

A Design for Intercultural Exchange – An Analysis of Engineering Students’ Interaction with English Majors in a Poetry Blog

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Abstract

Web based writing platforms allowing for exchanges across the world are increasingly being used in education. These recent forms of textual practice are highly related to conditions offered by the technology, allowing users, who previously were primarily consumers, to become producers of text. This chapter investigates student interaction over a blog in an intercultural student exchange between native speakers and non-native speakers of English in higher education analysing and interpreting poetry. The groups of students involved in this study belong not only to different academic disciplines, but also differ in terms of nationality and language background. In the blog posts, the students’ cultural voices are heard, offering a meeting between very contrasting groups. Scrutinising the student postings, the threaded discussions show ways that students thematise content and meaning in the poems. The results show that there are a number of features at play in an intercultural environment where language and translation issues are prominent parts of the student discussions, offering extended perspectives to the students’ initial views. Collaborative efforts in such a diverse environment are important when negotiating meaning and extending students’ understanding of poetry.

Keywords: blog, intercultural interaction, collaboration, negotiating meaning.

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1. Introduction

It is becoming increasingly common that web based environments are used as meeting spaces within language learning in higher education (cf. Conole, 2008; Lomicka & Lord, 2009). Frequently the lingua franca is English, which implies that non-native speakers of English will need to express their ideas in English and native speakers will encounter persons with other language backgrounds. For this reason, among many, environments that enhance web based group activities, such as blogs are considered beneficial for extending students' communicative repertoire, since they will have a possibility to engage with others in inspiring ways in order to learn about other cultures (Dippold, 2009; Lee, 2010). Such expectations are also expressed by Gee (2004) who claims that "people learn best when their learning is part of a highly motivated engagement with social practices which they value" (p.77).

The purpose of this study is to explore the interaction that evolves when such a web based environment is introduced to literature courses where students use a blog* as their platform for interaction in a web based poetry exchange between an American and a Swedish university. The exchange, which has been part of the course assignment for six years, involves two diverse groups belonging to different disciplines, mainly within the fields of engineering and English. The aims of the exchange are not only to increase the students' understanding of poetry and how readers in different contexts understand poems, but also to prepare students for future careers in a society where competences in language and communication are important features.

A sociocultural perspective on culture promotes questions of how people relate to and interact with one another. Through web based interaction, new venues for groups are created, which in turn have raised questions of how individuals become members of such groups, and how they contribute to the group's identity and culture (Levy, 2007). Exchange interaction through social networking is suggested to encourage the group's reflective collaborative

*Project homepage, <http://crossculturalcollaboration2010spring.blogspot.com>.

writing (Lee, 2010). ‘Culture’ is to be understood as patterns of human knowledge and shared attitudes in practices such as an organisation or a group. The development of culture is in this sense caused by “situated social interaction together with practical activity in the material world” (Thorne, 2003, p. 39; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). In this chapter, cultural aspects are thus coupled with the fact that the two groups of students come from different countries and have different educational backgrounds, which, it is assumed, will affect the content and outcomes of their intercultural web based interaction.

2. Background

Educational projects in which digital tools are used play a critical role in intercultural* communication (cf. Thorne, 2003; Ware & Kramersch, 2005). In the literature there are a number of studies targeting exchanges in language learning through digital media focusing on intercultural interaction, also referred to as “telecollaboration” studies (cf. Belz, 2003; O’Dowd, 2010). For the development within language learning, these media have generated openings to enhance multilingual and multicultural aspects of language learning in global exchanges (cf. Kramersch & Whiteside, 2008; Thorne, 2003). The exchanges have “raised questions about the traditionally monolingual and monocultural nature of language education” (Kramersch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 646), in exposing learners to various varieties of language whose outcomes are hard to predict in advance. When learning English, for instance, there is cultural diversity between those who speak the language as standard English, non-standard English or English as a foreign language, to mention but a few (Dewey, 2007). The challenge in meetings between NSs (native speakers) and NNSs (non-native speakers) is emphasised in existing exchanges. Collaboration here frequently takes unpredictable turns, which can lead to new experiences that learners claim are not achievable through their study of literature alone, but through interaction with peer learners. By engaging in

*The terms ‘intercultural’ and ‘cross-cultural’ are synonymously used in the literature, when referring to exchanges between language learners of different nationalities. In this study, though, ‘intercultural’ will be used, indicating that the exchange stretches over different cultural fields.

an exchange the concept of communicative competence is thus extended by adding an intercultural dimension (O'Dowd, 2010).

Most intercultural language learning exchanges reported by means of digital media are performed through e-mail, chat or discussion forum. There are only a few studies with a language learning focus, suggesting ways of using blogs to enhance cultural learning and connection with other disciplines (Lomicka & Lord, 2009). In a study by Ducate and Lomicka (2005), two blog projects of students of French and German are described, where the groups were set the task of co-constructing ideas about French, German, and American cultures. The students were encouraged to form their own new perspectives about other cultures with the intention of promoting critical thinking. Regarding culture, “students gained access to current events accompanied by a German perspective that they would not have received in the foreign language classroom” (Ducate & Lomicka, 2005, p. 417). By exploring cultural topics outside their textbook in reading their classmates’ perspectives on topics in a blog, the users got “the insider’s perspective on various cultural topics, thus leading to better understanding of other cultures and what shapes them” (Ducate & Lomicka, 2005, p. 413). It is suggested that the students formed new understandings by taking an active part in being productive on the blog. In addition, there is some research suggesting the potential of using literature in intercultural digital exchanges in language learning (Warschauer, 1999). In a study by Müller-Hartmann (2000) of joint reading of literary texts in an e-mail exchange, assignments including the analysis of literature are claimed to be “highly suitable for activities or tasks in intercultural learning” (p. 131).

A key aspect highlighted in previous studies is the fact that users’ previous experience with digital tools has a bearing on their communication. Thorne (2003) describes three case studies of NSs meeting NNSs where computer mediated communication (CMC) tools create conditions for language learning and building linguistic as well as cultural relationships. The nature of “production, consumption, and co-construction of meaning and intention when intercultural communication is mediated by such tools” is investigated (Thorne, 2003, p. 41). The outcomes of this study show that tools such as e-mail, chat, and instant

messaging are profoundly affected by the cultures in which they are used. This is termed “cultures-of-use”, i.e., “the manner in which these tools mediate everyday communicative practice” (Thorne, 2003, p. 38).

Studies of intercultural digital exchanges commonly describe miscommunication between participants caused by several issues. Frequently, there is a combination of conditions involved, related both to the digital tool and to the differences in nationality and language background. Investigating the impact of telecollaboration, Belz (2003) presents a detailed case study of an e-mail based exchange between two German students and one American. The analysis points at the necessity of being provided with the right input for interaction in order to avoid breakdown in communication. The students in this study lacked adequate knowledge of culture-specific patterns of interaction and the impact of their interactional styles eventually damaged the relationship beyond repair.

Another example of miscommunication, dealing with learners of German in the US and learners of English in Germany, is reported by Ware and Kramersch (2005). The students were involved in a telecollaboration of asynchronous writing on a discussion board. The project was designed to examine how participants on both sides engaged with language learning online and how they evaluated their experiences in the exchange. The article discusses a misunderstanding between a German and an American student leading to a breakdown in communication. Reasons given for the breakdown in communication included a number of issues, such as asynchronous technology, classroom assignment, language skills, teacher engagement as well as students not being adequately prepared for the exchange. According to O’Dowd (2003), there is a risk that intercultural exchanges that fail to function properly will reinforce stereotypes. However, through analysing and reflecting upon the interaction it is agreed that intercultural exchanges have the potential to reach further than mere “superficial pen-pal projects where information is exchanged without reflection” (O’Dowd, 2003, p. 121).

The general view in the field of intercultural communication embraces the fact that there are a number of issues that need to be considered. Merely having

the required prerequisites of a common language and digital medium is not always enough. Since there are other aspects at play in specific communicative traditions, outcomes cannot always be managed by the participants. Consequently, there are a number of conditions to take into account that might lead to communication breakdowns and therefore it is “over-simplistic to blame one single factor to explain an exchange’s lack of success” (O’Dowd, 2010, p. 7). In addition, if the interaction takes an unpredicted turn, which is a natural consequence when members of different cultures interpret each other’s intentions, this must be viewed as something which in itself can contribute to the learning process. This is also alluded to by Thorne (2003) and Ware and Kramsch (2005), who claim that differences in expectation and misunderstanding lead to learning opportunities for the students engaged in cross-linguistic exchanges.

Having the implications of multifaceted cultural encounters in mind, this study focuses on students’ interaction on a blog with the purpose of analysing poetry. The digital tool together with the pedagogical design and the content for discussion have been elaborated on during several years of exchange.

3. Pedagogical design

The intercultural poetry exchange was designed as part of two single-term university literature courses, Fiction for Engineers in Sweden and World Literature in the US. The exchange took place in spring 2010, for a period of less than two weeks in the middle of term. The students were set to analyse the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer, as part of their respective literature courses which involved reading works by different authors.

All in all there were 15 students from Sweden and 21 from the US. The students from the Swedish university were technology students, primarily master’s students from various engineering disciplines, such as computer science, mechanical engineering, biotechnology, chemical engineering and interaction design. From the US, the students were mainly freshmen, majoring in English,

but also one student with a history major and one with a double major in English and vocal performance. The students were divided into seven peer groups on the blog, with both Swedish and American students in each blog group.

There was little instruction in the classroom prior to the exchange, since the pedagogical strategy employed involved students elaborating on their postings without being too heavily guided by teachers. Therefore, the teachers were not part of the interaction on the exchange, but left the students to discuss the poems on their own, within their groups. All information pertaining to the exchange was posted on the blog start page, including thorough guidelines regarding objectives and instructions for three “letters” that were to be posted as part of the assignment. The time frame was intense with less than two weeks between the first and last letter. The content selected for discussions consisted of three poems by Tomas Tranströmer*, both the original poem and translations of the poem by different translators: *I det fria* together with two English translations: *In the Clear* and *Out in the Open*, *Andrum: Juli* together with four English translations: *Breathing Room: July*; *Breathing Space July*; *Breathing Space July*; one without title, and *Spår* together with two English translations: *Track* and *Tracks*.

Before Letter 1, the students were requested to read the three poems by Tomas Tranströmer that were posted on the blog and then respond to one, two, or all three. They were to choose words or short central phrases, motivating their significance and suggesting a theme of discussion. In the instructions prior to Letter 2, guidelines were given as to how to proceed when giving response to the peer group. For Letter 3, apart from giving response to the peer students’ reflections, the instructions were to find or to create a multimodal expression in the form of an alternative way of capturing the theme or mood of one of the poems.

Concerning the background to the poetry exchange, the first exchange took place in 2004. During the first two years, the web based environment consisted of a discussion forum hosted at the Swedish university. However, for practical and administrative reasons of not being able to host the forum on the university

*Poems are linked from the project homepage <http://crossculturalcollaboration2010spring.blogspot.com>

server, the exchange was moved to a blog in 2006, which was more transparent and flexible. The blog has been the environment for the exchange since then.

In addition to the change of technology, the teachers have also modified the pedagogical design by altering the contents over the years. Each year of the exchange one specific well anthologised poet has been chosen for the exchange, either an American or a Swedish poet, such as T.S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson and Tomas Tranströmer. The Swedish poet has been translated into English by a few different authors. One reason for choosing the particular Swedish poet was that at the time of the exchange, there was limited analysis available online about the poems, making the students' posted interaction more original, not reporting on existing established analyses.

4. Research questions

Using an asynchronous social software platform such as a blog for interaction within an educational environment implies using a meeting space that caters for a chronological, structured exchange of ideas over vast physical distances. This study analyses the interaction taking place in an intercultural student exchange blog. The particular exchange took place during a limited time frame bringing together two groups of students from different backgrounds. They were engaged in interaction through their postings on the blog where they discussed their understanding of the poetry being analysed.

Of central concern was to investigate student blog interaction in an educational environment and how it was possible for two such diverse groups with different backgrounds, regarding academic discipline and nationality to make sense of each other's viewpoints. Concerning the content of the blog postings, topics for discussion were put forward by the students themselves. The development of the content into discussion threads was founded on the students' discussions of the poems, emanating from the various topics based on the translations provided and their understanding of the poems. Therefore, the analysis is based on the following questions:

When blogging in an educational environment with the objective of analysing poetry:

1. What does the educational framing mean to the students' approach to the blogging activity?
2. How is the students' cultural belonging displayed in their blog posts?
3. How are threads developed when the students thematise content and meaning of the poems?
4. What discussions of language and translation issues are enacted by the students?

5. Method

Due to its chronological construction, a blog environment lends itself to parallel and targeted scrutiny of postings. This persistent representation of communicative interaction is what Thorne (2003) calls “CMC residua”, i.e., on-screen or printed out log files that can be “scrutinized and reflected upon by researchers and participants and can help to locate specific developmental episodes” (Thorne, 2003, p. 57). Written records of all student interaction are saved, from the very first to last posting of the exchange, preserving the content in the order in which it was saved on the blog.

The analysis of the student postings in this study was data driven, based on a close examination of the interaction taking place in the postings of the seven blog groups studying Tomas Tranströmer in spring 2010. The reason for focusing on the most recent exchange was catching the most current debates from the student exchanges. The design has been refined over the years and this is the first time a Swedish poet has been used since the exchange moved from a forum to a blog environment.

The procedure of analysing the blog postings was started after the termination of the exchange. Following an initial examination of the blog postings in their entirety, each blog group was then scrutinised individually, investigating the postings of each individual contributor in chronological order. The text in the blogs was then systematically coded and sorted into categories related to

prominent, recurrent features in the postings. These features were tagged with a number and a letter. Each participating student was assigned a colour code in order to facilitate tracing of the participants' entries. The seven blog groups were then investigated in detail, tracing commonly distinguishable items found in the postings. These postings were related to cultural areas, such as disciplinary and national belonging and the interaction process taking place. Consequently, each item was traceable, making it possible to follow the trail of a specific item and how it was intertwined with other items. The analysis is thus based on the joint formation of posted content developed by the participants.

In accordance with ethical guidelines, the students gave their consent to participating in the research project. The names of the participants in the examples given have been altered in order to preserve their anonymity.

6. Results

A web based writing environment used in education allows participants to engage in joint production of content on a specific space. This can be compared with a classroom setting where it is possible to hide by not contributing to the discussions or by not being able to make oneself heard. The results deal with the interaction taking place and how it is developed in the students' joint writing.

[Donato \(2004\)](#) suggests that it is possible for learners to 'mutually construct' assistance in the same way as experts scaffold novices, forming what he calls "a collective expert" (cited in [Lantolf & Thorne, 2006](#), p. 283). In the texts posted by the students, it is possible to trace how the interaction develops within the groups; from their initial choice of threads that are to be analysed in the poems, to their discussion, offering interpretations and eventually referring to the outcomes as facts that promote new insights to those involved.

Certain recurring features are visible when scrutinising the content of the postings in the blog groups. These are related to blogging as an assignment within a pedagogical design, how students' backgrounds are made visible, the

topics the students elicit and how language and translation is discussed. After having made these more general observations explicit, the analysis of four specific problems are thus presented, *Blogging in an educational environment*; *Displaying diversity in background*; *Forming threads thematising content and meaning of poems*; and *Discussions of language and translation issues in an intercultural environment*.

6.1. Blogging in an educational environment

Blogging within an educational setting implies targeting certain assignments or specific interactive exchange aspects (Lee, 2010). There is a clear connection between assignment descriptions and how the web based interaction is initiated by students in a blog designated for analysing poetry. Therefore, it is possible to see that the students are concerned about following the instructions posted on the blog start page in their interaction, taking elements from the guidelines into account. In the instructions to Letter 2, for instance, the students are requested to “refer specifically to at least two members of the group by name, attempting to cite at least two groupmates”. All of the student groups fulfil the task of including at least two members of the group in their responses in their second letters.

Another aspect is the set form that blogging within an educational environment invites its users into. In the student postings, there are few deviations from the instructions given. The participants introduce themselves, suggest a few central words or phrases to bring up from the poems, stay within the stipulated number of words, all according to how they perceive the given guidelines. The following quote is from Letter 2 showing how one of the students from Group 2 refers to one of the poems chosen by the other peers:

*It seems like most of you took a liking to the “Track(s)” poem,
so I’ll start off by sharing my reflection on your comments.*

(Swedish student, Group 2, Letter 1)

The student fulfils the guidelines, following the model presented in the instructions of giving his views of previous postings. Furthermore, this quote

reflects the style of content displayed in the student interaction. The student applies a polite and reflective tone, pointing out a specific theme of interest that struck him when reading the poems in relation to what is being posted previously in the blog.

Sticking to the set blog structure is something that the students generally do when contributing with content in their postings. Therefore, for example in group 7, even though two students get a comment from another blog group member having an opposing view on a matter, neither of the students replies nor defends themselves, since they have both already posted their third and final letter of the exchange and feel they have completed their assignment. In a non-educational setting, however, posing a question in a blog discussion would more likely imply answering.

The fact that blogging is integrated in the institutional educational setting is thus indicated in several ways. The groups are formed according to the instructions given, which is something that points out the basic organisation of the exchange as educationally situated. The students generally adhere to the educational norms implying that given an assignment the instructions should be followed. This means that even though the blog affords interactional exchange to be driven by the content or ideas presented, the students do not fully engage in a content driven discussion, since participating in a way that is formally demanded has higher priority.

6.2. Displaying diversity in background

Throughout the postings, the students' cultural belonging and how they position themselves is displayed. The diversity in the student body, the students from the Swedish university being a few years older engineering students than their US peers, creates an interesting mix in the exchange. Some of the students from the Swedish university are exchange students from Germany and France, having limited understanding of Swedish, but the others had the advantage of knowing the original language of the poems being discussed. The American students are younger, native speakers of English, majoring in English. Most of these

students introduce themselves as being familiar with poetry and competent in its interpretation.

Disciplinary characteristics are specifically visible in certain places. One such occasion is in the introductions when the students point out their disciplinary belonging in relation to previous experience of literature studies. The following quote is an example from one of the students of technology:

The course 'Fiction for Engineers' is my first genuine literature course at an advanced level and I love how different it is from the normal day differential equations and mechanics.

(Swedish student, Group 2, Letter 1)

The student states that he has a lack of experience of literature courses at an advanced level and gives a brief introduction to his everyday activities of “differential equations and mechanics”. The literature students also emphasise their disciplinary background, when specifying their previous experience of literature:

I'm a freshman English major at Clemson University.... I absolutely LOVE poetry and prose, so I'm really excited about this project.

(American student, Group 2, Letter 1)

To some extent, the disciplinary belonging is revealed through the formulation of posts. An example of this is found in the next quote where one of the significant themes in the exchange, the existence of ‘train’ in the poem Track is brought up. One of the engineering students elaborated on seeing the poem as an equation, removing the word ‘train’ to see how this affected the poem:

The train is significant. The first thing I did in order to convince myself that the train is important for the poem was to remove it from the equation. Without the train the night is still a night, the field is still a field but a different field...”

(Swedish student, Interaction Design and Computing, Group 7, Letter 1)

The student has a sequential presentation, systematising his analysis, using mathematics as a tool, introducing elements from engineering discourse. The function of language is of primary concern in this quote, where removing a parameter has an effect on the whole sentence. The next quote is written by one of the literature students. It displays a different viewpoint, approaching the poem from a linguistic perspective:

There is no title and his wording is also more concise and gives a structural flow to the poem with a steadier rhythm. The translation by May Swenson suggests a more literal interpretation because of the use of active verbs such as “swayed” and “outflung” as opposed to “swaying” and “released.”

(American student, English major, Group 7, Letter 1)

In this example, the student is more descriptive, highlighting the rhythm and the specific verb forms in the poem. Central components of the poem are targeted through using word and structure functions as analytical tools.

The disparity in the background of each individual contributor created a dynamic relationship, adding to the understanding of cultural diversity discussed by Dewey (2007). A wide range of elements are brought up around the poems, something that is used as a resource. This is frequently mentioned by the students, for instance in the reconfirmation by one of the Swedish students in his second letter claiming that “*I like to reiterate that I’m a computer science guy, and therefore analyse the poem different*” (Swedish student, Group 5, Letter 2). The student refers to his disciplinary background stating that it entails a specific way of reading poetry. He claims that due to the difference in background, his analysis is different. Given the fact that this is a setting where some of the students have presented themselves as being more experienced in analysing poetry, he gives an account for his lack of experience.

However, as the process of being engaged in the interaction unfolds, the role of being a literature student or an engineering student gradually becomes of subordinate importance. Instead, most of the points highlighted from the

poems in the exchange are related to general issues that concern humankind, irrespective of disciplinary belonging.

6.3. Forming threads thematising content and meaning of poems

Concerning how students engage in developing their analysis of the poems by thematising contents they lift from the poems, they shape the content of the blog together through elaborating on topics suggested by fellow writers. As the interaction expands, suggestions and responses form the groups' ways of negotiating meaning of the poems. It is possible to see how threads develop within the exchange groups, into a joint interpretative project.

Regarding the content being formed, there are an average of 14 discussion threads initiated by the members in Letter 1 of each blog group. From these, a little less than half of the threads are picked up and mentioned by at least one other student in the blog group. 20 % of the threads are followed up between three and eight times, which indicates there is very active blogging taking place. Such extensive interaction may promote the formation of new understanding, in line with [Ducate and Lomicka \(2005\)](#), who suggest that it is by being active in producing content on the blog that students form extended understandings.

One such example of development of a theme is from Group 7, where the significance of “train” from the poem *Spår* is brought up and discussed in eight postings by five students in this peer group. Following the processing of this word in the chronological postings, there is joint development of the perspectives this word brings to the understanding of the poem. In Letter 1, one of the Swedish students introduces the concept:

...The train is significant. The first thing I did in order to convince myself that the train is important for the poem was to remove it from the equation. Without the train the night is still a night, the field is still a field but a different field, the town lights are still flickering on the horizon and unruly thoughts still wash over my mind. But

the train changes the view, changes the location. This is not a field, it is a field with a resting train, a train that has covered hundreds of miles but is now suspended in place, its bulk pushing down on the track. The train casts haunting shadows across the field in the moonlight, each of the shadows accumulating into a greater whole. The train adds depth and atmosphere to the scene (if you let it)...

(Swedish student 1, Letter 1)

In Letter 2, three American students include reflections on the significance of the train in their postings, adding on to the previous postings. This is the first posting by one of them, referring to the original posting displayed in the previous quote:

I agree with Johan's thought on the train from the poem Tracks. The train does add a deeper quality to the poem that would be easily overlooked. I read the poem with the train in my thoughts and then again, this time removing the train as Johan suggested. It is quite clear that without the train the poem loses something, I cannot put my finger on it now, but hopefully through further discussion we can find the train's true purpose. I really liked Johan's description of what the train adds. "Haunting shadows" and "accumulating shadows" really gives an eerie but calming feeling to the literary piece...

(American student 1, Letter 2)

Following the postings regarding the significance of "train" by the group, this concept is brought up an additional four times in Letter 3 by another Swedish student, by two of the aforementioned American students, and by the Swedish creator of this theme, who summarises the discussion in his last letter.

Another example of a common theme, brought up in six of the seven blog groups, concerns whether or not the gender of the translator has any implications regarding the interpretation of the poem. By following two contrasting groups, Group 1 and Group 5, it is evident that the postings take different turns in different groups. In both groups this theme causes postings, however displaying different outcomes.

In Group 1, a group member initially claims that the difference in gender of the two translators affects the tone in the translation:

“The female translation seems to have a softer, emotional tone, whereas the male translator’s version seems to give more of a straight, descriptive tone”
(American student, Letter 1)

This is disputed by another student who connects to previous contributions by claiming that other issues apart from the gender of the translator need to be considered, for instance the poet’s background and previous work:

“...it’s very important to consider a poets earlier works to put the translation into context rather than draw conclusions from the gender”
(Swedish student, Letter 2)

There are eight postings negotiating this topic until the group comes to the conclusion that stereotypical generalisations are not applicable in modern society, where so much more than “gender” is at play.

In Group 5, however, when the gender of the author is raised as a topic of discussion, it differs from the structure of the previous group. In this group, the contributors act more as individuals, adding their views but not connecting their reasoning into a joint discussion. The next two quotes illustrate this, interpreting the significance of the gender of Tranströmer, the author himself, for understanding of the content in two different poems *Spår* and *I det fria*, respectively. The first student explains gender from a perspective of what the times were like in the fifties, when the poem was written:

“...since the poem was written in the fifties that there may have been an issue of female repression.”
(American student, referring to *Spår*, Letter 3)

The next student does not connect with or refer to the previous student’s remark that the poem was written in a specific period in history having significance

for the understanding of the poem. Instead, this student points to the author's Christian background as being significant in relation to gender:

"...the man is digging/poking in the field, the choice of male gender might be an indication of Tranströmer originating from a Christian context with the man being central."

(Swedish student, referring to I det fria, Letter 3)

There is neither reference between nor after these two postings dealing with the similar topic, within the group. Instead, the two posts display two individually posted reflections about the author, which are not developed further within the group.

Even though there is considerable variation in themes discussed within the seven exchange groups, there are a few themes which are brought up in all groups, such as man's connection to nature, selection of paths of life, and issues concerning death.

6.4. Discussions of language and translation issues in an intercultural environment

Another aspect visible in the blogs, apart from the disciplinary belonging, is that tied to local cultural settings and language issues. Among the different viewpoints displayed, the most conspicuous ones are those related to explicit statements about language translation. The fourth research question concerns how discussions on language are enacted by the students when they analyse the poems. Half of the students in the exchange, who do not understand Swedish, are dependent on the translated versions of the poems offered by the translators in order to understand the poems. The Swedish students, on the other hand, have access to the poems in the original language, Swedish, together with the English translations. This caused some engagement by the students. Below is an example explicitly expressed by one of the Swedish students:

"I'm the only one so knee deep in Swedish that I can analyze the poem in respect to Tranströmers original, what power I hold. :)"

(Swedish, Group 1, Letter 2)

Adding the emoticon at the end of the sentence softens this otherwise strong statement. Using appropriate jargon from web-based language, downplays the strong statement in the message, displaying efforts at maintaining a good relationship. Removing this symbol could potentially entail misunderstanding of the meaning and intention. It is claimed by Thorne (2003) that users' previous experience of communicating with digital tools affects the way in which they use them. Using emoticons in this blog exchange mirrors conventions of other social network environments that are applied by the students in the present context.

The advantage of understanding the mother tongue of the poet is also reflected in the American students' writing:

"I was particularly interested in the discrepancies between the original Swedish poems and the translations that we have to read. I have no knowledge of the Swedish language, so I only have the translations to go by. Niclas and Jonas, I envy your obvious advantage there. :)"

(American student, Group 2, Letter 2)

The benefit of understanding the original language, Swedish, is a theme frequently expressed by the American students. Since the three poems were provided with at least two translations each, one of the issues brought up in the blogs was the discrepancy in understanding, through the different translations. Having access to the poet's own language is something that is expressed as desirable. Emoticons are frequently used as a stylistic element in blogging, implying a softer tone to formulations.

The next selection of quotes show ways that students try to find answers in their analyses through language translation. In the first quote, an American student points out the importance of being supplied with relevant translation for understanding the content from the poet's point of view. In the preceding postings the two Swedish students in the blog group have made a comparison between the Swedish original and the American translations, which justifies this American student's initial understanding:

“I liked Swenson’s version of the poem better to begin with, and I was happy to know that her translation was more closely related to the original Swedish than Bly’s.”

(American student, Group 2, Letter 2)

The student puts forward the notion that a native Swedish speaker possesses specific credibility, which implies that native speakers can have a closer understanding of the true meaning of the poems. The American student expresses gratitude to learn that one of the Swedish students has verified the way he understands the poem.

The next quote shows how an American student is trying to determine a correct translation of the content of one of the poems by requesting the assistance of native Swedish speakers. The student contrasts the interpretations offered by two Swedish students:

“Philip wrote that Robert Bly’s Track was more accurate while Andreas said the opposite, believing that May Swenson’s translation is the more correct version”

(American student, Group 1, Letter 3)

The student in this quote expresses an opinion indicating that there is a more or less accurate meaning embedded in the original language, which is reflected in language formulations and exact translations.

Concerning translation, the students are frequently struggling with concepts at word level. There are a number of instances where this issue is brought up in the postings. One such example is in Group 2, where one of the American students brings up the word “synranden” from the poem *Spår*, in Letter 1, asking if this is equivalent to the English word “horizon”, due to its corresponding placement in the text. Two of the Swedish students give similar explanations in reply to this request, independent of one another in Letter 2. They claim that the two words are synonyms, that there is a Swedish word “horisont” which is more directly compatible with “horizon” and that “synranden” implies “as far as one can see

with the naked eye”, which is more metaphorical. In Letter 3, the student posing the question expresses her appreciation for getting this insight, also reflecting on the fact that native speakers are blessed with an enhanced view of knowing a more appropriate meaning of single words.

An example of how joint construction of understanding of words takes different paths is displayed in discussions of the word “ultra-rapid”. The Swedish word “ultrarapid” is being used in the Swedish version of *Andrum: Juli* and referred to as “ultra-rapid” in one of the English translations, whereas the synonym “slow motion” is used in the other three English translations. The discussion on this topic, consisting of eight threads in Group 7, tries to shed light on the distinction between these words, even using a video-clip from YouTube. The group does not come to a joint understanding of this concept. In fact, it is clear from the following quote that one of the American students misinterprets the input from his peers:

“I would have never of thought that the word would mean the opposite in Swedish as it does in English. During my reading of the poem this confused me, but with the Swedish students help it was much clearer.”

(American student, Group 7, Letter 3)

This statement indicates the student never understands the fact that the two words have similar meaning in Swedish and in English. Since none of the participants in the peer group are persuasive enough in their efforts to clarify meaning, the outcomes of the joint efforts of understanding are not helpful enough here. Instead, as evidenced by the quote, it is not clear that he has understood this concept.

Although there is clearly some miscommunication in this exchange, there are no significant instances of breakdown in communication as described by for example [Belz \(2003\)](#) and [Ware and Kramsch \(2005\)](#). There are certain features that are problematic for the students. In some of the postings, students try sharing a culture-specific experience, which is a complex endeavor. It entails not only communicating a specific context but also the use of foreign words to express

that context. One such example is explaining the traditional Swedish April Fools' Day nonsense rhyme being recited on April 1 in Sweden, in connection with performing a practical joke; *April, april din dumma sill, jag kan lura dig vart jag vill*. The student is aware of the fact that there is no corresponding idiom in English and that the concept needs to be experienced in order to understand it. Nevertheless, he tries to explain it together with giving a direct translation of the idiom from Swedish to English:

*“...considering the date, in Sweden we have a tradition
and a childhood verse which goes something like: April,
April you silly herring I can fool you with anything”*

(Swedish student, Group 2, Letter 3)

This quote illustrates that communicating something that is inherent in another culture and linguistic context, making it comprehensible, is an advanced and demanding task. Foreseeing how this will be received by the American reader is indeed difficult.

In fact, there are a few local cultural traces in the blogs which go beyond a mere word level. One such example is referring to “the feeling of a summer day in the Swedish archipelago” (Swedish student, Group 2, Letter 1). Though the words can be understood, the feature is something that might be hard to envision by someone who has never visited the Swedish coast on a beautiful summer day.

7. Discussion and conclusion

Blogs are increasingly being used for educational purposes (Murray & Hourigan, 2008). This implies that students are asked to interact in environments where they are not always particularly experienced or used to interacting (Mortensen, 2008). Although these emerging web based tools generally require low level technical skills, they call for elaborated writing skills. The blog as a writing environment requires a certain style of posting, which is generally informal and personal.

From an interactive perspective, a blog environment caters for commentary and descriptions of events in the form of an online diary, which can be seen in the results of this study.

Blogs provide an arena that encourages self-expression and creativity (Huffaker, 2004). Also, blogging provides students with a “high level of autonomy while simultaneously providing opportunity for greater interaction with peers” (Williams & Jacobs, 2004, para. 35). This type of asynchronous writing environment caters for reflection by its contributors, since it only allows one posting at a time. In the assignment for this project, the main threads being posted were named “letters”, which adheres to the original idea of blogging of being informal and presented chronologically. Accordingly, the discursive quality of posts in blogs can be both of a private nature, where the person writes for personal reasons, as well as of a more social nature where there is an expectation of an audience being out there (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In this study it is evident that even when blogging is used within an institutional context, the affordances of the blog technology as suggested above are picked up and made use of by the participants.

Using social software such as a blog in a targeted way in language education allows for student engagement in a joint project. There were certain expectations from the students of what they were supposed to communicate in the blog geared at analysing poetry, which can be seen in relation to how the assignments were fulfilled. The design around the exchange involved very little restriction of the students’ interaction and there was also very limited preparation prior to the exchange. The students were only informed that they were going to participate in an exchange as part of their respective courses. The writing guidelines, however, posted on the exchange web site gave detailed instructions of the frames and prerequisites of what was expected of the student posts. As far as the contents were concerned, the topics brought up in the exchange were entirely created by the students themselves, which also implied very active participation. However, as was shown in the analyses, blogging in an educational setting is constrained, primarily by the fact that the activity is driven by the given task or assignment and how this is supposed to be organised and performed. We might even talk about blogging in an educational setting as “educational blogging” to point out

the fact that blogging in an educational institutional context becomes something partly different from blogging in an everyday context. However, the analysis also implies that there is ample room for the students to take initiatives, set the agenda for discussions and carry out these discussions.

The analysis of the postings clearly demonstrates how the students position themselves and collaborate in a joint writing project. Disciplinary background and local cultural belonging is presented or revealed in a number of places throughout the blogs, offering a meeting between two very contrasting groups. In this exchange, although there were some instances of miscommunication, there were no instances at all of breakdown in communication as reported in other studies (cf. [Ware & Kramsch, 2005](#)). On the contrary, the difference between the students stood out as the driving force for the discussions, creating a dynamic environment.

The asynchronous nature of a blog suits reflective writing, such as poetry discussions, well, since the time frames are more expanded than real-time chat, for instance. Blogs allow for negotiating meaning of various concepts in the poems in a number of discussion threads created by the students. In addition, blog environments present the chronological postings of participants, making it possible for the writers to trace the contents of the posted threads easily. In fact, the ‘delay’ created by the environment in combination with the conversational collaboration has the potential to enhance the learning impact of the intervention in the respective courses. Furthermore, the overlap between the content and the medium emphasises how forums and blogs are “unfinished business” ([Mortensen, 2008](#), p. 452). This openness caters for flexible ways of sharing individual reflection as a collaborative enterprise and as mutual opportunity for learning. Consequently, the analysis suggests that despite the fact that cultural, individual as well as collective causes influence the ways students perceive Internet communication tools, and thus their learning, informed design and use of virtual environments can facilitate learning not easily achieved in traditional environments.

Concerning language differences, the issue of translations and negotiating meaning was identified in the interaction. The interpretation of the poems for half

of the students in the exchange was totally reliant on the variants of translations offered and not the poet's own, original phrases in Swedish. The interaction took place in English, the native language of the half who did not understand the poet's original words. In the discussions which focused on language and translation issues negotiated by the students, a number of specific words and expressions were raised where translations and comparison of their meaning in the two languages were elaborated on. In the postings, there were instances where the students both agreed and disagreed on the meaning of concepts.

Within the course frames there is a temporal and spatial boundary, which is characteristic of digital tools when used in an educational environment. The efforts students need to make when taking part in a cultural exchange with asynchronous technology cater for a high level of performance. From first individually posting reflections to making iterations, the tool offers promising possibilities to extend the students' interaction. Not only does it enable students to become more active on their own but also to be engaged in joint projects of interpretation and construction of meaning. It is suggested that the delay inherent to asynchronous environments provides a means to "reinject both space and time into communication" (Brown & Duguid, 1996, para. 67) which is beneficial for those involved, allowing for extended reflection (Wegerif, 2007). In the case of communicating more reflective content, e.g., interpreting poems, the delay between message and response adds time to evaluate the analysis of poems.

In the last letter of the exchange, some of the students reflect on the significance of the various peer backgrounds. A Swedish student makes the following comment:

"I wonder how important our different backgrounds played a role in our respective opinions, was it just our culture, our educative background or, most probably, our personal life?"

(Swedish student, Group 6, Letter 3)

The quote suggests downplaying the significance of cultural backgrounds in favour of emphasising how individual experience of human life might be more important for achieving shared meanings. With that suggestion, this final

quote accentuates that in a blog exchange, it is as much the joint collaborative efforts as the specific backgrounds of the participants that are important for negotiating meaning. So, for these students, trying to make sense of others is a complex matter connected equally to single conditions as well as to an array of intertwining cultural aspects.

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