conducted to get a better idea as to how they perceived the value of the forum for their language development and as an intercultural experience. Chat interviews were also conducted with selected students. Five ITESM students were interviewed by the instructor one week after the forum had ended and grades were submitted. Two students were interviewed through chat by another researcher before the forum had ended. The instructor also elicited feedback on different aspects of the forum during her face-to-face class time with the students. In addition, her own observations were documented throughout the 8 weeks of the forum.

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF THE DATA

The 8 weeks of discussion resulted in over 2000 messages across 4 international groups of

15-20 students per group. Based on the interviews with the ITESM participants, instructor observation, and analysis of the discussion forum, the following observations emerged.

1. Popular topics focused on global issues

Although there was considerable latitude given to the students in engaging in topics for discussion, the forums maintained the theme of global issues and intercultural understanding. Almost all the topics were student-initiated threads, and the majority of the threads could be considered a 'global issue'. Some of the most popular threads (in terms of number of contributions) were:

- . Cultural stereotyping
- . National/cultural/personal identity
- 0. Environmental issues
- 0. Plagiarism, research ethics
- 0. Intercultural marriages
- 0. Learning a second language
- 0. English as a global language

This is not to say that more variety of topics did not emerge. Topics such as pets and fashion also formed part of the discussions, and these were not discouraged. In fact, the

ITESM instructor continually mentioned in class that students could start a thread about anything that they wanted, regardless of whether it was a global issue. However, there were very few topics outside the course content and about half of them emerged into a discussion that became a more 'global' topic as a result of postings of the three different nationalities. We interpret this as evidence that students took the underlying theme of intercultural understanding as critical to their professional success.

2. ITESM students focused on message and not form

What became obvious very early on is that the ITESM students were not concerned about form even though it comprised 25% of their grade for their online participation. In fact, in some cases common mistakes being made on the forum were brought up in class by the instructor and were explained. For example, the use of capitalization for nationalities, certain spellings, run on sentences and comma splices, were frequent errors that were addressed in class. Despite the in class instruction related to these grammar points, the ITESM students continued to make these errors. Clearly content communication took priority. The desire to communicate regardless of accuracy was something that students expressed in class conversations with the instructor and was also reflected in the interviews.

MALE STUDENT

Instructor: Did you use a dictionary?

Student: No I used directly (directly composed the message in WebCT)

I: And you did not worry much about spelling? Because the important thing for you was ...

S: Not really... was the message - not (whether it was) right or wrong (since) that probably does not change the message...

0. 3. *The international characteristics of the global audience motivated students to read and share perspectives*

Students expressed in both the interviews and in the discussion forum that the appeal of this type of interactive writing activity was enhanced by the presence of a larger audience. In particular, the international characteristic of the global audience was a motivator to read and share perspectives, and to make an effort to communicate in a way that would be understood by this larger audience.

Instructor: Instead of doing the forum, what if I would give you an essay to do instead? What do you think would help you more with your writing?

Student: Forum

I: Why do you think the forum would help you more?

S: Probably because you feel more... I don't know, you feel like if you write to other people probably it is more fun... you (the other students) know (what you mean)... (it is) kind of understandable even if you know I am wrong ... if you write to other people and then you start interacting with those people, probably those people can show you where is your mistake. I think it is more fun writing (in the) forum - you learn a lot writing (in the) forum.

I: If you write an essay there is only me who can see your message, whereas when you write to the forum 100 people can see your message - does it ever bother you?

S: No, I mean that's great. Probably if I have something wrong, there are people who can tell me "Hey, you are wrong..." It does not bother me - 100 people read my message.

It is important to note that this student is not referring to “wrong” use of language, but is referring to whether the audience disagrees with his idea, not the form. While the debate between form and fluency is ongoing we believe the students’ willingness to communicate

in this format is conducive to their mastering communication in the language. We found this to extend to all 3 cultural groups and not to be confined to the ITESM students nor to gender. However, this is highly variable among students, which is revealed in the following example.

FEMALE STUDENT

Instructor: Do you think you improved your English at all?

Student: Maybe...

I: Why? Just because you were forced to have to write?

S: I can't write in English – because we have a lot of it here at school to write in English a lot. But writing in English (in the) forum was we have to really write and do it well, because someone else is going to read it what we write. It was hard, but I liked it, I improved my writing, my reading, I liked it.

In this case, the student was motivated to write more accurately in the forum because her message was going to be read by a larger audience. This student was particularly weak in writing, but was a very active participant on the forum.

4. Pattern of interactions were largely about sharing opinions and perspectives

With some exceptions, the interactions around the topic threads fell into a common pattern of introduction to the topic, sharing of local perspectives and opinions, responses to the local perspectives, and sometimes further questions directed to particular students. In some cases this dialogic pattern resulted in as many as 30 messages posted to a thread topic. Future analyses will need to extend the interpretation of interaction patterns using models that are currently being developed and refined.

The following thread is a good example of the pattern of interaction we have described, and could more systematically be researched in another paper. This particular thread resulted in 18 messages in a group of 17 students. The thread has not been edited for grammar or spelling—the students’ messages are copied below exactly as they appeared on the forum.

a) Introduction to the topic, sharing of a Canadian problem and an invitation to contribute

Subject Environment

Message no. 1264

Posted by **ITESM Instructor** on Tue Feb 26, 2002 13:40

Hi everyone,

In our classes we have been talking about environment and environmental problems in our own communities. In British Columbia, for example, deforestation is a huge problem, and there are many environmental groups that oppose it. I'm curious to know what are some environmental issues in your own countries/regions, and whether there are any organisations that are actively doing something about it.

b) Sharing of local perspective (Mexican)

Message no. 2019[Branch from no. [1271](#)]

Posted by **Mexican male** on Fri Mar 8, 2002 09:13

Here in Sonora our huge problem is water because is a dessert. Another problem is hunting, a lot of Americans came and hunt a lot of species and we have ones in problems, water pollution is other problem, this happen in two of our principal rivers in the south of Sonora.

c) Sharing and opinion of local perspective (Russia)

Message no. 2082[Branch from no. [1264](#)]

Posted by **Russian female** on Sun Mar 10, 2002 08:00

The climate is going mad, don't you think so? Last spring we had a lot of trouble cause of the flood. The whole Republic had to rebuild Lensk town. I'm sure that the fact of the Global Warming (or the Green House Effect) is on hand. Cause of the industrial pollution of the air, there is some coat above the Earth. The sunlights come through this coat, but can't go out, and the Earth becomes warm. It's something like the green house. The Global Warming means not just the temperature's warming, it means the climate's disbalance: the storms, floods and other natural calamities. If the temperature will increase too high, it can turn to the catastrophe: everything alive on the Earth can die. We should pay this problem more attention.

d) Opinion on the problem globally

Message no. 3355[Branch from no. [3260](#)]

Posted by **Russian male** on Wed Mar 27, 2002 00:33

Hi!

I'm quite pessimistic about this problem because I think the only positive way out for

us would be our mind's changing. People have to think about future and learn to TAKE as much as they really need, not want. But it's impossible. People are too selfish and those who have power will never agree to miss a chance to get more and more.

e) Sharing of local problem

Message no. 3191[Branch from no. [2413](#)]

Posted by **Mexican female** on Sun Mar 24, 2002 12:44

Hi , Im ---, I think that there a lot of ecological problems in Mexico, it depends of the zone we focus. In this commentary I will focus into my city Hermosillo,Sonora. I think that the most serious problem we have is that we are losing water, and each day is less. There are commercials, campaigns for people understand the problem, and I think it can works.

Another problem I think is the pollution cause by the cars, or aeresol, tahat affect us in bad way ,seriously. For our lungs this is a serious problems we can breath pure air. So we can take care our enviroment, because we live with this all day.

0. f) Personal opinion (Japan) integrating class material and appeal for a global solution

Message no. 2700[Branch from no. [1272](#)]

Posted by **Japanese male** on Mon Mar 18, 2002 03:32

I strongly agree with Tomokazu`s article, which is "I would like to say that we cannot depend on OTHERS, but WE have to take great care of environment and pollutions in order to preserve a clean nature and to live a healthy life. " Actually, our government has big power in each country. However, i think that we should change our environment. In Japanese proverb,"tirimotsumorebayamatonaru." This means "A penny saved is a penny earned". i am just one student. However, if we, Japanese students, Russian students, Mexican students and others will cooperate, we students can change our world. Our nateres are depending on our hands.

g) Response to appeal for a global solution

Message no. 2713[Branch from no. [2700](#)]

Posted by **Mexican male** on Mon Mar 18, 2002 08:03

Talking about taking initiative in preserving the environment and all nature, we should try to do so but not affecting the country's economic development. Many countries are very industrialized, so if we try to stop industries because they pollute, the economy will be affected. What I'm trying to say, that there many ways to stop pollution: like treating waters, recycling, air filters on the pipes, etc. And not trying to ban all thing that pollutes. Progress is something very important in this post-capitalist era.

0. 5. *Topics around cultural and national identity were addressed on many levels*

The forum was a productive place for students from the three national groups to address cultural and national stereotypes. On one level, students were able to address local issues related to national identity and found that there were similarities between the Russian and Mexicans in their distrust of corruption in government. In the following example, an ITESM student is responding to a Russian student's message about how views of Russian national identity are being challenged by the current socio-political context in Russia.

Message no. 2191

Posted by **Mexican female** on Monday, March 11, 2002 1:01pm

Hi (Russian male)!, thanks for your reply. Well, let me tell you that here, in Mexico, we have a lot of national identity, but we still blame our government a lot. This is mainly because of the corruption we had, and because the people don't trust in it anymore. This is a big problem here in our country, because its like a vicious cicle, because the people don't pay taxes because they don't trust in the use the government gave to it, and because of that the people and all the services that the government should provide us, is not enough. I hope I could be very clear, but if you have any question, don't doubt asking me. ok??

See you

The ITESM students also took an active role in addressing global stereotypes around Mexican cultural identity, revealing how complex the notion of national and cultural identity really is.

Message no. 2379

Posted by **Mexican male** on Wednesday, March 13, 2002 6:15pm

Cultural stereotypes are a very uncertain description of people. I can't really say anything of importance about other countries, so I will talk about my own. Most

of the world has the same stereotype of Mexico, probably the one provided by Hollywood or something like that. The thing is, Mexico is so big and diverse that the people are really a big deal different from one another depending on the region you pick. I don't know how you think we are, but let's take my English classroom as a statistic sample, you may agree or disagree if this is a fair sample, let me know. Most of the men are tall, except one or two and with not a lot of difference, the average of height must be above 1.80m as our English teacher can confirm. Women are also tall. The majority of us have white skin, but really few have blond hair. On the other hand, if you go to the southern region of Mexico, the stats are another thing. Most of the people have dark skin and black hair, and they are not tall. There are a lot of anatomic differences between the people around Mexico as well as other differences, but as the first we tend to notice are those (height, skin, and hair color), it will be enough to make my point. So I really don't understand how can Mexicans have a stereotype if we're so much different from each other. How about your countries? does this also applies to you?

A common concern of the ITESM students was to counter stereotypes of Mexicans as portrayed in American movies.

Message no. 2292

Posted by **Mexican female** on Tuesday, March 12, 2002 5:37pm

Hello (Japanese male) do you remember me??? i am --- from Mexico.. well i was curious about your message because I know that you came to Mexico.. and i have a question.. have you ever seen american movies? because you know in american movies you always see mexicans with big hats with guns.. and in the border of U.S to Mexico they show Mexico like a dirty city.. but that imagine is false.. don't you think thaT? abOUT Japan i imagine like people are always very active.. from one place to another.. and that people are in their own bussiness you know how? .. that they don't care other lives than each person.. but well what do you think that are the sterotypes of your country? byee!! ---

In both the interviews and in class discussion, students expressed their desire to counter what they thought were negative views of Mexicans, and felt it was important that the Russian and Japanese participants go away with a more positive idea about Mexico and Mexicans.

MALE

Instructor: As a Mexican did you feel you were trying to give different ideas about Mexico?

Student: Yeah, all the time I tried to (express) "I am Mexican. We have this culture, we have this tradition and then I was trying to show how the Mexican people live here. Maybe they have different idea about Mexico about our people you know. And all the time I tried to do to show how people live here in Mexico - that we have feelings, we have very nice traditions probably sometimes the same traditions that they have all the time ...

FEMALE

Instructor: Being a Mexican did you think you were trying to convey yourself in some way – were you conscious that ... I am going to express myself as Mexican – were you trying to do that?

Student: Yes, always like Mexicans. You have to make them think like Mexican, not to think about stereotypes they have about Mexicans. That's very important. And they say a lot in the forum – questions and everything about the stereotypes. It was the topic that was so interesting.

Finally, when addressing issues around identity and language, the ITESM had multiple views on this complex issue.

Message no. 2966

Posted by **Mexican female** on Wednesday, March 20, 2002 8:23am

Hi everyone, I think that your national identity is not define with the language you spoke. I thin that it came from your tradition and the educationa your parents gave to you. I really think that globalization is very good, and instead to be a chance to loose your national identity, its a great oportunity to know more about another cultures. I don't think that what (Japanese male) said that if he speak english fluently he will loose his national identity, because he is just learning another way to comunicate, is not changing his identity.

In the following example, an ITESM student recognizes that cultural identity is in fact very fluid and not necessarily defined by language and borders.

Message no. 3010

Posted by **Mexican male** on Wednesday, March 20, 2002 2:12pm

Hi to all!;!;!;

My ethnicity is not well defined because i live in Sonora a border state and my native language is Spanish and my second strongest is English, it is important to

learn English, and not only because US and UK speak it, it is because most of the countries have adopted the English as a second language. But now I'm learning Japanese as a third language. But I'm identified as a Latino American and a little cosmopolitan now. But I have plans of traveling to Japan and study there, so I think the identity depend of your plans and what do you like to be. this is a nice topic!!!! so.. see you

What is interesting to note in the forum is that ideas around topics such as identity reveal the level of complexity of the issue even within one cultural group. The opportunity to share, compare, and reconstruct ideas around this theme with other cultural groups resulted in a rich and engaging discussion.

DISCUSSION

As we had hoped, some of the success of this project is in large part due to creating a social situation and online community where students felt they were appreciated, trusted and were able to share issues that normally go undiscussed at such a personal and motivated level either in face-to-face classes or elsewhere in universities. Our research shows that there are issues of great significance to these undergraduates who are exploring their socio-cultural identities and social realities in a rapidly changing world. This provides the potential to look in greater depth at the values relative to nationalism, identity and how these are changing due to the new globalism and how such discussions can facilitate ESL acquisition. In other words, we believe that highly important and

pertinent input facilitates more intense processing or throughput, which can push the envelope of output.

It is important that the control of interactivity is in the students' hands so they can discuss topics of interest. Therefore, they can take ownership of their learning and create more opportunities for interaction than in a typical face-to-face classroom. This forum gave equal opportunity for all levels of students to contribute to the discussions and particularly to students who normally would have difficulty communicating in class due to language level or simply because they were shy, as explicitly stated by the students in the interviews. This is consistent with Carey (1999) Anderson (2002) who states that "sufficient levels of deep and meaningful learning can be developed as long as one of the three forms of interaction (student-teacher; student-student; student-content) are at very high levels. The other two may be offered at minimal levels or even eliminated without degrading the educational experience." It is also consistent with Weasenforth, Biesenbach-Lucas, Meloni (2002) who conclude that "Threaded discussion can represent an important forum for opening up new learning possibilities that might not be achievable in a face-to-face classroom alone". However, they note that technology needs to be "tightly integrated with the remainder of the course" (p. 76).

The initial descriptive data from this study reveals that ITESM students appreciated the intercultural aspect of the forum since it provided them with an opportunity to interact

with representatives of the respective cultures. The ability to expand the learning community beyond the walls of the classroom via internet technologies created a situation where many of the tenets of social-constructivism became possible. More in depth analysis of the discussion forums will be applied to examine the extent of the social and cognitive presence of the students, and whether there is evidence of critical thinking. This paper has offered a number of avenues of future research and we hope it will stimulate the potential for future research. In particular, intercultural understanding by definition requires the communication between diverse cultures from vastly geographically separated areas and we do not know of any other means of engaging similar sized populations of authentic international students in such a productive forum as implemented in this study.

We believe that CMC has tremendous potential for promoting intercultural learning on higher ethical issues in cultural understanding and the accompanying nuances of a second language. This however necessitates the creation of a situation where students have ownership and there is credibility in the people they are communicating with. This interchange led to increasing their own understanding of their cultural identity. Further research is essential if we are to understand the creation of online learning situation that lead to a sense of ownership, personal growth, and professional development. However, it does take considerable planning and cooperation to create these types of collaborative inter-institutional opportunities.

DRAFT

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