Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure in Computer-Mediated Communication

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Abstract: The study reported in this paper examines the occurrence of cross-cultural misunderstandings in computer-mediated communication (CMC). CMC has become a part of many people's everyday life; rules of language practice such as politeness and other characteristics of relational communication are blurred. The study will expose subtle conducts that are language and culture specific. It will further explore how these social and culture factors influence language use of native and non-native English speaking national and international postgraduate Education students. In particular, the positive and negative tactics and the depiction of relational regularities and patterns prove to be useful to uncover cross-cultural interactions. Questions that arise are: What is considerate as polite and acceptable and what is rude and intolerable in CMC? Is politeness a luxury we no longer can or want to afford? How is this affecting cross-cultural communication and negotiation in CMC?

Keywords: cross-cultural pragmatic failure; computer-mediated communication; politeness

If persons have a universal human nature, they themselves are not to be looked to for an explanation of it. One must look rather to the fact that societies everywhere, if they are to be societies, must mobilise their members as self-regulating participants in social encounters.
...
Universal human nature is not a very human thing. By acquiring it, the person becomes a kind of construct, built up not from inner psychic propensities but from moral rules that are impressed upon him from without ... The general capacity to be bound by moral rules may well belong to the individual, but the particular set of rules which transforms him into a human being derives from requirements established in the ritual organisation of social encounters (Goffman, 1967, pp. 44-45).

Introduction

In the CMC domain, cross-cultural communication is twofold. The Internet and the World Wide Web have shrunk the physical world, fitting it into peoples' offices and homes as soon as their equipment interfaces with a server. New technological designs, applications and meanings promote change and influence or alter the status quo (Okan, 2007). Information is often just a mouse click away and online communication overcomes geographical and time limitations. Computer technology changes so fast that its users are continuously stimulated and challenged by its boundless interactive environments. Digitally influenced outlooks, understandings and cognitive processing routines entice interlocutors as individuals or social groups by allowing them a sense of freedom and equity.

Conversely, CMC is limited by its own qualities, as it requires competence in computer application, technical sophistication and communicative proficiency. The Internet dissolves face-to-face (FtF) natural occurring inhibitions while drawing interlocutors into its boundless digital environment. Social interactions are manifested in the first or second virtual world and are supported by animation, graphics, sound and text. FtF interactions are simultaneously occurring cooperative processes between two or more interlocutors. These interactions require instantaneous and continuous signal transmissions and receptions, while uninterrupted feedback is enhanced by non-verbal cues. In CMC, such cues are limited, requiring a high level of interactional control and an awareness of linguistic norms and pragmatic peculiarities (Felix, 2003).

The occurrence of cross-cultural misunderstandings in CMC is common and occurrences are well documented. In particular, people from the same language and cultural background develop similar cognitive processing habits informed by environmental perceptions, observations and agreed norms (Feenberg, 1991). Language manners, such as politeness and other attributes of linguistic interactions are becoming increasing distorted. In FtF, agreed politeness conventions assure interlocutors by means of interactional prompts, making it easy to identify the other's intent. However, group and cultural norms inform politeness: what one interlocutor conveys is not necessarily what the other interlocutors perceive, requiring cautious application of politeness norms among local and across global groups (Pohl, 2004). Particularly in CMC, the singularity of politeness from an English linguistic and cultural perspective seems to enforce incivility towards supposed out-groups.

Aim of the study

This study focused on the phenomena of written expressions in CMC. Besides cross-cultural pragmatic differences, written language in asynchronous communication proposes the advantage of compositional control; however, it cannot precisely determine the interlocutors' interpretation due to the lack of paralinguistic and prosodic elements, which boost the possibility of misunderstandings and failure. It investigated how social and

cultural factors influence language use of native and ESL postgraduate Education students. The findings of this study intended to further the discussions and initiate research in CMC in the negotiation of communication problems.

Literature Review

Language identity and culture

Language is intrinsically embedded in culture, therefore, a tool to become aware of cultural peculiarities in communication (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Dunworth, 2002). Language is fluid and modification takes place first on the individual level, sub-group or community in practice, while later gradually progressing into changes at the social level (Mills, 2008). Native and non-native English interlocutors because of their likely diverse cultural background encode and decode messages in different ways. Native English speakers tend to become content with the idea that the English language and culture are omnipresent and understood around the world. As Thomas (1983) stressed "emerging cross-cultural pragmatic differences may potentially threaten or disrupt collaborative interaction between native and non-native interlocutors" (p. 109).

Pragmatics

According to Thomas' (1983) model of pragmatic failure, cross-cultural communication refers to the messages transmitted between two or more interlocutors who do or do not share a common cultural or linguistic background. In other words, pragmatics goes beyond the meaning of syntactic form and semantics or as stated by Grice "the overt meaning differs from the implied" (1975, as cited in Hatch, 1992, p. 260). Dash (2004) highlighted that interlocutors in cross-cultural communication are required to become cultural sensitive and objective, avoiding prejudice and stereotypical assumptions to prevent communication breakdown in CMC. Lin (2008) discovered that interlocutors from different social and cultural traditions tend to use their own cultural values and systems to comprehend and interpret new social situations. She stressed that it is impossible for ESL speakers to acquire all pragmatic rules but it would be beneficial if both native and non-native speakers were aware of linguistic multiplicity, which reaches beyond the spoken word.

Computer-mediated communication

CMC takes place between one or more interlocutors via the instrumentality of a computer as the tool and telecommunication networks. CMC is predominantly carried out through discursive interaction. In CMC, the physical absence of interlocutors is replaced with

language and its multimodal, semiotic systems. Interlocutors use the keyboard to type verbal language that appears as a readable text on the computer screen (Herring, 2004). Cohen and Metzger (1998) made the point that the fundamental

> … motivation for both mediated and face-to-face communication is a basic need for social affiliation. The need for social affiliation is so central for communication because it stems from, and is necessary for, understanding of who we are in relation to the world around us (p. 1).

The popularity of CMC and the tremendous boom in globalisation, immigration and travel allows interlocutors to create a new category of social interaction. Initially, CMC was created purely as a tool for data transmission but quickly gained attractiveness as a social interface (Walther, 1996, as cited in Herring, 2004). People who use the Internet for commercial purposes or pleasure can easily attain some basic computer literacy and can access reliable Internet connection from a wide range of providers offering an ever-growing range of plans and options. Wireless Internet connections make it possible to stay connected anytime and almost anywhere (Heisler & Crabill, 2006). Interlocutors appreciate the interactive mode as it allows language to be manipulated, reproduced, altered and updated (Herring, 2008), and identities in regards to gender, race, class, ethnicity and religious affiliation can be concealed or reinvented (Heisler & Crabill, 2006).

In CMC, the physical absence of interlocutors is replaced with language and its multimodal, semiotic systems (Dresner & Herring, 2010). In real life, people's identity is primarily created through the interaction with families and secondary environmental relations. The way people interact and converse is determined by their cultural rules (Montero-Fleta, Montesinos-Lopez, Perez-Sabater, & Turney, 2008). In CMC, interlocutors who belong to a linguistic community share similar linguistic and communicative competence (Felix, 2003). Consequently, notions of egalitarian Internet communities seem enticing. Herring (2008) concluded that the emergence of communication software applications such as Skype, Elluminate and Wimba Pronto often integrated in Learning Management Systems (LMS) offer real communities in virtual communities a platform for the progress of certain behaviours, norms and values that can be constructed and interpreted in many ways based on individual preference and projection, group expectation and cultural norms. Yus (2001) investigated the concept of Cyber-pragmatics, a branch of pragmatics and CMC, and discovered a potential for simulated and immersive learning in a variety of contexts. DeLucia, Francese, Passero and Tortora (2009) explored Second Life as an educational Web3D environment and revealed that the low cost virtual world supported interlocutors' engagement and social relationship building.

Politeness as the underpinning theory

Brown and Levinson defined politeness as the considered formulation of utterances in regards to other's feelings without exposing their face. 'Face' relates to the perceived and constructed image of the self (Goffman, 1955). Politeness theory focuses on interlocutors' individual speech acts. Brown and Levinson's (1987) intricate theory intended to unravel

the underlining factors of discourses that, intentionally or not, lack clarity, directness and efficiency (Holtgraves, 2002). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), interlocutors use a range of tactics either to provide or threaten the face: "direct and unambiguous comments – 'Bald on record'; respect statements – 'positive politeness', lessening imposition statements – 'negative politeness', subtle requests – 'off-record-and silent treatments – 'withholding the face-threatening act'" (pp. 68-70). Expressions of politeness can be misinterpreted depending on the individual's perception or cultural practice (Yus, 2001). Golato and Taleghani-Nikazm (2006) concluded that interlocutors transferred real life interactional tactics into CMC depending on the individual and cultural personified behaviour. Spencer-Oatey (2002; 2005) confirmed these as interlocutors' seek peer acceptance to conform to group norms. Vinagre (2008) agreed to some extend as she puts forward that interlocutors preferred clarity and collaboration, and use "positive politeness to show solidarity, like-mindedness and friendship" (p. 1031). In cross-cultural communication, FtF or in CMC, judgments about politeness/impoliteness are based on the highly ideological assumption of what is considered the norm of language behaviour in a society, subgroup or community in practice (Mills, 2008). Kasper (cited in Kasper & Kellerman, 1997) questioned the culturally neutral approaches in cross-cultural communication, while Graham (2007) concluded that a fulfilling cross-cultural communication means something different for each interlocutor.

Methodology

The Subjects

The subjects were USQ postgraduate Education students. The reasons for approaching postgraduate Education students were threefold as is was assumed that these students are highly trained and proficiently skilled in Education and related fields and uphold a sense of professionalism and integrity in their responses. Secondly, it was anticipated that these students have come across cross-cultural contexts in teaching and learning, therefore are aware of possible cross-cultural pragmatic issues. Thirdly, postgraduate Education students may conduct research in the future.

Instruments

This study used a questionnaire containing two components. The first component included general demographic questions to establish background data concerning the participant's native language, cultural background, and place of residence, age and gender, foreign language knowledge, and their regular use of CMC. The second component referred to the DCTs, which comprised of six CMC scenarios. The design of the DCT questionnaire was based on anecdotal incidents within CMC in university, business and private contexts. The dialogue-type situations focused on four work-like scenarios ranging from formal to

friendly, while the two other scenarios represented a closer relationship between the interlocutors.

Procedure

Postgraduate students from the faculty of Education at USQ were invited via an email to take part in the study. By responding to the questionnaire, participants gave permission for the investigator to use information for research purposes only. Data was collected using a self-completion questionnaire eliciting numerical information that was quantitatively analysed. Discursive responses were also coded and analysed for possible patterns and correlations.

The first part of the questionnaire contained inquiries that aimed to elicit nominal data to determine gender, native language, age range, cultural background and place of residence. The participants were expected to provide extended responses to gain an understanding of the distribution of gender participation of NE and ESL interlocutors. Firstly, language and cultural background was anticipated to impact on the findings of this study. It was also anticipated that the place of residence would impact on cross-cultural pragmatic behaviour, therefore providing further insight.

In the second section, participants were asked to provide ordinal data about second or other language knowledge and proficiency. While the number of languages was unlimited (the first five languages were individually stated while further language knowledge could be noted in a rubric of 'other' (please specify). A category of proficiency levels was employed, ranging from native-like, to vocational, minimal vocational, minimal social, survival and minimal survival. It was expected that knowledge of a second language or more and varying degrees of proficiency might influence communication across languages and cultures.

The third section was concerned with the frequency distribution of CMC. Participants were asked to indicate if they used asynchronous and synchronous communication and how often they used it. Frequency of use ranged from frequently to regularly, occasionally and rarely, while the option of 'other (please specify)' was given for further information. Again, CMC participation patterns across gender, age, language and cultural background were expected to provide answers to the research questions.

The last section contained CMC scenarios, which were adapted from real life situations, and names and distinctive features of real life incidents were omitted. The content was adapted without losing its authenticity while at the same time adjusted to suit the purpose of this study. The study aspired to keep the scenarios free from gender bias to appeal to females and males alike. Furthermore, the scenarios ranked from professional workplace-like scenarios to more familiar or friendship-like situations. While the work related scenarios expressed professional language use, the more familiar situations allowed for colloquialisms and emotional expressions.

Data analysis and coding

The component of analysis was determined by the responses produced in the four sections. Sections one to three were coded and analysed according to participant's native language, cultural background, age and gender. Place of residence was disregarded due to insufficient information. Native language referred to native English (NE), while non-native allowed for categories of English as a second language (ESL) speakers who have a non-English cultural background, and English speakers with a non-English cultural background (NEBG). The scenarios were classified in accordance with Brown and Levsinson's (1987) politeness theory. The responses were annotated, classified, coded and sorted applying Leech's (1983) taxonomy of illocutionary functions (*Table 1*). These classifications related to the interlocutor's goals of "establishing and maintaining comity" (Leech, 1983, p. 104). They were separated into the four classes of "competitives, convivials, collaboratives and conflictives" (Leech, 1983, p. 104). For the study, the second and third class are regarded as polite, while the first and the last classes are referred to as impolite, with the latter considered the rudest.

Table 1: **Leech's (1983) classification of illocutionary function**

Illocutionary function		Definition	Examples
Polite	**Convivials**	The illocutionary goal coincides with the social goal	Offering , inviting, thanking, promising, vowing
	Collaboratives	The illocutionary goal is indifferent to the social goal	Claiming, boasting, complaining
Impolite	**Competitives**	The illocutionary goal competes with the social goal	Ordering, demanding, advising, commanding
	Conflictives	The illocutionary goal conflicts with the social goal	Accusing, cursing, reprimanding

Results

Participants by gender

This study received 133 responses within a few days. However, eight prospective interlocutors chose not to participate. A further sixteen participants were unable to complete the questionnaire or provided insufficient information to be included in this study.

In total, 109 USQ postgraduate Education students participated in this research. Female participation (72 participants) was higher than male participation (37 participants).

Participants by gender and language

A further break down into language background revealed that 65 females, or 60%, identified English as their native language while seven females, or 6 %, indicated they spoke languages other than English. In comparison, 34 males, (31%), were NE speakers while three, or 3%, named languages other than English as their native tongue. Participants' native languages included Afrikaans, Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, German, Polish, Portuguese, Tagalong and Tamil.

Participants by gender, language and cultural background

Participants' cultural backgrounds were defined by their native language as well as what they identified as their cultural background. According to the information provided, 65 NE female participants (53%), and 34 males (27 %) considered themselves to be from English/Australian cultural background. A further 7 females or (6 %), and 3 males (2 %) considered themselves as ESL speakers. Most importantly, another 11 English-speaking females (9 %), and 4 English-speaking males (3 %) insisted they belonged to a NEGB.
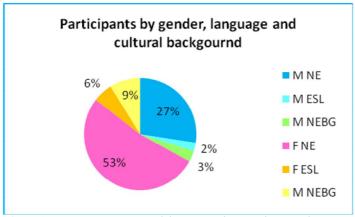

Figure 1: **Female and male participants: native-English, English as a second language, and native-English speaking from non-English cultural background**

As the data revealed more females than males participated in this study. Participants from ESL backgrounds formed the smallest group. On the other hand, a group emerged that considered themselves as NE speakers but identified themselves as belonging to NEBG.

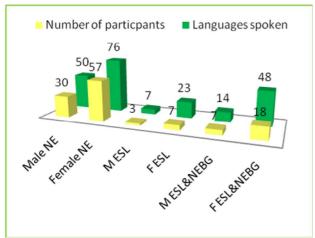**Second or more language(s) knowledge and proficiency levels**

Figure 2: **Female and male participants: second and more languages spoken at differing proficiency levels**

The data revealed that more languages are spoken by ESL, and ESL and NEBG speakers than NE speakers. The level of proficiency is consistent with the rank of languages spoken. In other words, the second language was often spoken at a high proficiency level while subsequent languages were spoken less proficiently. In particular, NE speakers' second or more language knowledge was at a lower proficiency level.

CMC participation

In regards to CMC, participants of different gender, age, language, and cultural background equally appreciate asynchronous but were less enthusiastic to utilise synchronous communication.
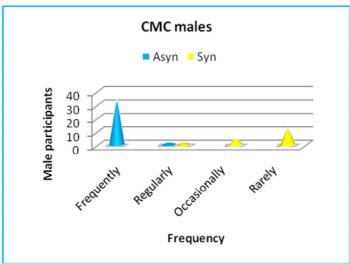

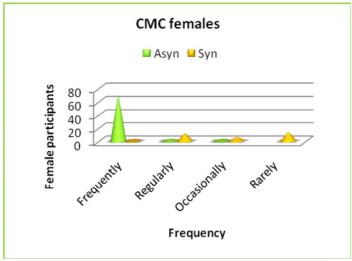*Figure 3:* **Male participants: CMC preference and frequency**

Figure 4: **Female participants: CMC preference and frequency**

Discourse Completion Tasks – 6 Scenarios

Table 2: **Numbers of female and male participants: language and cultural background**

Participants	NE	ESL	ESL & NEBG
Males	30	3	7
Females	54	7	18
Total	84	10	25

Scenarios and coding

The six scenarios were adapted from real life situations. This part of the survey required participants to read the scenario description and to respond as they would in reality. The scenarios were coded according to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). The third, fourth and fifth scenarios were considered positive polite while the first, second and sixth were considered negative polite. The scenarios were also ranked in regards to the seriousness of Face Threatening Acts (FTA's) which are part of most cultures. The FTA ranking referred to the social distance between the two interlocutors, the relative power between interlocutors and the absolute ranking of impositions in the particular culture. In that sense, scenario one was considered to be the most serious or the most formal and distant. Levels of social distance were gradually reduced, therefore classifying scenario six as the most familiar, along the lines of a recreational chat.

Responses

The responses were coded according to Leech's (1983) illocutionary functions. Polite responses were grouped as A – presenting convivial, or B – presenting collaboration. Impolite responses were grouped in C – presenting competitive, or D – presenting conflictive. A neutral factor for omitted responses was represented by an O.

Results by gender, language and cultural background

Table 3: **Numbers of male participants: all ages and language backgrounds employing polite or impolite tactis**

Males	A - convivial	B – collaborative	C – competitive	D – conflictive	O – no response
NE	85	39	20	1	34
ESL	11	3	2	1	1
ESL & NEBG	23	10	4	1	3
Total	119	52	26	3	38

Table 4: **Numbers of female participants: all ages and language backgrounds employing polite and impolite tacits**

Females	A – convivial	B – collaborative	C - competitive	D - conflictive	O – no response
NE	128	76	57	7	56
ESL	14	13	11	1	1
ESL & NEBG	40	34	15	3	6
Total	182	123	83	11	63

Table 3 and 4 clearly demonstrated a trend towards convivial responses across genders, language and cultural backgrounds. Males responded more frequently with option A than females. Noticeably, NE males and females chose to ignore messages more often. In particular, in Scenario 1 language behaviour was similar for both genders and across language and cultural backgrounds with the exception of ESL speakers, who clearly preferred the most polite option, while in Scenario 2 the results indicated that males preferred to respond politely or ignore the message. NE females responded similarly to males while ESL and NEBG chose polite, collaborative and competitive options. In Scenario 3, NE, ESL and NEBG male participants reacted similarly choosing polite options over impolite. However, NE females, in contrast to ESL and NEBG females, clearly asserted their position with response C while ESL and NEBG chose politer options. In Scenario 4, NE males preferred polite options, while the ESL and NEBG males were slightly less kind. NE and ESL and NEBG females were mostly collaborative but they also chose competitive alternatives. In Scenario 5, all males chose to respond most politely. Females also preferred the politest options with a few exceptions resorting to competitivenesss. In scenario 6, a rude comment prompted differing responses. NE males

either chose to collaborate or to skip the inquiry. ESL and NEBG males still preferred to respond competitively, collaboratively or conflictively. NE females ignored the messages while others expressed a strong preference for competitive or collaborative and conflicitve responses. ESL and NEBG females responded in a similar way.

Discussion

The results from the inquiry corresponded with the findings in the literature. In today's globalised world and competitive job market which is driven by economic rationalism, the individual is required to be able to think creatively, work collaboratively, and possess a high degree of linguistic proficiency and communicative competence, particularly in CMC (Bonilla, 2003; Ling, Gen-Cai, Chen-Guang & Chuen, 2003). Language is a vehicle to articulate emotions and ideas; it moulds thinking, creating a unique way of understanding the world. Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Dunworth, 2002) pointed out that people's identity is primarily formed through the interaction with families and secondary environmental relations. Pragmatic competence refers to the understanding of meaning in context, as it is culturally informed while functioning in the social context level of language performance (Montero-Fleta et al. 2008; Thomas, 1983). Pragmatics is concerned with the way language is communicated, rather than its structure. It seems that the greater the structural differentiation of languages (Kecskes & Papp, 2000), the more dissimilar their conceptualisation of the world, making it difficult to detect the subtle nuances of meaning, ambiguous words, or the accidental or intended use of a word (Schnitzer, 1995). An agreed language standard and an eagerness to embrace cultural differences promote cross-lingual and cross-cultural enrichment, understanding and admiration (Durham cited in Danet & Herring, 2003; Hrastinski, 2008; Pohl 2004).

Preference for politeness and high tolerance for impoliteness in CMC

Politeness is a matter of taste (Fromkin et al. 2007), and a tool for power relations to assert superiority as well as group relations (Lanteigne, 2007; Limberg, 2009; Spencer-Oatey, 2002, 2005). Everywhere in the world people like to be respected; hence, politeness is a universal phenomenon but cultural differences are prevalent and expressed through subtle nuances in discursive interactions (Kienpointner, 2005; Montero-Fleta et al. 2008; Tang & Zhang, 2008). Politeness in essence is not only a strategy to ensure smooth conversations between interlocutors but it is also a technique to prevent conflict and misunderstandings (Yus, 2001; Kasper cited in Kasper & Kellerman, 1997). According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, interlocutors consider the other person's face in interactions to enhance their self-image and to avoid communicational reconstruction. However, as the literature reveals such assumption are not always applicable cross-culturally or with FtF and CMC interactions (Oliveira, 2003; Watts, 2003). In some languages, politeness is a component of grammar while in others rude nicknames are an expression of fondness and acceptance. Interlocutors in CMC similarly develop their own range of community specific

semiotic systems to assert individuality in addition to group belonging (Herring, 2004). Politeness and its interpretations fluctuate between language and cultural group and on the attached value to proper conduct (Leech, 2007).

The data revealed that participants across a wide range of genders, languages, cultural backgrounds and generations demonstrated a preference for polite language and a high tolerance for rude and offensive language. The results from the 'Results by gender, language and cultural background' section confirmed the findings in the literature, which conveyed that participants in general communicated politely, and with kindness. A close examination of *Table 3* and *Table 4* showed that neither language nor cultural background determined a polite response but rather, gender did. Males chose positive politeness while females used competitive responses, which indicated some endorsement for impoliteness.

At first glance, these results seemed to suggest that men are the more courteous gender. However, if the language and intent of the scenarios are taken into consideration, it became apparent that gender binaries continue to exist in CMC, where males dominate the public arena (Mills, 2002; Oliveira, 2003). In the findings, male responses showed a tendency for short answers, fewer apologies, and deliberate employment of clichés, and expressed less doubts about meaning of messages and used humour and irony more often. Female participants on the other hand, used elaborate expressions in their answers, responded with more apologies, openly expressed their confusion about the messages and expressed more gratitude as well as asserted disapproval. Females also temporarily increased written dexterity, poise and linguistic frankness to counteract transgression. Women's language behaviour in this study confirmed the findings of the literature, which emphasised that females employ co-operative strategies such as care, concern and sympathy in communication (Coates, 1996). They are also more likely to reveal personal details in CMC, exposing themselves as easy targets for cyber predators (Herring, 2000). Evidently, both genders favour a polite and conflict free interactional environment. However, women safeguard their interaction in CMC, and react with greater caution and assert their position if necessary.

Language is never cultural neutral

Language is not culturally neutral, as it is continuously reinvented, moulded and constructed by cultural norms (Deutscher, 2005; Kasper & Kellerman, 1997; Mills, 2008). Language is flowing, and is therefore a site of ubiquitous change and endless opportunities (Berendt & Kralisch, 2007; Schnitzer, 1995). Interlocutors from different language and cultural backgrounds are often unaware of each other's particular values, social customs, social status, and principles in communication (Adams St Pierre, 2000; Lin, 2008; Tang & Shang, 2008). In contrast to FtF communication where sensitivity, sociability and empathy are at the highest level, the low level of social presence proposes a particular challenge in CMC (Felix, 2003; Herring, 2004; Nobila, 1998). Disappointments also arise from expectations that ESL interlocutors abide by and assimilate the cultural peculiarities of the dominant culture in their language compositions consequently handing over linguistic autonomy (Bastardas-Boada, 2002). This leads to further frustration as cross-cultural

pragmatic failure results not only from errors in syntax, inaccurate pronunciation (not applicable in asynchronous communication) or literal meaning, but also in part from the misunderstanding or miscommunication of the implied meaning (Thomas, 1983). In CMC, interlocutors are dependent on the written text, their language skills and their knowledge about their online community.

The outcomes of the evaluation process of the scenarios clearly illustrated once more the participants' inclination for polite responses confirming Brown and Levinson's theory (1987) that interlocutors generally strive to save the other person's face. The third, fourth and fifth scenarios were categorised as positive and the first, second and sixth scenarios as negative polite. In the first scenario, participants' language behaviour was similar in both NE genders, with the exception of ESL and NEBG participants, who clearly preferred the most polite option. In the second scenario, NE female responses were comparable to male responses, while ESL and NEBG females chose the politer options. As both the first and second scenarios referred to distance and the professional world, answers were clearly composed to neutralise possible power imbalance by reacting to impoliteness with a positive response (Herring, 2004; Mills, 2002; Yus, 2001).

In Scenario 3, NE, and ESL and NEBG male participants reacted similarly, using polite options. However NE females, in contrast to ESL and NEBG females, clearly asserted their position with competitive responses while ESL and NEBG females still chose politer options. Interestingly, in this scenario professional distance was surmounted with familiarity. This seemed to have violated NE female boundaries but not the ESL and NEBG female ones. These findings may convey a greater tolerance on the part of ESL and NEBG females. It also affirms that NE females possess a greater knowledge about their language and cultural norms and its violations (Lanteigne, 2007).

In Scenario 4, NE males preferred polite options, but ESL and NEBG were slightly kinder. NE and ESL and NEBG females were the most collaborative. This scenario clearly appealed to participants' empathy, eliciting the politest responses from females to support and encourage the composer. In Scenario 5, all males agreed to respond most politely. Females also preferred the politest options, except for a few considered competitiveness. This indicates that familiarity and humour in language, which are understood to be positive qualities, are a matter of taste and agreed norms which in unfamiliar situation can result in misunderstandings or conflict (Graham, 2007; Matthews, Hancock & Dunham, 2006).

In Scenario 6, the offensive language in this scenario tested tolerance levels and provoked participants to possibly cross the line of formality and good manners. The rude comment prompted NE males either not to comment or not to collaborate, which indicates personal distance, group belonging and a sense of sensitivity to others' needs (Katz, Lenhardt and Mitchell, 2007). ESL and NEBG males still preferred to respond competitively, collaboratively or conflictively. Most NE females ignored the messages, while others expressed a strong preference for competitive or collaborative responses. ESL and NEBG females responded similarly, communicating assertiveness and dismay. The results confirmed the findings of the literature that participants, regardless of their gender, language, cultural background or age, predominantly favour politeness or choose not to respond to avoid conflict (Duthler, 2006).

Implications for further research

It became apparent in the course of the inquiry that more work could be undertaken in the areas of politeness and bilingualism. How important is the notion of politeness? How and to what extent does the NE speaker's non-English cultural background influence their perception of politeness. How are they adjusting to the ongoing cultural divide and how are these changes reflected in their language? In particular, the Australian Indigenous perspective of the middle class white male construct of politeness behaviour may challenge the current theoretical underpinnings of politeness. Due to university policy, this study exclusively recruited USQ postgraduate Education students. For further research, data gathered from across a range of disciplines may bring further light on cross-cultural pragmatic failure in CMC. Future research could include the broader public to gain a greater insight into Australians' motivation to use polite tactics in CMC.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature proposes that language and culture are intrinsically intertwined; that language is constructed by cultural values and norms to articulate human needs and emotions. Politeness, conditioned through cultural experiences, is considered a means of respect and kindness to allow the other interlocutor to save face. The data affirmed the findings of the literature review, revealing that neither NE, ESL nor NEBG groups are exclusively responsible for cross-cultural pragmatic failure in CMC. Language and cultural background influenced responses in such a way that participants predominantly drew on polite tactics. Even the most bad-mannered scenario prompted understanding, support or disregard. The study also uncovered that pragmatic misunderstandings are not just the signs of insufficient language control on the part of the ESL interlocutors. The myth of the perfect interlocutor's discourse in a uniform language community with exact language comprehension contributes to the expectations of ESL interlocutors as language culprits (Chomsky, as cited in Le Page, 1997). This attitude ignores accidental or deliberate inconsistencies of pragmatics on the part of the NE interlocutor. However, cross-cultural pragmatic failure has the potential to transform into cross-cultural sensitivity and awareness benefiting the NE and ESL interlocutors promoting cross-cultural communication and dialogue in today's conflict ridden world.

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