

Intercultural Discourse in Virtual Learning Environments: A Preparatory Study of the Perceptions of Students in an Iranian University

H. R. Dolatabadi, Ph.D.

Arak University of Iran

The University of Exeter, UK

P. Dillon, Ph.D.

The University of Exeter, UK

email: p.j.dillon@ex.ac.uk

Corresponding Author: h.r.dowlatabadi@ex.ac.uk

Abstract

The need for intercultural awareness and skills emerges strongly in both distance learning courses, and in social life in multicultural societies. The study of online language transactions is therefore an important aspect of the emerging culture and sociolinguistics of computer mediated communication. The research reported in this paper concerns perceptions held by students in an Iranian university about intercultural discourse in virtual learning environments. The research is the first phase of a larger project concerned with the nature of online discourse. Results are reported of a questionnaire survey of 200 students' experiences of, and beliefs about, communication in a virtual learning environment. The results show that, notwithstanding the dangers of miscommunication, students generally view virtual learning environments positively and perceive them to offer possibilities of effective and harmonious communication and productive learning.

Keywords: Intercultural Discourse, Online Language Transaction, Virtual Learning Environment.

Introduction

The increasing and international use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) is changing the internet from a dominantly English language medium to a space for bilingual and multilingual communication (Androustopoulos, 2000). As a result, notions of culture and intercultural are being foregrounded by language education theoreticians (e.g. Kelly, Duran, & Zolten, 2001). While the complexities of 'teaching culture' in language teaching programs have been widely recognized (e.g. Kramsch, 1998), models of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) have been proposed as a way forward (Young & Sachdev, 2005). Research on miscommunication between representatives of different cultures has identified lack of shared background knowledge, differences in communicative style, and different interpretations of context as the primary problems (Blum-Kulka, 1989). Research has demonstrated that misconceptions arising from communication in intercultural situations can affect academic performance (e.g. Dillon,

Wang & Tearle, 2007) and many other social situations such as job interviews, social lectures and so on (Cortazzi & Jin, 2001). Successful communication presupposes shared knowledge of social and cultural values. Since intercultural interaction is typically asymmetrical from this perspective, those interacting must do more conversational work in order to accommodate each other in the discourse. Coordination and synchronization of both verbal and non-verbal signs reflecting appropriate communication norms and creating new intercultural norms are needed for successful intercultural discourses (Chomsky, 1986). These relationships are illustrated in Appendix 1.

It is therefore crucial for researchers in this area to understand how virtual learning environments with their specific affordances and restrictions influence the kind and amount of language contact, the kind of online community, and the communicative genre (i.e. single-authored genres such as personal home pages or interactive genres such as chats or forums) (Swan, 2002). So a VLE should be a place where there are not only cognitive but also affective challenges and the opportunity for an individual to reflect on his or her responses. Among various forms of mediated interpersonal communication, computer mediated communication (CMC) through international networks has been extensively applied in institutions of higher education in many parts of the world. CMC includes interactive computer messages (e-messages), electronic mail (e-mail), forums, computer conferencing, etc (Ma, 1996).

Intercultural researchers who are studying in any area related to society and culture are of the idea that it is practical and useful to ‘elicit and quantify the opinions, feelings, and intentions of subjects as part of their overall research strategy’ (Brislin & Mead, 1973; Mann & Stewart, 2005). This information may be the goal of the research or it may be an important preliminary activity before valid testing or experimentation can be undertaken (Brislin & Mead, 1973). As Robson (2002) has stated, probably most surveys are carried out for descriptive purposes since they can provide information about the distribution of a wide range of people’s characteristics and of relationships between those characteristics. Such is the purpose of the survey reported here. Questionnaires were used to collect information on:

- The background of respondents, such as age, gender, qualifications, teaching experience.
- Respondents’ beliefs about people from other cultures in a virtual learning environment (VLE).
- The constraints that respondents face in intercultural communication through CMC.

Method

A questionnaire survey was chosen as the first instrument to gather data because it was 'relatively easy to carry out and it is the least time-consuming to obtain data' (Cheong, Meyer, & Mannock, 2006). Moreover, many researchers believe that questionnaires are the 'only feasible way to reach a number of reviewers large enough to allow reliable analysis of the results' (Mann & Stewart, 2005). The self-administered questionnaire used in this study comprised 39 questions concerned with respondents' previous experiences of communication with each other, their ideas about VLEs and associated learning and teaching systems, and their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of online learning and communication. Many of the questions were framed around a five point Likert scale. The questionnaire –shown in Appendix 2- was designed with attention to the 'communication of many aspects of the research' (Brislin & Mead, 1973), with questions written clearly and unambiguously.

For checking the reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study was undertaken with 80 students. Analysis of the responses to the pilot study enabled the researcher to clarify some important points. Reliability of some of the questions was found to be lower than the acceptable rate ($r < 0.05$) and these were replaced. Reliability of the revised questionnaire was $r = 0.07$. The final version of the questionnaire is appended.

The questionnaire was administered in web-based format to 200 graduate and undergraduate students at Tehran Elmo Sanaat University. All of the students were enrolled in the university's online program and received all of their classroom instruction through the university's internet-based course system. Of the 200 participants, 40% were graduate students enrolled on an ICT and Communication Studies program, 30% were undergraduates enrolled in a Management program, and 20% were graduate students in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEOFL) program. Ten percent of respondents did not indicate their major. All the programs included both full-time and part time students.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire provided quantitative and qualitative data that were analyzed using appropriate statistical and qualitative methods (Oppenheim, 2000). The relative merit of quantitative and qualitative data is a contentious matter in some fields of research. For instance, there has been a long history of challenging the 'place of numbers rather words' in qualitative works (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Some qualitative researchers have not excluded quantitative measurements 'a priori, but have used them where appropriate and with necessary caution' (Mann & Stewart, 2005). Some researchers such as May (1993) still insist on separation of the two systems at the data collection level, but many others such as Brannen (2005) agree that a 'combination

of the methods in the research design if this strategy addresses the research questions' (Mann & Stewart, 2005). So, descriptive statistics were calculated for the response of the learners on the closed-answer survey items and data analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Simple frequency tables and descriptive statistics were used to get an overview of the mean levels and distribution of all the related factors.

Results

Tabulated results are given in appendix 3. In reporting these results, data for 'agree' and 'totally agree' have been conflated, as have data for 'disagree' and 'totally disagree'. Percentages have been rounded up to whole numbers.

Communication with Others Online

This category is concerned with how students regard online communication with others. When asked if the VLE is able to introduce new and better ways of communication, 76% of students agreed while only 11% disagreed and the rest of the students did not have any idea about this. Seventy-nine percent of students thought the VLE provided a harmonious atmosphere for students with different cultural backgrounds; only 4% disagreed and 17% were neutral. When asked if face-to-face communication is more effective than online communication, 30% said they did not know; 35% agreed and 35% disagreed. In terms of frequency of email communication with teachers, 47% said this happened termly, 11% said it was monthly, 3% weekly and 4% daily, but 34% said they never had such a form of communication.

ICT Usage and Experience

This category is concerned with students' personal experience in using ICT in general and VLEs in particular. When asked how much they 'chat' through written messages with their friends or teachers online, 41% said they sometimes had such communication, 20% said it was usually, 31% seldom, and 8% never. When asked about the amount of time in a week they spend on the Internet outside their professional duties, 20% said it was 0-5 hours, 38% said 5-10 hours, 20% said 10-20 hours, and 22% more than 20 hours. Regarding use of email for discussion about their lessons, 25% said it was termly, 35% said it was monthly, 9% weekly, and 8% daily. Twenty-three percent stated that they never used email for discussion about lessons. When asked if their chats start from their educational needs, 34% agreed, 43% disagreed, and 23% did not have any idea about this question. Regarding the number of computers they had good access to in their learning situations, 44% said it was 0-5, 23% said 5-10, 26% said 15-20, and 6% said it was more than 20. About using the VLE for problem solving

during an academic term, 8% said they never used the VLE for problem solving, 13% said they had used it termly, 28% monthly, 30% weekly and 21% of them said they used it daily.

Beliefs Regarding the VLE and Its Role

In this category students were asked about the educational and psycho-social roles of the VLE. When asked if the VLE encourages independence in learning, 73% of them agreed that it does encourage independence in learning, 18% did not have any idea, and 10% disagreed. When asked if teachers can track students' learning performance in the VLE better than through the traditional system, 56% agreed that learning could be tracked better through the VLE, 31% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 14% disagreed. When asked if the VLE can introduce new ways of learning and teaching, 85% agreed that it could, 11% did not have a view one way or the other, and 5% disagreed. When asked if the VLE can help students gain a better understanding of each other's views, 73% agreed that it could, 16% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 12% disagreed. When asked if the VLE introduced new and better ways of communication, 76% agreed that it did, 12% disagreed, and 13% did not have any idea about the question. When asked about the role of the VLE in creating harmony among students with different cultural backgrounds, 79% agreed that it did, 4% disagreed, and 18% did not have any idea about it. When asked if the VLE made students closer to each other, 73% agreed that it did, 10% did not have any idea, and 18% disagreed. When asked if the most important role of the VLE is to prepare students for professional world, 57% agreed that it was, 23% did not have any idea, and 21% disagreed.

Personal Experiences with Others in the VLE

Eighty percent of respondents said they had experienced some kind of miscommunication with others online. When asked if the miscommunications were related to language differences 52% agreed, 36% did not have any idea, and 13% disagreed. When asked if the miscommunications were related to ethnic and cultural differences 35% thought they were, 35% thought not, and 30% did not have any idea. When asked how well they had communicated with friends or classmates with different ethnic (religious and political) backgrounds, 61% answered 'well' and 39% said 'not well'. When asked how well they communicated with friends or classmates with different linguistic (language) backgrounds 39% said 'well' and 61% said 'not well'. Fifty-two percent of respondents had had negative experiences in communicating in the VLE, against 29% who had not; 19% did not have any idea about this. Twenty-three percent of respondents worry about having miscommunication when they are chatting with others in the VLE, 54% did not; 23% did not have any idea about this.

Discussion

The results of data analysis are interesting both for what they do and do not show. In terms of communication with others online, most of the students agreed that the way they communicate with each other can become much better and stronger through the VLE. This is especially important when combined with the view that (i) the VLE is really effective in making a harmonious atmosphere for students with different cultural backgrounds, and (ii) can encourage independence in learning. The implication is that new ways of learning and communication can help students have better understandings of each others' views. Further, a large majority of students said that the VLE can make people closer to each other. Although 80% of students had experienced a kind of miscommunication with others on line, only 34% of them said that their miscommunication was related to ethnic or cultural differences; most of them (61%) said they had communicated well with friends and classmates with different ethnic backgrounds. It is interesting that many of them were not worried about miscommunications when they are chatting with others in the VLE. A powerful feature of these environments is that they allow students "to choose their preferred mode of communication, to select anonymity or public exposure, and to move freely between real and imaginary worlds, which not only caters for different learning styles and preferences but also offers real opportunities for addressing the problem of performance anxiety" (Williams & Humphrey, 2007).

Conclusion

Characteristics of electronic genres, communication styles and routines differ between cultures (Chase & Macfayden, 2003). The need to gain knowledge of diverse phenomena in other cultures is growing because of globalization (Giddens, 1993; Robson, 2002) the communications explosion (Palloff & Pratt, 1999), internationalization of technology, and economic universalism (Child, 1994). However cross-cultural research in virtual environments is relatively rare (Dimmock, 2000), and is particularly lacking "in studies focusing on IC in such environments and education policies and learning situation in digital world. The need to fill out this gap introduces a cultural dimension into educational research" (Shah, 2004). In other words, little is known about the actual experience in the field using these technologies to facilitate communications between individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds.

Expanding understanding of the processes of intercultural communication in a VLE is a necessary step in designing exemplary networked learning in international and intercultural education (Yetim & Raybourn, 2003). Given that education and learning are cultural activities and computers, networks and virtual learning environments in

general are cultural artifacts, it is expected that researchers and practitioners do more to fill out the gaps in intercultural discourse in such environments. This study will help us “to illustrate our emerging understanding, and will provide the basis for presentation of directions for further research.” (Robson, 2002).

This paper has reported students’ ideas, beliefs, and experiences relating to a virtual learning environment. It is the first phase of a project on sociological and educational research into virtual learning environments. The next phases of the project will be concerned with: (i) how cultural identities of students are co-constructed in a virtual learning environment; (ii) the nature of the community that arises from the co-construction of identities, (iii) how virtual forms of interacting lead to creative ways of experiencing and communicating; and (iv) how they support meaningful learning and satisfying social interaction.

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B. Please tick one of the choices which fits you best.

	<i>Never</i>	<i>Termly</i>	<i>Monthly</i>	<i>Weekly</i>	<i>Daily</i>
15. I use email for contact with my teachers.					
16. I use email for discussion about the lessons.					
17. I use the Internet to keep informed about the latest developments in my field.					
18. I use the VLE to learn something new.					
19. I use the VLE to exchange information with others					
20. I use the VLE for problem solving.					

C. Please tick one of the answers

Please tick one of the answers	<i>Totally Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Disagree Nor Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Totally Disagree</i>
21. The most important role of VLE is to prepare students for professional world					
22. My chats always start from my educational needs					
23. The lessons in VLE should be in line with the abilities and skills expected by society.					
24. The VLE can make people know more about each others' interests.					
25. I don't like many changes in teaching methods and systems for students.					
26. The VLE can encourage independence in learning.					
27. Instructors can track pupils' learning performance in VLE better than traditional system.					
28. The VLE can increase students' understanding of technology.					
29. The VLE is able to prepare the students for higher levels of education.					
30. The VLE can introduce new ways of learning and teaching.					

D. Please tick one of the answers

	<i>Totally Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Disagree Nor Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Totally Agree</i>
31. The miscommunications I have had so far have been mostly related to language differences.					
32. The miscommunications I have had so far have been mostly related to ethnic and cultural differences.					
33. The main aim of VLE is to encourage the students to have better understanding of each other's views.					
34. I believe that face to face communications are more effective than talks online?					
35. I don't think new technologies can decrease miscommunication among people.					
36. I have negative experiences in communicating in the VLE					
37. I worry about having miscommunication when I am talking with the others in VLE					
38. The VLE is able to introduce new and better ways of communication for the students and the whole society.					
39. The VLE should promote harmony among students with different cultural backgrounds.					

Appendix 3: Tables of results

Table 1
Using Email for Contact with Teachers

How often do I usually talk (chat) with my instructions or friends on line?					
		Frequency	Precent	Valid Precent	Cumulative Precent
Valid	never	16	8.0	8.0	8.0
	seldom	62	31.0	31.0	39.0
	sometimes	82	41.0	41.0	80.0
	usually	40	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Table 2

How often I usually talk (chat) with my instructors or friends on line

I use email for contact with my teachers.					
		Frequency	Precent	Valid Precent	Cumulative Precent
Valid	.00	3	1.5	1.5	1.5
	never	68	34.0	34.0	35.5
	daily	8	4.0	4.0	39.5
	weekly	6	3.0	3.0	42.5
	monthly	21	10.5	10.5	53.0
	termly	94	47.0	47.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Table 3

Using Internet Outside Professional Duties

For approximately how many hours in a week do I use internet outside my professional duties. e.g. for leisure and chats with your friends? hours.					
		Frequency	Precent	Valid Precent	Cumulative Precent
Valid	.05	40	20.0	20.0	20.0
	5-10	76	38.0	38.0	58.0
	10-20	40	20.0	20.0	78.0
	over 20	44	22.0	22.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Table 4

Can the VLE Encourage Independence in Learning?

The V.L.E can encourage independence in learning					
		Frequency	Precent	Valid Precent	Cumulative Precent
Valid	totally disagree	3	1.5	1.5	1.5
	disagree	16	8.0	8.0	9.5
	neither disagree nor agree	36	18.0	18.0	27.5
	agree	98	49.0	49.0	76.5
	totally agree	47	23.5	23.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Table 5

Can the VLE Introduce New Ways of Learning and Teaching

The V.L.E can introduce new ways of learning and teaching					
		Frequency	Precent	Valid Precent	Cumulative Precent
Valid	totally disagree	4	2.0	2.0	2.0
	disagree	5	2.5	2.5	4.5
	neither disagree nor agree	21	10.5	10.5	15.0
	agree	89	44.5	44.5	59.5
	totally agree	81	40.5	40.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

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Table 6
Introducing the New and Better Ways of Communication

The V.L.E is able to introduce new and better ways of communication for the students and the whole society					
		Frequency	Precent	Valid Precent	Cumulative Precent
Valid	totally disagree	6	3.0	3.0	3.0
	disagree	17	8.5	8.5	11.5
	neither disagree nor agree	25	12.5	12.5	24.0
	agree	74	37.0	37.0	61.0
	totally agree	78	39.0	39.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Table 7
Having Miscommunication with Other People Online?

Have I ever had a miscommunication with other people on line? a. Yes b. No					
		Frequency	Precent	Valid Precent	Cumulative Precent
Valid	no	38	19.0	19.0	19.0
	yes	159	79.5	79.5	98.5
	4.00	3	1.5	1.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Table 8
The Miscommunications have been Related to Language Differences

The miscommunications I have had so far have been mostly related to language differences.					
		Frequency	Precent	Valid Precent	Cumulative Precent
Valid	totally disagree	9	4.5	4.5	4.5
	disagree	16	8.0	8.0	12.5
	neither disagree nor agree	71	35.5	35.5	48.0
	agree	92	46.0	46.0	94.0
	totally agree	12	6.0	6.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Table 9
Ethnic and cultural reasons for miscommunications

The miscommunications I have had so far have been mostly related to ethnic and cultural differences.					
		Frequency	Precent	Valid Precent	Cumulative Precent
Valid	totally disagree	7	3.5	3.5	3.5
	disagree	63	31.5	31.5	35.0
	neither disagree nor agree	61	30.5	30.5	65.5
	agree	65	32.5	32.5	98.0
	totally agree	4	2.0	2.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Table 10
Having Negative Experiences in Communication in the VLE

I have negative experiences in communicating in the V.L.E.					
		Frequency	Precent	Valid Precent	Cumulative Precent
Valid	totally disagree	10	5.0	5.0	5.0
	disagree	47	23.5	23.5	28.5
	neither disagree nor agree	40	20.0	20.0	48.5
	agree	94	47.0	47.0	95.5
	totally agree	9	4.5	4.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Table 11
Being Worried About Having Miscommunication when Talking with Others in the VLE

I have about having miscommunication when I am talking with the others in V.L.E.					
		Frequency	Precent	Valid Precent	Cumulative Precent
Valid	totally disagree	14	7.0	7.0	7.0
	disagree	32	16.0	16.0	23.0
	neither disagree nor agree	47	23.5	23.5	46.5
	agree	97	48.5	48.5	95.5
	totally agree	10	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

