Social interaction in asynchronous learning environments

Margarita Vinagre Laranjeira, Antonio de Nebrija University (Spain)

Index

1 Introduction

The effectiveness of using e-mail as a tool to promote foreign language learning has been mentioned in a wide range of studies. Previous research suggests that computer-mediated communication (CMC) can facilitate communication (Cooper and Selfe 1990), reduce anxiety (Sullivan 1993; Kern 1995), increase oral discussion (Pratt and Sullivan 1994), enhance student motivation (Warschauer 1996a), facilitate social learning (Barker and Kemp 1990) and improve writing skills (Warschauer 1996b) among others.

There is a growing body of research that investigates the integration of e-mail into language learning environments and its effectiveness as a tool to promote foreign language learning (Van Handle and Corl 1998; Müller-Hartmann 2000; Vinagre 2005). Other perceived benefits refer to extending language learning beyond what can be achieved in the classroom (Woodin 1997), providing authentic contexts for real communication (Little et al. 1999) and encouraging equal opportunity participation (Warschauer 1995; González-Bueno 1998). E-mail exchanges are text-based and computer-mediated, both of which define the nature of the communicative interaction. First, the permanence of written texts, as opposed to oral speech, means that the messages can be analysed again and again, thus facilitating reflection and learning awareness. As Schwienhorst (1998: 125) suggests, "The major advantage of written communication is (...) the possibility for each learner to preserve the entire communication" and to have "an enormous sample of his or her own efforts in the target language" for future use. Second, e-mail asynchronicity allows participants time to compose their messages and consider their answers, which also encourages critical reflection. Finally, its impersonality removes the pressure of face-to-face encounters and participants tend to be more uninhibited. As Gonglewsky et al. (2001: 3) point out,

> Because it is separated from face-to-face contact, the high pressure of such immediate demand for production is lessened, and learners can take their time formulating their thoughts, much like they might do in written composition.

For all the above-mentioned reasons, we decided to set up a collaborative e-mail exchange during the academic year 2005-2006 between specialist learners of English at Nebrija University in Madrid and non-specialist learners of Spanish at Trinity College Dublin. Our project started with a direct agreement between the two universities and the immediate objective pursued by the parties involved was to establish a close relationship between the students of both countries, so that they could use their target language in authentic contexts and situations. In addition, we wanted to encourage our students to get to know and understand their counterparts' culture. The overall

objective was to promote autonomy in the language learning process in order to make the students aware of the importance of being responsible for their own learning (Lewis and Walker 2003). Given the fact that students on Spanish university courses tend to be highly dependent, we felt that encouraging and helping our students to become more autonomous was an important objective in terms of rising to the challenges which the Bologna Convergence Process entails.

2 Collaborative learning: theoretical background

Collaborative learning has been the focus of a wide range of studies over the last twenty years. The term "collaborative learning" refers to a mode of learning in which students work in pairs or small groups towards a common goal. When this goal is to learn a second language, we refer to a partnership between learners who are learning each other's mother tongue. These learners meet regularly and work together with the purpose of improving their own communicative competence in the target language and helping their partners achieve the same goal. Kohonen (1992: 33-34) explains with respect to cooperative language learning that:

> since all members (…) share a common goal, they are motivated to work together for mutual benefit in order to maximize their own and each other's learning. This creates a positive interdependence among the learners: they perceive that they can reach their goal best when the others in the same learning group also do as well as possible.

Based on this explanation, we can see that collaboration rests on two main factors: positive interdependence and joint responsibility. Positive interdependence refers to the idea of exchange and, if this exchange is to be successful, there has to be a balanced partnership in which both participants work together for mutual benefit. Thus, they have to exchange information, negotiate meaning, discuss topics or carry out tasks with other speakers. Exercising joint responsibility is linked to the development of learner autonomy, which is essential to the process of language learning, since, in order to achieve communicative efficiency in the target language, learners must develop a "capacity-for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action" (Little 1991: 4).

The pedagogical framework that supports collaborative language learning can be traced back to Krashen's (1982) nativist ideas, which he reflects in his Monitor Model, and to Vygotsky's (1962; 1978) social-interactional theory in which he stresses the importance of social relationships to the development of learning.

Krashen's (1982) Monitor Model is based on five hypotheses: 1) the acquisition-learning hypothesis; 2) the monitor hypothesis; 3) the natural order hypothesis; 4) the input hypothesis and 5) the affective filter hypothesis.

1) The acquisition-learning hypothesis

According to Krashen, adult language learners can develop second language competence either through "acquisition" or "learning". In his view, acquisition takes place when we are exposed to samples of the second language which we understand. This happens unconsciously in the same way that children pick up their first language. In doing so, we are not aware of the rules of the language being acquired. Language learning, on the other hand, takes place through conscious study, attention to form and rule learning.

2) The monitor hypothesis

Acquisition and learning in Krashen's model play different roles in second language performance. The acquired system is responsible for fluency and intuitive judgements about correctness. The learned system, on the other hand, acts only as monitor of conscious rules about language, making minor changes and polishing what the acquired system has produced. In other words, learners use the monitor only when they are focusing on being correct rather than on what they have to say, whereas for normal fluent communication they will draw on what they have acquired. Certain conditions have to be met for the monitor to be used effectively. Learners must be focusing on form rather than on meaning; they need to have sufficient time to search their memory for the relevant rules in order to correct the output; finally, they must also know these rules. Thus, writing tends to be more conducive to monitor use than speaking, since it allows more time for attention to form.

3) The natural order hypothesis

This hypothesis refers to the observation that second language learners seem to acquire the features of the target language in predictable sequences, in a way similar to that of first language learners. In other words, there is a natural predictable order in the acquisition of grammatical structures. Contrary to what intuition might suggest, the rules that are easier to state and, thus, to learn are not necessarily the first to be acquired. This hypothesis is of limited relevance for the theoretical framework on which collaborative learning is based.

4) The input hypothesis

This hypothesis states that learners acquire language only by exposure to "comprehensible input". That is to say, we acquire language by focusing on meaning rather than form and it is when we are concerned with understanding oral or written input that we acquire the structure of the language. This input needs to contain forms and structures just beyond the learner's level of competence in the language if comprehension and acquisition are to occur. According to this hypothesis, second language acquisition depends on comprehensible input. As Aitsiselmi (1999: 6) points out, this input "should be interesting, relevant and used in a genuinely communicative way".

5) The affective filter hypothesis

According to Krashen, the "affective filter" is a barrier which prevents learners from acquiring language from the input that is available. He refers to motives, needs, attitudes and emotional states as determining factors in promoting or impeding second language acquisition. Thus, depending on the learner's state of mind, the filter limits what is acquired. When the filter is down (i.e. learners are relaxed and motivated) there is no barrier to acquisition. However, when the filter is up (i.e. learners are anxious, tense and self-conscious), acquisition may be blocked. Thus, imparting confidence to learners should be one of the main goals of language teaching.

As we can see, Krashen believes that natural internal mechanisms operate upon comprehensible input, which leads to language acquisition. The major distinction between nativist and interactionist theories of SLA is that scholars such as Krashen emphasise comprehensible target language input, which is one-way input, whereas interactionists acknowledge the importance of two-way communication in the target language (Ariza and Hancock 2003).

Other interactionists (Long 1983; Pica 1994) have argued that much second language acquisition takes place through conversational interaction. Long (1983) agrees with Krashen that comprehensible input is necessary for language acquisition. However, he is more concerned with the question of how input is made

comprehensible and he sees modified interaction as the necessary mechanism for this to take place. In his view, what learners need is not necessarily a simplification of the linguistic forms, but rather an opportunity to interact with other speakers in ways that lead them to adapt what they are saying until the learner is able to understand. Therefore, the interactional modifications which occur in negotiating meaning when communication problems arise are of particular significance (Ellis 1994).

Krashen's approach—in particular, his Input Hypothesis—can explain how students acquire language. However, it cannot explain how students manage to become competent members of a social group (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986), or how they develop their cultural knowledge through language use. In order to explain these aspects, we need to turn to Vygotsky's (1962; 1978) social-interactionist theory, which focuses on the importance of social relationships to the development of learning. The central concept in his theory is "the zone of proximal development" (ZPD), where learners construct the new language through socially-mediated interaction (Brown 2000: 287).

The ZPD can be defined as:

the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky 1978: 86)

This approach stresses the crucial importance of collaboration in the learning process. Thus, interactive communication should be facilitated through the use of alternative learner-centred environments, where students can work together and help each other, either in pairs or small groups.

By bringing together Krashen and Long's ideas about the importance of comprehensible input for acquisition and Vygotsky's theories on the importance of social relationships to the development of learning, it becomes clear that collaborative learning, if it is to be successful, must rely on two aspects: (negotiation of) interaction which provides comprehensible input and collaboration within pairs or groups in order to promote language learning through problem-solving, performance of tasks, critical thinking and reflection.

3 Socio-institutional context

The approach to language learning at both universities shared certain basic features, such as emphasis on the development and use of communication skills and a focus on similar topics, which facilitated our task when it came to setting up the project. It is also worth highlighting the fact that students at both universities had access to a multimedia language learning system, which combined multimedia resources with face-to-face sessions. In addition, students were familiar with the use of new technologies, since the Internet was the usual means of communicating either with their teachers (by e-mail) or with their classmates and friends (by e-mail or chat). In addition, all students at Nebrija University studied applied computer science formally as part of their basic degrees.

The original group was formed by twenty Nebrija students and their Irish counterparts. The age of the learners was similar, since, with the exception of two mature students, the students were between nineteen and twenty-two years old. Students at Nebrija majored in languages and they were required to pass a compulsory subject entitled English Language Patterns and Usage (Advanced English). This was a first year annual course and students attended lectures twice a week. In addition, work outside the class included their e-mail tandem exchange, which was considered a

_____

compulsory component of their course load and was worth 20% of their final mark.

Students at Trinity College took Spanish (intermediate) as an extra-curricular or optional subject, and they majored in Law, Engineering, Business Studies and Economics. This difference in the academic profile of the students created some problems throughout the exchange. Students at Nebrija were under pressure to work hard at their exchange and had a sense of urgency, because they wanted to perform well in order to achieve high marks. Conversely, as many as half of their partners either stopped writing when they had exams or dropped out altogether when their course load proved too stressful. This forced the author of this paper, in her capacity as Nebrija's exchange coordinator and teacher of the subject, to look for partners in other institutions, which was not always feasible in the middle of the academic year. Furthermore, from a motivational point of view, this imbalance also had some negative effects, since students were left feeling let down and disappointed; they felt that they had put a considerable amount of effort into the exchange and that it had not paid off. What is more, they were also required to start all over again with a new partner. For this reason we have only included eleven students and their partners in this study, i.e. those students whose partnerships lasted throughout the entire academic year.

The students at both universities were given the same general guidelines on e-mail collaborative learning. These guidelines explained the importance of reciprocity and mutual help in ensuring the success of the exchange. In addition, other relevant aspects included e-mail frequency (two a week), topics to be discussed and the task to be carried out jointly. In order to get in touch with each other they were asked to send an introductory e-mail, in which they were to introduce themselves to their partners and talk about themselves (where they lived, what they were studying, about their family, hobbies, etc). They were also to stress the importance of working together and helping each other in order to improve their communicative competence in the target language. This type of e-mail, in a similar way to conversational openings, may pose a problem for both the sender and recipient of the message, since asking for collaboration and help may threaten their negative face.

4 Methodology

In order to explore how collaborative e-mail partners mitigate this threat to each other's negative face, we analysed a corpus of eleven introductory e-mails written half in English and half in Spanish, along with the replies, which were written in the same format. All the introductions bar one were initiated by the Spanish students.

The model of politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) provided the framework for our analysis. This model revolves around the concept of face (Goodman 1967), which is defined as the public self-image that all competent adult members of society have and seek to claim for themselves. Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) suggest that this image is universal and consists of two related aspects: negative face (freedom of action and freedom from imposition, i.e. the desire for freedom from impingement) and positive face (the desire to be appreciated and approved of, i.e. the desire to be wanted). Positive politeness strategies address others' positive face wants, whereas negative politeness strategies address their negative face by showing distance and impersonality.

Thus, in successful social relationships, people cooperate by maintaining face in interaction and, therefore, participants attempt to preserve their self-image at the same time as they try not to damage the image of others. When it comes to e-mail exchanges, no matter how technical a communicative exchange may appear, the same principles apply. These exchanges are still carried out by individuals who wish their face to be shown respect by others at the same time as they demonstrate that they can handle the face of the other participants with tact. In this respect, participants attempt

to deliver an accomplished and "commendable performance" (Morand and Ocker 2003: 5).

This commendable performance depends on maintaining a balance between preserving one's face and protecting that of the other. However, this is not always possible, since there are some acts that intrinsically threaten the speaker/sender's or hearer/recipient's positive or negative face (Face-Threatening Acts or FTAs). In these situations, the sender needs to employ linguistic realisations of politeness strategies in order to avoid, or at least minimise, the potential face threat. Brown and Levinson (1987: 69) summarise these strategies as follows:
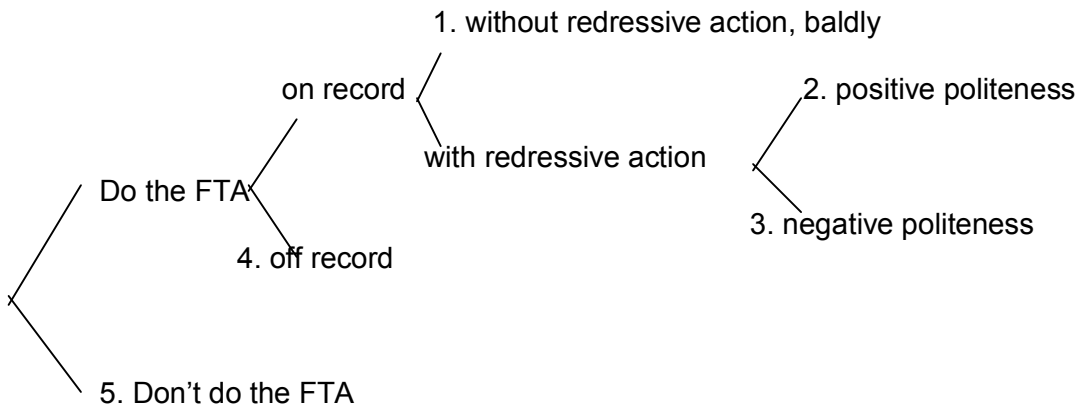

Figure 1. Brown and Levinson's possible strategies for doing FTAs

According to these authors, all participants in communicative interaction tend to use the same types of strategies in similar circumstances. Roughly speaking, the more dangerous the particular FTA is, the more the speaker will tend to choose the higher-numbered strategy. Therefore, for those FTAs whose potential threat is minimal, the sender (S) will use strategy number one (on record, without redressive action, baldly), whilst the most dangerous ones should not be realised at all (don't do the FTA).

According to Brown and Levinson, in order to assess the seriousness of an FTA we need to consider the following factors: 1) the social distance (D) of Speaker (S) and Hearer (H), 2) the relative power (P) of S and H, and 3) the absolute ranking (R) of impositions within the particular culture. Thus, the weightiness of an FTA is calculated as follows:

Wx = D (S, H) + P (H, S) + Rx

Where Wx is the numerical value that measures the weightiness of the FTA x, D(S, H) is the value that measures the social distance between S and H, P(H,S) is a measure of the power that H has over S and Rx is a value that measures the degree to which the FTA x is rated as an imposition in that culture. (1987: 86)

Thus, social distance (distant relations versus close relations) is understood to be high among people who do not know each other or are relative strangers. Their behaviour is fundamentally impersonal and formal and, therefore, characterised by the mutual use of negative politeness strategies. Low social distance, on the other hand, refers to relationships between friends in which communication essentially displays positive politeness strategies (mutual interest and common ground, in-group language, cooperation and reciprocity). Power (superior/subordinate relationships) refers to dependency relations between the participants in interaction. Thus, subordinates (low power individuals) tend to use mostly negative politeness when addressing more

powerful participants in order to avoid impinging on them, whereas high power individuals tend to use negative politeness less and positive strategies rather more with their subordinates. Power relations are, therefore, defined by their asymmetry in terms of politeness, whereas more equal relations are defined by their symmetry.

These two concepts, social distance and power, have been used as the bases for defining the types of relationships that are established between members of a tandem partnership and, therefore, the kind of politeness strategies that we are likely to find in these relationships. Since neither partner knows the other beforehand, we would describe their social distance as high and, therefore, we would expect their exchanges to be filled with negative politeness strategies. As regards power distance, we would assume that their relationship is based on their mutual recognition as experts and learners, in which respect their relationship is symmetrical.

In addition to these considerations, introductory collaborative e-mails may pose a threat to the recipient's negative face (right to non-distraction, the desire to have his actions unimpeded by others—i.e. freedom of action and freedom from imposition), since learners are trying to establish contact with their partners for the first time. Moreover, requests and offers, which are at the core of collaborative learning, are likely to threaten the face of both participants. In order to mitigate these threats, we would expect the students to use different politeness strategies, especially samples of negative politeness, for all the reasons mentioned in the paragraph above.

In order to analyse and identify the strategies found in the students' e-mails, we followed Brown and Levinson's (1987) classification. For the messages, we gave each strategy a code in order to facilitate understanding: bald on record (ON), positive politeness (P+), negative politeness (P-) and off record (OFF). These strategies can sometimes overlap, since it is possible to encode more than one strategy in a single statement. Therefore, we placed the codes corresponding to all the politeness strategies that were used directly after the statement in which they appeared. Below, we include one of the introductory e-mails[1] sent by one of the students, along with her partner's response, with the codes in brackets:

Hola Maria,[2] (P+4)
Soy Ann, y estoy estudiando aquí en Trinity College Dublín (Irlanda). Pero vivo en Londres, en realidad soy inglesa pero quería estudiar aquí. No hay muchos ingleses aquí porque se tiene que solicitar para las universidades irlandesas, por un sistema distinto de lo que hay en Inglaterra. Es mi de segundo año de estudiar, mi asignatura es la psicología y el español es un curso adicional porque durante el año que viene me gustaría estudiar en España (P+7). I don't know what else to tell you! (P+13)
But (P-2), speak soon (P+10), (P+11) and I'm glad we're in contact! (P+12), (P+14)
(es más fácil escribir en inglés!) (P+7)
Ann

Hi, (P+4)
I'm very pleased to receive news from you (P+2). I'm studying Translation and Interpretation here in Madrid. It's my first year. I'm very

---

[1] Messages have been left as they were written.

[2] The names of participants have been changed.

interested in the study of language. I can speak French because I have made all my studies in Paris and I am learning German. It's quite difficult.

I live in a small village in the outskirt of Madrid. In winter, here in Madrid, we can go skiing if we find a place in the ski lift! The ski slopes are so crowded. But the most favourit people of Madrid sport is "ir de copas" (have drinks) with friends.

Today, we have gone to Alcala de Henares. It's the city where both Cervantes (Don Quijote's writer) and the first university in the world were born! But the weather was very cold.

And now my piece of Spanish writing

Menudo cambio: De Londres a Dublin! (P+2) ¿Por qué quieres estudiar en Irlanda? (P+1) En mi caso (P+7) cambié Paris por Madrid porque me gusta mucho más la vida en España (P+13). La gente es más abierta y divertida (P+13). El tiempo es mejor, y también los chicos son más guapos (P+13). Esto último es broma (P+8). Por cierto ¿te has informado ya sobre las universidades españolas para cursar tu tercer año de carrera aquí? (P+2)

Tienes razón es más fácil escribir en nuestra lengua materna. (P+5),(P+7), (P+15)

Bueno, hasta pronto, (P+4), (P+11)

Maria

Ann begins her e-mail with "Hola", which is used in informal contexts and presupposes that the correspondents already know each other. In this case, Ann is trying to convey in-group membership by using specific identity markers (P+4), in which respect the relationship between Maria and Ann starts on an friendly footing. After introducing herself and offering some personal information, she decides to conclude her e-mail. In her closing lines she indicates that she does not have anything else to say by using a positive politeness strategy, "Give reasons" (P+13). However, she does not finish her e-mail there and then, which the recipient could have interpreted as being rude. She introduces a mitigating particle instead, which is a substrategy of negative politeness (P-2), followed by four strategies of positive politeness: "Offer, promise" (P+10), "Be optimistic" (P+11), "Include both S and H in the activity" (P+12) and "Assume or assert reciprocity" (P+14). Finally, she finishes her e-mail by code-switching into Spanish and remarking on how it is easier to write in English, which is her mother tongue. This last comment, with the exclamation mark at the end, is an attempt to establish common ground (P+7) between the two participants, since Ann knows Maria will be facing the same difficulties when writing to her in the target language.

Maria starts her e-mail in the same way as Ann, using "Hi", another in-group identity marker (P+4). She continues with a positive politeness strategy which emphasizes her interest in her partner: "Exaggerate interest, approval, sympathy with H" (P+2). After introducing herself and offering her partner some personal information in English, she knows that she now has to change into Spanish and that this may pose a problem for her partner. Therefore, she tells her in English, beforehand, exactly what she is going to do. Then, she starts the Spanish part of the e-mail by introducing positive politeness strategy (P+2): "Exaggerate interest, approval, sympathy with H", followed by a question which shows interest in H: "Notice, attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, goods)" (P+1). However, since this question is extremely direct and might be interpreted as a lack of respect for her partner's sense of privacy, she mitigates the threat by raising common ground (P+7), offering reasons (P+13) and joking (P+8), before she asks her a final question which intensifies interest with H (P+2). She pre-closes her e-mail, a potential threat to Ann's positive face, by seeking agreement (P+5), asserting common ground (P+7) and by offering understanding (P+15). Finally,

she closes the message by using two positive politeness strategies: "Use in-group identity markers" (P+4) and "Be optimistic" (P+11).

5 Results and discussion

After analysing twenty-two e-mails, we found that the students used a total of 383 politeness strategies. Out of these, 8 were bald on record (ON), 14 were samples of negative politeness and 361 were samples of positive politeness. No samples of the off record (OFF) strategy were found. This coding and analysis of strategies was also carried out by two independent raters and the inter-rater reliability coefficient was 0.84, which can be considered high. The total results are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Results of politeness strategies found in introductory collaborative e-mails

Strategy	Number	Percentage	Spanish	English	Spanish Speaker	English Speaker
ON	8	2.1%	2	6	Sp 1 En 0	Sp 1 En 6
P+1	62	16.2 %	33	29	Sp 20 En 17	Sp 13 En 12
P+2	37	9.7%	18	19	Sp 11 En 11	Sp 7 En 8
P+3	0	0%	0	0	0	0
P+4	31	8.1%	14	17	Sp 5 En 13	Sp 9 En 4
P+5	6	1.6%	4	2	Sp 1 En 2	Sp 3 En 0
P+6	22	5.8%	10	12	Sp 3 En 6	Sp 7 En 6
P+7	54	14.1%	30	24	Sp 17 En 13	Sp 13 En 11
P+8	3	0.8%	2	1	Sp 2 En 0	Sp 0 En 1
P+9	1	0.3 %	0	1	Sp 0 En 1	Sp 0 En 0
P+10	16	4.2%	3	13	Sp 3 En 9	Sp 0 En 4
P+11	19	5 %	12	7	Sp 10 En 2	Sp 2 En 5
P+12	13	3.3%	6	7	Sp 4 En 5	Sp 2 En 2
P+13	44	11.4%	23	21	Sp 14 En 11	Sp 9 En 10
P+14	36	9.4%	11	25	Sp 8 En 17	Sp 3 En 8
P+15	17	4.4%	7	10	Sp 4 En 1	Sp 3 En 9
P-2	14	3.6 %	7	7	Sp 6 En 1	Sp 1 En 6
OFF	0	0%	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	383	100%	182 47.5%	201 52.5%	Sp 109 En 109 Tot 218 57%	Sp 73 En 92 Tot 165 43%

Our analysis presents the following results: 94.3% of all politeness strategies used in the e-mails correspond to samples of positive politeness, whereas only 3.6% are negative politeness mechanisms. These results do not confirm Brown and Levinson's assumptions, based as they are on the concept of social distance. According to this concept, our exchange, which is characterised by relationships with high social distance between participants, should have been characterised by lower percentages of positive politeness and higher percentages of negative politeness strategies. Since this is not the case, I would suggest, along the same lines as Morand and Ocker (2003: 8), that in computer–mediated communication the two basic rules of communicative competence (make yourself clear and be polite) often clash, since being polite often entails ambiguous or indirect communication. The findings we obtained from this e-mail exchange would seem to indicate that participants in collaborative e-mail exchanges are happy to subordinate the principle of politeness to that of clarity. Thus, the presence of higher percentages of positive politeness strategies found in the messages can be explained as follows: a) students wanted to write messages that were more direct and, therefore, clearer, although less polite; b) the participants wished to establish a close relationship based on enhancing group cohesion, solidarity and friendship with their partner.

This assumption would seem to be confirmed by the types of positive politeness strategies found in the messages. According to Brown and Levinson:

> Positive-politeness utterances are used as a kind of metaphorical extension of intimacy, to imply common ground or sharing of wants to a limited extent even between strangers who perceive themselves, for the purpose of interaction, as somehow familiar. (1987:103)

According to these authors, the three main categories of positive politeness include "Claim common ground", "Convey cooperation" and "Fulfil other's wants". All positive politeness strategies fit into these three categories as follows:

Table 2. Chart of strategies: positive politeness.
Adapted from Brown and Levinson (1987)

Claim common ground
Convey 'X is admirable, interesting'   (P+1)   Notice, attend to H (his interests, wants, needs and goods)   (P+2)   Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)   (P+3)   Intensify interest to H   *Claim in-group membership with H*   (P+4)   Use in-group identity markers   *Claim common (point of view, opinions, attitudes, knowledge, empathy)*   (P+5)   Seek agreement   (P+6)   Avoid disagreement   (P+7)   Presuppose, raise, assert common ground   (P+8)   Joke
Convey that S and H are cooperators
Indicate S knows H's wants and is taking them into account   (P+9)   Assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants   *Claim reflexivity*   (P+10)   Offer, promise

---

(P+11)	Be optimistic
(P+12)	Include both S and H in the activity
(P+13)	Give (or ask for) reasons
Claim reciprocity	
(P+14)	Assume or assert reciprocity

Fulfil H's want (for some X)
(P+15)   Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)

In our analysis we discovered that the main politeness strategies employed corresponded to the following percentage break-down: "Notice and attend to H (P+1)" represented 16.2% of all politeness strategies; "Presuppose, raise, assert common ground (P+7)", 14.1%; "Give (or ask for) reasons (P+13)", 11.4%; "Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H) (P+2)", 9.7%; "Assume or assert reciprocity (P+14)", 9.4%; "Use in-group identity markers (P+4)", 8.1%; and "Avoid disagreement (P+6)", 5.8%.[3]

According to Table 2, five out of the seven politeness strategies used most by the students—i.e. (P+1), (P+2), (P+4), (P+6) and (P+7)—fit into the category "claim common ground", and two—i.e. (P+13) and (P+14)—into the category "convey cooperation". These findings would seem to indicate that the students' attempt at working collaboratively is based, first, on establishing a mutual friendship. Therefore, the first five strategies within the "claim common ground" category are aimed at establishing the basis for their relationship. Showing interest and attending to the other ("what do you think?", "what do you like?", "espero que"), exaggerating approval and sympathy ("me encantaría saber", "no sabes lo contenta que estoy de que aprendamos juntas", "I'm so excited about this project"), using in-group markers to make them feel they belong to the same group ("hi", "hello", "mate", "hola", "buenas"), avoiding disagreements ("this is entirely up to you", "whatever you prefer", "qué te parece si") and claiming common ground ("me gusta mucho el español", "fui a Barcelona es fantástica", "going out in Dublin sounds like loads of fun") would all contribute to creating this friendship. However, the last two strategies, giving or asking for reasons ("ahora en español mucho más fácil para mi", "I'm sorry for writing so late", "I had some problems with the email address") and assuming or asserting reciprocity ("you and me could learn very much about us", "our countries and cultures", "I expect you to help me with [my English] correcting my e-mails and I'll try to help you with your Spanish") are aimed at stating the motives and benefits of working together and helping each other to learn on a reciprocal basis.

As regards the analysis of the percentages per language (Spanish versus English) and per speaker (native Spanish versus native English), the findings could be interpreted as follows. The total number of positive politeness strategies that appear in English (201) and those that are in Spanish (182) are not relevant in themselves. Since the e-mails were written half in each language, these figures do not indicate that English speakers used a higher number of positive politeness strategies than Spanish speakers. They are just global figures of the total realisation of strategies per language, regardless of the speaker's native language. However, what it is interesting is the fact that the Spanish-speaking students used politeness strategies more when writing in English (109) than their English counterparts did (92). A plausible explanation for this may be the fact that the first introductory e-mails were sent by the Spanish partners. It

---

[3] Since the rest of the strategies represented 5% or less of the politeness strategies employed, we decided to limit our study to an analysis of the seven main strategies mentioned above.

is likely that these students may have felt responsible for initiating the contact, thus trying to be overtly friendly and polite, not only in Spanish but in the target language, in order to encourage a positive response from their English counterparts.

The Spanish students used a total of 218 politeness strategies, which amounts to 57% of the total number of strategies used. There are many feasible explanations for this. First, the Spanish students' competence in the target language was superior (advanced) to that of their counterparts' (beginner, intermediate), which would explain their greater use of politeness strategies in both languages. Second, as we mentioned above, the Spanish students were the first to initiate the exchange. Perhaps for this reason, they felt that they had to write long e-mails (an average of 255 words long) with detailed introductions and explanations and, at the same time, try to show an interest in their partner. Their production in both languages was quite balanced, since they used the same number of strategies in each language (109). The English students used a total of 165 politeness strategies, which comes to 43% of the total. In their case, there was a difference between the number of strategies that appeared in English (92) and the number that appeared in Spanish (73), representing 55.75% and 44.25%, respectively, of their total production of politeness strategies. Thus, the English students' use of politeness strategies increased by 11.51% when they wrote in English, as opposed to Spanish. The English students' lower level of competence in the target language could be a reason for this, since they would have had to rely more heavily on their mother tongue for politeness use in communicative interaction.

The presence of such a high percentage of positive politeness utterances in this collaborative exchange would seem to be consistent with learners trying to ensure that reciprocity and mutual cooperation are stressed, from the beginning, as essential factors for collaborative language learning. In this respect, reciprocity and mutual cooperation represent an imposition whose threat to their respective faces both partners try to mitigate by using positive politeness to convey closeness and friendship.

Finally, these results would seem to support Morand and Ocker's Proposition 8a:

CMC users wishing to avoid missattribution may compensate by being less polite, more direct. If so, we would expect the ratio of positive to negative politeness to increase in CMC, in comparison to FtF. (2003: 8)

6 Conclusions

The use of politeness resources in collaborative e-mail learning does not seem to follow the same patterns as those used in face-to-face encounters. In face-to-face interaction, since power distance is symmetrical between participants, it is down to the social distance (high since the students do not know each other) to determine the type of politeness that will characterise the exchange (mostly negative politeness utterances). Students in collaborative e-mail exchanges are willing to ignore this convention for the sake of clarity and to stress cooperation between partners, whilst mitigating the possible threat to each other's face by using expressions of positive politeness to show solidarity, like-mindedness and friendship. Thus, the use of positive politeness strategies helps to create a highly sociable environment which, in turn, "will result in the emergence of a sound social space (…) characterised by effective working relationships, strong group cohesiveness, trust, respect and belonging, satisfaction, and a strong sense of community" (Kreijns et al. 2004: 157).

References

Aitsiselmi, Farid (1999): "Second language acquisition through email interaction". *ReCALL* 11 (2), 4-11.

Ariza, Eileen N. and Hancock, Sandra (2003): "Second language acquisition theories as a framework for creating distance learning courses". *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*. Retrieved on April 4, 2006 from http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/142/222

Barker, Thomas and Kemp, Fred O. (1990): "Network theory: a postmodern pedagogy for the writing classroom". In: Handa, Caroline (ed.), *Computers and community: teaching composition in the twenty-first century.* Portsmouth, NH: Bonyton/Cook Publishers, 1-27.

Brown, H. Douglas (2000): *Principles of language learning and teaching*. New York: Longman.

Brown, Penelope and Levinson, Stephen (1987): *Politeness: some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cooper, Marilyn M. and Selfe, Cynthia L. (1990): "Computer conferences and learning: authority, resistance and internally persuasive discourse". *College English* 52, 847-873.

Ellis, Rod (1994): *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gonglewsky, Margaret, Meloni, Christine, and Brant, Jocelyne (2001): "Using e-mail in foreign language teaching: rationale and suggestions". Retrieved on March 31, 2006 from http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Meloni-Email.html

González-Bueno, Manuela (1998): "The effects of electronic mail on Spanish L2 discourse". *Language Learning & Technology* 1 (2), 55-70.

Goodman, Kenneth (1967): "Reading: a psycholinguistic guessing game". *Journal of Reading Specialist,* 26-35.

Kern, Richard (1995): "Reestructuring classroom interaction with networked computers: effects on quantity and characteristics of language production". *Modern Language Journal* 79, 457-476.

Kohonen, Viljo (1992): "Experiential language learning: second language learning as cooperative learner education". In: Nunan, David (ed.), *Collaborative language learning and teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 14-39.

Krashen, Stephen (1982): *Principles and practices in second language acquisition*. New York: Pergamon Press.

Kreijns, Karel, Kirschner, Paul, Jochems, Wim and Van Buuren, Hans (2004): "Determining sociability, social space, and social presence in (a)synchronous collaborative groups". *Cyberpsychology & Behaviour* 7 (2), 155-172.

Lewis, Tim and Walker, Lesley (2003): *Autonomous language learning in tandem.* Sheffield: Academy Electronic Publications.

Little, David (1991): *Learner autonomy 1: definitions, issues and problems*. Dublin: Authentik.

Little, David, Ushioda, Ema, Appel, Marie-Christine, Moran, John, O'Rourke, Breffni and Schwienhorst, Klaus (1999): *Evaluating tandem learning by e-mail: report on a bilateral project.* CLCS Occasional Paper No. 55. Dublin: Trinity College.

Long, Michael (1983): "Native speaker/non-native speaker conversation in the second language classroom". In: Clarke, Mark and Handscombe, Jean (eds.), *On TESOL '82: Pacific perspectives on language learning and teaching*. Washington DC: TESOL, 207-225.

Morand, David A. and Ocker, Rosalie J. (2003): "Politeness theory and computer-mediated communication: a sociolinguistic approach to analyzing relational messages". *Proceedings of the 36th Hawaii International Conference on System*

Sciences (HICSS-36). Los Alamitos: IEEE Press. Retrieved March 27,2006 from http://csdl2.computer.org/comp/proceedings/hicss/2003/1874/01/187410017b.pdf

Müller-Hartmann, Andreas (2000): "The role of tasks in promoting intercultural learning in electronic learning networks". *Language Learning and Technology* 4 (2), 129-147. Retrieved February 15, 2005 from http://llt.msu.edu/vol4num2/muller/default.html

Pica, Teresa (1994): "Research on negotiation: what does it reveal about second-language learning conditions, processes and outcomes?". *Language Learning* 44 (3), 493–527.

Pratt, Ellen and Sullivan, Nancy (1994): "Comparison of ESL writers in networked and regular classrooms". *The 28th Annual TESOL Convention, Baltimore.*

Schwienhorst, Klaus (1998): "The "third place"—virtual reality applications for second language learning". *ReCALL* 10 (1), 118-126.

Schieffelin, Bambi B. and Ochs, Elinor (eds.) (1986): "Language socialization"*. Annual Review of Anthropology* 15*,* 163-191.

Sullivan, Nancy (1993): "Teaching writing on a computer network". *TESOL Journal* 3, 34-35.

Van Handle, Donna C. and Corl, Katherine A. (1998): "Extending the dialogue: using electronic mail and the Internet to promote conversation and writing in intermediate level German language courses". *CALICO Journal* 15 (1-3), 129-143.

Vinagre, Margarita (2005): "Fostering language learning by e-mail: an English-Spanish exchange". *Computer Assisted Language Learning* 18 (5), 369-388.

Vygotsky, Lev S. (1962): *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Vygotsky, Lev S. (1978): *Mind and society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Warschauer, Mark (1995): Comparing face-to-face and electronic discussion in the second language classroom. *CALICO Journal* 13 (2-3), 7-26.

Warschauer, Mark (1996a): *Motivational aspects of using computers for writing and communication*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii.

Warschauer, Mark (1996b): "Computer-assisted language learning: an introduction." In: Fotos, Sandra (ed.), *Multimedia language teaching*. Tokyo: Logos International.

Woodin, Jane (1997): "Email tandem learning and the communicative curriculum". *ReCALL* 9, 22-33.