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S. E. Pasfield-Neofitou

Monash University

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“INTERCULTURAL INTERNET CHAT AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: A SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE”

SARAH E. PASFIELD-NEOFITOU

Monash University

Abstract

Chat can create a natural context for learner independence and second language acquisition. However, as a developing variety of interaction, Internet chat has unique linguistic and interactional features that are distinct from either oral or written communication. This study uses Socio-cultural theory, in particular, Activity theory, to examine the characteristics of Japanese – English intercultural Internet chat, the ways in which learners use this medium as an opportunity to communicate in their target language, and the strategies chat participants utilise.

Naturalistic data was gathered from five Australian advanced learners of Japanese, and their five Japanese chat partners, in the form of chat logs, collected over the period of a month, and follow-up interviews, both face-to-face, and over the internet. Participants identified turn management, code switching, error correction, issues of identity, computer literacy and symbolic interaction, among others, as areas of concern or interest. Conversation analysis was used to discover numerous linguistic and interactional features in the ten chat logs collected, in terms of turn taking, language features, and features linked to computer literacy and amount of experience in using chat. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for learners, teachers and researchers

Introduction

Learning is not exclusive to the education system, and is not the sole domain of schools or universities. While learning begins long before school, and continues long after school or university, it also occurs parallel with formal education, occurring in the home or in the wider community. However, it appears that there have been very few studies of chat examining naturally occurring “authentic interaction” where participants are motivated by reasons other than teacher-directed language learning to participate in chat conversations. Tudini (2003) found that some students who were engaged in learner-only chat complained that they wanted “someone they could learn from”. Herrington and Stadden (2000) also emphasise the importance of authentic activities for learning. According to Pritchard (2005), one definition of learning is “to gain knowledge of, or skill in, something through study, teaching or experience”, In providing an environment for study, using online dictionaries and other websites, an environment for peer

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teaching, and an environment for experiencing authentic conversation in a learner's second language, intercultural Internet chat may provide an excellent opportunity for learning.

The main focus of this paper is to examine the linguistic and interactional characteristics of Japanese – English intercultural Internet chat through one specific software application, the instant messenger MSN Messenger. It also explores the ways in which non-native speakers use this medium as an opportunity for communication with native speakers, and for informal language acquisition. All of the participants in this study utilized online chat for social interaction, of their own volition, and in their own homes. In the cases examined in this study, it appears that chat provided a positive environment in which to achieve goals of socialising and language learning in an intercultural context.

This paper is concerned with the ways in which the histories and motives of participants shape their use of intercultural Internet chat, as differences in individual chatting styles may present different opportunities for learning. It is part of a larger project, which also explores the linguistic and interactional characteristics of intercultural chat, and how it may provide opportunities for communication with native speakers and informal language acquisition.

Previous Research on Chat Interactions

There have been numerous studies utilizing Sociocultural Theory in the areas of language learning and the Internet. Hata (2003) found that the kinds of interactional conditions predicted to be useful for second language acquisition by Sociocultural Theory seem to be an almost natural outcome of using computer mediated communication for some students. These include the creation of a natural context for learner independence, and a means of extending opportunities for interaction. Furthermore, chat may provide for learners a chance to form their own identities through the hybrid uses of language(s) (Murray, 2005). Online, identity is largely constructed through one's textual behaviours, so it is important for learners to manipulate language effectively. However, as a developing variety of interaction, Internet chat has unique linguistic and interactional features that are distinct from either oral or written communication. The first step to a better understanding of the role of chat in language learning is to understand these features, and the way in which they differ according to the histories and interactional circumstances of the participants.

Sociocultural theory promises a framework through which cognition may be investigated without isolating it from the wider social context (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Thorne's (1999) study of foreign language electronic discourse within an activity theoretical framework is one such example. Considering the tools (language) artefacts (Internet) community (rules and aesthetics), and division of labour (social roles and identity) of computer assisted classroom discussion, it was found that the way participants carried out electronic discussion in an educational setting was intimately related to their prior experience as members of digital speech communities outside the classroom. Chat provided for students opportunities for experimentation with language, and importantly, afforded the student the potential to construct

social identities that extend beyond the often cast role of “foreign language student” (Thorne, 1999: 269).

In a major analysis of Japanese-English intercultural classroom communication in Internet chat, Kitade (2000) also utilized a Sociocultural Theory framework. Emphasizing the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the distance between learners’ actual and potential levels of development, Kitade analyzed the data from 24 chat discussions produced by 15 learners of Japanese and 3 native speakers, using Discourse Analysis and found that computer mediated communication may provide potential benefits for second language learning because it can offer meaningful and collaborative native speaker – non-native speaker interaction, providing a place for acquisition in the ZPD.

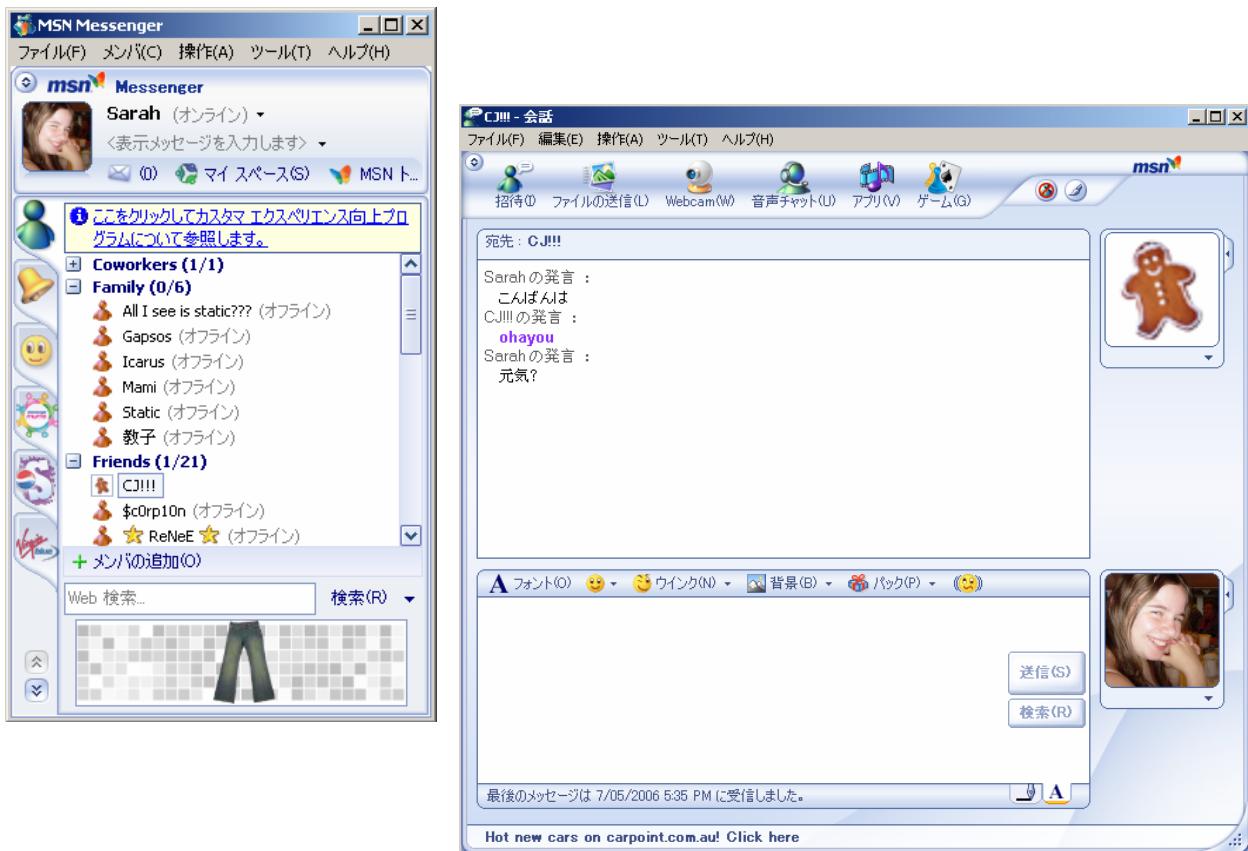
Sociocultural theory, in particular notions of ‘role’, was also used by Spiliotopoulos and Carey (2005), who undertook a qualitative study which investigated the role of identity in writing on electronic bulletin boards. Utilizing a mix of grounded theory and an ethnographic approach, Spiliotopoulos and Carey completed participant observation of the message posting, interviews, and an analysis of the posted online messages. From this analysis, they concluded that, as there is often insufficient class time for adequate reinforcement of vocabulary learning, task-based computer mediated communication may help improve the quality of, exposure to, and interaction with new vocabulary, and the introduction of new vocabulary within a form-focused context.

Each of the studies outlined above has contributed to our knowledge of the linguistic impact of Internet chat use in a second language learning context, either in the classroom, or outside the classroom, when teachers instruct their students to do so. However Kitade (2000) concludes that the interactional features of language learning in online environments are being neglected, and recommends further research into how native and non-native speakers interact through computer media. In order to better understand how chat may be used for language learning, it is necessary to investigate the various characteristics of chat, and how the different backgrounds of students result in individual chat styles, which in turn, may influence the opportunities for learning presented in an intercultural chat setting. More recent works in the field of linguistics and second language acquisition, for example, Fujiike (2004) and Fitze (2006) also cite a need for further empirical studies on native speaker – non-native speaker computer mediated communication. In the majority of studies in the field of online language learning, participants are learners seated in the same computer lab as their interlocutors, undertaking teacher-directed activities, or paired by their instructors with native speakers with whom they share no history. It would appear that no study has yet described in any great detail the chat behaviour of students outside the classroom, when users are taking advantage of chat for genuinely interactive and social purposes, rather than to fulfil the requirements of teachers or researchers.

MSN Messenger

At the time of data collection, MSN Messenger, was the most popular instant messenger in Australia and Japan, available in numerous languages other than English, including Japanese. The program was freely available for download via Microsoft's website, and consists of two key windows. The main window consists primarily of the contact list, called members, which may be grouped into categories such as co-workers, family and friends. Members may be added to the contact list by clicking the plus symbol on the bottom of the window, and then entering the member's email address. Users may select a display name, which can either be a real name or a nickname, and a display picture, which may be a photograph of themselves, or a picture of something they are interested in. A member who is online will have their display picture next to their name on the contact list, while a member who is offline will be represented by a red person next to their name.

MSN Messenger Windows



To begin a conversation, the user simply clicks the name of the member they wish to chat with. This will open a secondary chat window in which the conversation takes place. Messages are typed in the smaller dialogue box at the bottom, and these messages, when sent by hitting the enter key or the clicking send button, appear in the larger box above, along with any messages sent by other members in the conversation. At the bottom of the window, the time the last message was received is displayed, or, if another participant is typing, the message “(display name) is typing a message” will be shown. Various options are available to the user, including the manipulation of font size, colour and style.

One of the most exciting functions of the chat program is the ability to add small pictures, referred to as emoticons a combination of the words *emotion* and *icon*. The most familiar emoticons are commonly referred to as smileys, and express emotions by depicting facial expressions. Other emoticons are simplified pictures of everyday objects, weather phenomena, and so forth.

The Research Design

In order to examine the linguistic characteristics of and opportunities for learning in Japanese-English intercultural Internet chat, ten participants (five Australian student volunteers and their five Japanese chat partners) were asked to record their naturally occurring chat conversations for the period of approximately one month, using a function called Message History. The files Message History produces are called “chat logs”. To shed light on the histories and motives of the learners, immediately following their final chat conversation at the end of the month, the Japanese participants completed a brief follow-up stimulated recall interview via chat with the researcher, while the Australian participants completed a face-to-face follow-up interview. In both cases, questions were based on Neustupný and Miyazaki (Neustupný, 1990; Neustupný & Miyazaki, 2002), and conducted in the learner’s native language, while referring to a printed copy of the pair’s most recent chat log. The present study utilizes three primary sources, the chat logs from the pair’s conversations, the transcribed, digitally recorded face-to-face follow-up interviews with Australian participants, and the chat logs from the online follow-up interviews with the Japanese participants.

The Australian participants were all advanced learners of Japanese, and ranged in experience in using chat from 3 weeks to 6 years. The least experienced chat participant used MSN for only 1 hour a week, while one experienced heavy user remained constantly logged in, 128 hours a week.

Australian Participants

	Level of Japanese Study	Chat Background
Nadia	Lower Advanced (up to Level 10) 19 day high school exchange to Japan	Beginning light user Length of experience: 3 weeks (in English) 1 day (in Japanese) Number of buddies: 5 Chat usage per week: 1 hour Used chat for the first time without assistance from friends during the period of this study
Kaylene	Upper Advanced Level 11 1 year university exchange to Japan, 3 month holiday to Japan, staying with Yogi Nun	Experienced light user Length of experience: 8 years (in English) 4 years (in Japanese) Number of buddies: 15 Chat usage per week: 2~4 hours Started using chat sites, then Yahoo Chat before MSN Messenger
Evelyn	Lower Advanced Level 9 10 month high school exchange to Japan	Beginning heavy user Length of experience: 1 year (in English and Japanese) Number of buddies: 40 Chat usage per week: 4~28 hours Started using chat in university, to keep in touch with friends at other universities
Jacob	Lower Advanced Level 9 3 week high school exchange to Japan	Experienced heavy user Length of experience: 5 years (English) 2 months (Japanese) Number of buddies: 20 Chat usage per week: 168 (always logged in, computer always on) Started using chat before going on exchange to keep in contact with people
Phia	Upper Advanced Level 11 5 month high school exchange to Japan	Experienced medium user Length of experience: 6 years (English) 2 years (Japanese) Number of buddies: 15~20 Chat usage per week: 15~20 Started using ICQ before MSN Messenger

The Japanese participants were all advanced learners of English, ranging from eight to fourteen

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years of English study, and again ranged from 3 weeks to 6 years in chat experience. 7 hours per week was the maximum usage among the Japanese participants.

Japanese Participants

	Length of English Study	Chat Background
Tomi	14 years Middle school – high school, 8 month university exchange to Vancouver, Canada, 2 years and 9 months working in language school office, Studying Bridging course at an Australian university	Experienced light user Length of experience: 5 years (in Japanese and English) Number of buddies: 43 Chat usage per week: 3~7 hours Started using chat in Vancouver to keep in touch with friends in Japan
Ruriko	8 years Middle school – university, Studied at English conversation school, Studying Arts course at an Australian university	Beginner Length of experience: 3 weeks (in Japanese and English) Number of buddies: 8 Chat usage per week: 2.5 hours Used chat for the first time in the period of this study
Azusa	8 years Middle school – university, 10 month high school exchange to Australia	Experienced light user Length of experience: 6 years (in Japanese and English) Number of buddies: 5 Chat usage per week: 1 hour Used chat since high school
Miku	10 years Middle school – university, 10 month high school exchange to Australia, Studying Arts course at an Australian university	Experienced heavy user Length of experience: 7 years (in Japanese) 4 years (in English) Number of buddies: 40~50 Chat usage per week: 2~3 hours Used chat since high school
Soichiro	13 years Studied English from the age of 7 to 10 in California, USA Middle school – university, University exchange to Melbourne, Australia Currently in Japan, attends occasional lessons and chats	Experienced medium user Length of experience: 6 years (in Japanese) 4 years (in English) Number of buddies: 104 Chat usage per week: 1 hour + Used chat since second year high school, and now uses Social Network Service mostly

Pairs were given labels to generally reflect the nature of their relationship, in order for ease of reference, however no broad conclusions were based on these characterisations. Nadia and Tomi, the Education Students, were both studying to become language teachers. Kaylene and Ruriko, the Language Exchange Partners, were both involved in a language exchange program at

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the same university. Evelyn and Azusa were labelled Former Host Sisters, as Evelyn lived with Azusa's family in Japan as an exchange student for several months in 2002. Jacob and Miku, the social chatters, were both experienced heavy users of chat. Finally, Phia and Soichiro, the Former Classmates, had been in the same class at university the previous year, before Soichiro returned to Japan.

Pairs

Characterisation	Participants	History of Pair
Education Students	Nadia	Length of relationship: First interaction Both participants are studying Education at the same Australian university.
	Tomi	Met online through a third party, Tami's housemate and Nadia's classmate. No non-chat contact
Language Exchange Partners	Kaylene	Length of relationship: 1 year Both participants are members of a Language Exchange at the same Australian University. Had used chat together for 1 month at the time of study.
	Ruriko	Met regularly for Language Exchange sessions and visited each other's homes in addition to chat.
Former Host Sisters	Evelyn	Length of relationship: 4 years Met through Evelyn's exchange to Japan, when Azusa's family hosted her for a period. Had used chat together for 1 year at the time of study. Exchange postal letters in addition to chat.
	Azusa	
Social Chatters	Jacob	Length of relationship: 1 day Both participants are studying in Australia, at different universities.
	Miku	Met online through a mutual friend. No non-chat contact.
Former Classmates	Phia	Length of relationship: 1 year Met in class at an Australian university, Soichiro has since returned to Japan. Had used chat together for 4 months at the time of study. Exchange emails in addition to chat.

In the follow-up interviews, each of the learners were asked to identify their goals in using chat. The majority (8/10) of participants cited communication as their main objective. Only one learner, Nadia, stated that they used chat primarily to practice their second language, and Phia stated that language learning was a secondary goal for her, as she primarily used chat to combat boredom.

Goals

- **Tomi:** 友達や家族と会話するため (To converse with friends and family)
- **Nadia:** To practice Japanese and meet Japanese people
- **Ruriko:** 友達や家族と会話するため (To converse with friends and family)
- **Kaylene:** To keep in contact with people
- **Azusa:** 友達と話すため (To talk to friends)
- **Evelyn:** To talk to friends
- **Miku:** 友達と連絡り (To get in contact with friends)
- **Jacob:** To keep in contact with people
- **Soichiro:** 気軽に世界中のひとと繋がっていられる (To easily connect with people around the world)
- **Phia:** I got bored... There is a borderline study thing there.

Clearly, social interaction with friends was the main goal of most of the learners.

Japanese participants in particular were motivated to converse with friends around the world, while some of the Australian students were motivated to practice Japanese through chat. While students mentioned social interaction as their main reason for using Internet chat, it is important to recognise the multiple layering of goals, as is demonstrated in Phia's statement of goals above. In order to get language practice, the participants must have or develop a social relationship. In order to develop a social relationship, participants must use language, with at least one participant practicing reading and writing their second language. Accordingly, at different stages of the chat conversations different interactive goals of the participants' surface.

Analysis Method

Three levels of analysis are utilised in this study, based on Thorne (1999)

1. 'Internal Context'
The activity of an individual, and their 'internal context', of personal present and history with the Internet and language, as the participants relate through interviews and other communication with the researcher.
2. 'Communicative Activity'
Short exchanges of a few turns or longer sections of discourse occurring in the chat logs. The relationships between (a) and (b) are significant in locating the communicative activity within a socio-historical context.
3. 'e-Turns'
Electronic turns, coined by Thorne (1999), are derivative of a turn unit. In the context of MSN Messenger, or similar instant messengers, an 'e-turn' is a distinct block of text that is tagged with the sender's name.

Jones and Mercer (1993) emphasise the importance of Sociocultural Theory in investigating communicative, culturally oriented learning. While Sociocultural Theory provides the overall interpretive framework, Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) Conversation

Analysis is used to analyse the features of the ‘Communicative Activity’ and the ‘e-Turns’ on the micro level. Conversation Analysis was chosen in order to examine language produced in the chat conversations as social actions, while Sociocultural Theory was used to interpret the first half of the interviews. The follow-up interviews consisted of two parts, firstly, a historical section where participants were asked about prior usage of chat, language and in-country experiences, designed to elicit the participant’s ‘Internal Context’. The second, stimulated recall section of the interviews was then used to inform the analysis of both the ‘Communicative Activity’ and ‘e-Turns’.

Findings

Turn Taking

A shared history with their chat partner had a large influence on the distribution of turns in the conversations analysed, which may be viewed as a division of labour in chat. The partner who types the most takes the role of “speaker” or in some cases, even “teacher”, while the other partner may be cast in the role of “listener” or “learner”. While in more balanced conversations, these roles switched back and forth between chatters, analysis of the interview data and chat logs suggests that the widely claimed egalitarian nature of chat is dependent upon the participants’ own framing of the activity, their goals, and the ways in which they decide to organise the interaction. Researchers such as Kitade (2000), Toyoda and Harrison (2002), Fujiike (2004), and Fitze (2006), have claimed that turn-taking competition in chat does not occur because overlaps and interruptions are impossible. However, in MSN Messenger, like other chat programs, the order of turns is influenced by the respective typing speed of the participants, the connection speed of their computers, and the way in which the program receives and orders input. In the example below, the participants manage three different strands or threads of conversation simultaneously. The lines in black, according to Kaylene, are “talking about the camera”, in which Kaylene organised with her Japanese language exchange partner Ruriko via chat to use the Internet to contact friends and family in Japan using a webcam at Kaylene’s house. The second topic, in white, is about it being “so cool how they can email phones in Japan”, and the final topic, in grey, is organizing a day and time to use the webcam. All of the topics are related, however, the turn adjacency is interrupted, with answers to questions, responses to comments and queries about statements delayed, occurring one to two turns later. Kaylene describes her management of turns, commenting, “I’m just so used to doing that in chat, because in English, I do that all the time as well, and sometimes we have three conversations going at the same time”. She explains that “it’s because typing takes a long time, and generally, while the other person’s reading, you’re saying something else anyway, and so, you end up replying to a comment, then typing one out, then replying to one”. She also commented on the short-lived nature of these multiple and concurrent conversational strands, stating that “they don’t usually last long anyway”.

Managing multiple and concurrent conversational strands

8:23:03 PM	kay miró	瑠璃子	Is that enough time to let people in Japan know you'll be online?
8:23:19 PM	kay miró	瑠璃子	oh, I forgot... you can email their phone, right?
8:23:25 PM	瑠璃子	kay miró	あ、母の日だけど仕事ある??
		((Ruriko))	((Ah, it's Mother's Day but do you have work??))
8:23:41 PM	kay miró	瑠璃子	かっこいいね
			((It's cool))
8:24:03 PM	瑠璃子	kay miró	yes!! maybe it is ok!!
8:24:14 PM	瑠璃子	kay miró	What is cool??
8:24:17 PM	kay miró	瑠璃子	いいえ、バイトはあしたと土曜日だけ:) ((No, my part time job is only on tomorrow and Saturday :)))
8:24:32 PM	kay miró	瑠璃子	being able to email people's phones is cool ^^;
8:24:57 PM	瑠璃子	kay miró	Oh, nice!! So what time are you free??
8:25:01 PM	瑠璃子	kay miró	Ah, I got it!!
8:25:34 PM	kay miró	瑠璃子	anytime you like. I'll probably just be doing homework that day.

The management of multiple and concurrent conversational strands did not occur in all conversations. Jacob described how he avoids multiple “streams of conversation” in chat, by monitoring the space at the bottom of the chat window, which would display “Miku is typing a message” when his partner was composing a turn. “I’d go to write something in, but it would say underneath, Miku is typing, and so I’d go, oh, okay, and delete what I was going to say, because I’d wait for her response”. “Because often when... you’re both... starting off a question, it’ll get really confusing. So I thought, it’s probably easier, just to have one stream of conversation going”.

One pair in which the division of labour was certainly not even was the former host sisters, Evelyn and Azusa. Evelyn stayed as an exchange student at Azusa’s home in Japan in 2002 on a one-year student exchange. Evelyn felt that this relationship placed her in a position of indebtedness to Azusa, and did not like to “annoy” Azusa, who she viewed as her senior. In her interview, Evelyn described having difficulty in gaining Azusa’s attention in chat, and revealed that a large portion of her e-turns were specifically aimed at spiking Azusa’s interest, demonstrating Evelyn’s sense of powerlessness. Evelyn went to great efforts to maintain Azusa’s interest in the conversation, typing her messages in English, even though she wanted to practice her Japanese, because she knew that Azusa enjoyed speaking English, and attempted to use this tactic to lure her into a conversation. Whenever she felt Azusa’s attention waning, Evelyn would code-switch back to English, stating in her interview “I didn’t want to lose her”.

Phia commented in her interview that in chats with her former classmate, Soichiro, she made efforts to “indulge him” in topics that seemed to interest him, and stated, “I was just listening to the story”. Education student Nadia reported waiting ten minutes for her chat partner, Tomi, to say goodbye to her, and stated an hour later in the interview “I felt a bit sad”, and “I thought it was rude” that she did not respond. In all of these cases, the unequal division of labour meant one participant was cast into the relatively powerless role of listener or reader, and the other, speaker or writer. In order for balanced participation, it is vital that swapping between these roles occurs.

Orthographic Switching

Technology-related problems were relatively rare, however many learners had a limited knowledge of orthographic switching methods. The five Australian students all used different methods to switch between Japanese and English characters, with different levels of success, as is shown in the table below, which appeared to be related to their amount of prior experience using Japanese on a computer.

Australian Participant’s Orthography Switching

Participant	Strategy	Success (based upon number of related errors and participant’s self-evaluation)
Nadia	Mouse	Limited
Kaylene	ALT + ~	High
Evelyn	CAPITALS	Medium
Jacob	F10	High
Phia	Avoidance	High

A lack of knowledge of orthographic switching methods was one of the greatest sources of frustration for learners, and in some cases, contributed to learners deciding not to code-switch. Phia reported trying to avoid orthographic switching in her conversation with former classmate Soichiro. She said “if I knew the keyboard shortcuts, I’d use them, but I don’t, which really annoys me” so “when I’ve switched into the Japanese IME, it’s much easier just to write, go on in Japanese”. Phia stated that switching frequently would “infuriate” her, and for this reason, she said, “I’ve got to try and stick to one language or the other”. One of the most proficient users, on the other hand, was able to offer advice to her Japanese chat partner, who was not so adept in orthographic switching. Ruriko learnt a new method of switching orthographies by asking her chat partner Kaylene, whom she knew was skilled in computer use. This was surprising, as Kaylene assumed that as a native speaker of Japanese, Ruriko would be more skilled in using the Japanese language interface than herself. In this way, participants exhibited learning about something through language, rather than just learning about language in the chats.

In addition to the language choices of Japanese and English, a third, computer-related code was identified, including chat slang such as the acronym LOL for Laugh Out Loud, and text art, such as the colon and right parentheses :) to display a smiley face, which some learners had limited or no exposure to prior to their interactions with their partners in this study. Most

participants found these emotion expressing symbols useful in building relationships with their chat partners. Kaylene commented that these symbols were important because “that’s the one area I think chat really falls short on, because you don’t have, mainly, the ability to actually have them see your facial expressions. To know that you really feel for them”. While less experienced chatters used the symbols that come standard with the software, some of the more veteran users downloaded custom icons, or created their own text art.

Goals, Expectations and Repair

Participant’s goals were a major factor in shaping their interactions. Repair appears to be more frequent where students have a primary goal of language learning. Education student Nadia, the only participant to identify language learning as her primary goal, and language exchange partners Kaylene and Ruriko performed repairs the most frequently, while social chatter Jacob often avoided repair entirely by changing the topic. Participants used a wide range of dictionaries – both online and electronic hand held dictionaries – and again, those who chatted mostly for language learning purposes were the only ones to look up words that were not crucial to sustaining the conversation. Importantly, Kaylene and Ruriko, the language exchange partners would ask one another before resorting to the dictionary. However, Evelyn described in her interview how she felt that her Japanese was inadequate compared with Azusa’s level of English, and revealed that she would type new words into her dictionary “rather than asking her, what does that mean, because it’s just easier”. Overall, however, the visual nature of text-based chat, with the permanent record appearing on the screen appears to facilitate repair.

Discussion

The histories of learners were found to shape their use of intercultural Internet chat in a variety of ways. Experience with computers, their chat partners, and language learning had a profound influence upon participants’ turn management, turn taking, orthographic and code switching, use of symbols, repair, dictionaries, and partners. The nature of Kaylene and Ruriko’s relationship as language exchange partners appears to have positively influenced the balance in their conversations in terms of turn management and turn-taking, as well as facilitating their use of one another as resources to learn new vocabulary, in concert with dictionary use, as Kaylene and Ruriko often asked one another language related questions.

Where one partner produced considerably more e-turns, or lengthier e-turns, than the other, an uneven power relationship was formed, whereby one partner assumed the role of the reader, and the other, of the writer. The majority of the chats contained slightly more Japanese than English, and accordingly, the Japanese native speakers composed and sent the majority of the e-turns. Thus, the Japanese participants often assumed the dominant role in the conversations. The uneven relationship produced when one speaker took on or was given the identity of the

'writer' is evident in Jacob's waiting for Miku to finish, Evelyn's attempts to maintain Azusa's interest, and Phia's casting of herself as the 'listener'.

Past experience and expertise in using computers and the Internet also impacted upon learners' conversations. In order to create an optimum learning environment, as many technology-related problems as possible should be avoided. It is desirable for learners to be aware of the various functions of the program they are using, although often these functions do not need to be explicitly taught, instead, learners often learn by using. In addition, they may also seek assistance from a peer.

Conclusion

Authentic intercultural chat communication is a fertile area for further investigation. This study was successful in identifying a range of ways in which individual participant's histories and goals informed their use of chat, and revealed that sociocultural factors are important in shaping the nature of the discourse, and these features in turn may provide different opportunities for learning. Chat was found to provide opportunities for natural language use with native speakers, with the majority of participants stating that their primary goal in chatting was social interaction, language learning being the second most frequently stated goal. Most of the participants drew on previous relationships with their chat partners that extended beyond the virtual world. Chat was, in some cases, a vehicle for cementing or continuing these interactions despite geographic separation experienced by returning to the participant's home country, as in the case of the former classmates and the former host sisters. Chat was found to provide a positive environment for interaction with native speakers and informal language acquisition, and all of the participants stated that they enjoyed chat interaction overall. Aside from the potential egalitarianism of chat, opportunities for reciprocal teaching and learning, and role swapping to develop as language experts were also found, although further research in this area is needed.

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