

# Cross-cultural Online Communication: from Interactional to Transactional Writing

## 1 Introduction

The choice of lexicogrammatical features in a particular writing depends on the communicative context that can range from interactional to transactional situations. Non-native students, however, tend to be less sensitive to the variation of linguistic features expected by interactional/transactional characteristics of a text<sup>1</sup>. The acquisition of this sensitivity is important for the students of FML (Faculty of Modern languages) of the University of Latvia, as their needs<sup>2</sup> range from the English language teaching to various target groups to translation of texts of different disciplines and genres, which requires language use variation that cut across these genres. The multi-purpose needs of the students of FML can be addressed through involving them in writing activities that range from transactional to interactional written communication, because they

must practise writing in a range of genres to capture the language use variation. One of the ways to provide such practice is the application of technology-enhanced, cross-cultural writing activities by placing students in contact with an authentic audience and authentic target language exposure. In order to meet the needs of the students of FML, they were provided with the possibility to participate in the project envisaging online cross-cultural communication with the students of Mars Hill College (USA). The goal of the present paper, therefore, is to outline the structure and aims of the cross-cultural writing sessions and explore the lexical complexity and the variation of personal pronouns in the texts developed by the students of the University of Latvia. Moreover, a subsidiary goal is the evaluation of the usefulness of the activity in the light of its cross-cultural potential from these students' perspectives.

## 2 Theoretical Background

The assumption that written communication ranges from transactional to interactional texts has been considered by linguists over the past decades. Brown

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\* PhD. in Philology, lecturer, Faculty of Humanities, University of Latvia, e-mail: zigrida.vincela@lu.lv

<sup>1</sup> Shaw, P., Ting-Kun Liu, E. 1998, What Develops in the Development of Second-language Writing? *Applied Linguistics*, 19:2, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Kramiša, I. 2000, *Linguo-didactic Theories underlying Multi-purpose Language Acquisition*. Riga: ELPA.

and Jule<sup>3</sup>, like Bühler<sup>4</sup>, Jakobson<sup>5</sup> and Halliday<sup>6</sup>, have summarised language functions in two groups: transactional functions that “serve in the expression of content” and interactional, “involved in expressing social relations and personal attitudes”. They emphasise that writing is primarily transactional, whereas speech interactional. This approach, which is shared by other linguists<sup>7</sup>, brings out the peculiarities of spoken/written communication and leads to a more complex perception of the language use variation across spoken/written or orality/literacy continua. Accordingly, Hatch<sup>8</sup>, Street<sup>9</sup> and other researchers conclude that particular written texts can share the same lexicogrammatical features, which are characteristic of spoken language. The overlapping of the lexicogrammatical features along the written/spoken or orality/literacy continuum has been thoroughly

investigated by Biber<sup>10</sup>, who has proved that “there is no linguistic or situational characterization of speech and writing that is true of all spoken and written genres”. These findings show that linguistic features in written texts can overlap and cut across the orality/literacy continuum, hence interactional/transactional divide of language functions. Moreover, with the advent of computer networks, written communication situations tend to diversify. Callot & Belmore<sup>11</sup> have explored the language use variation in bulletin-board messages according to Biber’s multidimensional approach. They have found that variation of linguistic features in these messages correlates with the linguistic characteristics of public interviews, personal and professional letters, which means that bulletin-board messages tend to combine interactional and transactional functions. The diversity of variation across the orality/literacy continuum in different Internet situations has been analysed by Crystal<sup>12</sup>, Murray<sup>13</sup> and Herring<sup>14</sup>, who conclude that the Inter-

<sup>3</sup> Brown, G., & Yule, G. 1983, *Discourse Analysis*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Bühler, K. 1999, *Sprachtheorie. Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache*. Mit einem Geleitwort von Friedrich Kainz, Ungekutter Neudr. der Ausg. Jena, Fisher, 1933, 3. Aufl. Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius.

<sup>5</sup> Jakobson, R. 1960, *Linguistics and Poetics*. In: Sebeok, T. (ed.), *Style in Language*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT-Press), pp. 350-377.

<sup>6</sup> Halliday, M. 1970, *Language Structure and Language Function*. In: Lyons, J. (ed.) *New Horizons in Linguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

<sup>7</sup> Crystal, D. 1995, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Halliday, M. 1995, *Spoken and Written Language*. Burwood: Deakin University Press; Nunan, D. 1993, *Introducing Discourse Analysis*. London: Penguin English; Tannen, D. 1982, *Oral and Literate Strategies in Spoken and Written Narratives*, *Language*, 58, pp. 1-21.

<sup>8</sup> Hatch, E. 1992, *Discourse and Language Education*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Street, B. 1995, *Social Literacies*. Harlow: Longman.

<sup>10</sup> Biber, D. 1988, *Variation across Speech and Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Collot, M., & Belmore, N. 1996, *Electronic Language: A New Variety of English*. In Herring, S. (ed.), *Computer-mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social, and Cross-cultural Perspectives*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 13-28.

<sup>12</sup> Crystal, D. 2001, *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Murray, D. 1996, *Communicating for Life: The Social Dimensions of Computer-mediated Communication*, *Applied Linguistics Forum*, 16:2, pp. 1-2; 7-9; Murray, D. 2000, *Protean Communication: The Language of Computer-mediated Communication*, *TESOL Quarterly*, 34, pp. 397-421.

<sup>14</sup> Herring, S. (ed.) 1996, *Computer-mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-cultural Perspectives*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins; Herring, S. 2001, *Computer-mediated Discourse*. In: Schiffrin, D., Tannen, D., & Hamilton, H. (eds.), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell), pp. 612-634.

net situations incorporate the linguistic features expressing interactional and transactional functions. Such diversity, as Kern<sup>15</sup> asserts, prompts that advanced level students must analyse situational factors in order to understand the register pertinent in the variation of linguistic features in different genres.

The topicality of the contextualisation of linguistic features in technology-based writing correlates with the assumption<sup>16</sup> that language learning potential is an essential quality of technology-enhanced activities. Accordingly, this potential has been made obvious by researchers who have investigated technology-based activities aiming at students' contextualisation of written communication. Davis & Thiede<sup>17</sup>, who have explored lexical and syntactical complexity in students' asynchronous discussion postings, conclude that the examined EFL students' electronic conference messages demonstrate the advancement of students' language learning as well as their adjustment to the communicative situation. Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth<sup>18</sup> have focused on the research of students' contextualisation shift in their email-

based and word-processed academic essays. They point out that the frequency rates of linguistic features in email-based essays show that the writers have tended to express their stance more overtly than the writers of word-processed essays, which indicates the contextualisation shift. However, Kern & Warschauer<sup>19</sup> conclude that more recent research on technology-based communication tends to expand the language learning contexts to intercultural learning. The present study, therefore, addresses the involvement of the students of FML of the University of Latvia in authentic, cross-cultural writing sessions that aim at the development of three electronic text-types (biographies, online discussion, informative texts) requiring a shift from interactional to transactional writing.

### 3 Cross-cultural writing sessions

Cross-cultural writing sessions brought together the students of Mars Hill College and the students of the FML of the University of Latvia. Four writing sessions were enabled by Mars Hill College on a Blackboard-based online course (Figure 1). The first session was a trial run aimed at the piloting of writing session stages. The smooth flow of the trial run inspired the integration of the cross-cultural communication in the respective courses of both institutions during three subsequent years: 2003, 2004 and 2005. The collaborative writing sessions at the FML of the University of Latvia were integrated into the course *English Academic Writing*.

The longitudinal cross-cultural writing sessions that included all the previously

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<sup>15</sup> Kern, R. 2006, Perspectives on Technology in Learning and Teaching, *TESOL Quarterly*, 40:1, pp. 183-210.

<sup>16</sup> Chapelle, C. 2001, *Computer Applications in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Chapelle, C. 2002, Computer-assisted Language Learning. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Davis, B., & Thiede, R. 2000, Writing into Change: Style Shift in Asynchronous Electronic Discourse. In: Warschauer, M., & Kern, R. (eds.), *Network-based Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>18</sup> Biesenbach-Lucas, S., & Weasenforth, D. 2001, E-mail and Word Processing in the ESL Classroom: How the Medium Affects the Message, *Language, Learning and Technology*, 5, pp. 133-165.

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<sup>19</sup> Kern, W., & Warschauer, M. 2004, Crossing Frontiers: New Directions in Online Pedagogy and Research, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 24, pp. 243-260.

considered activities, covered nine weeks within the 16-weeks course of *English Academic Writing*. The activities of cross-cultural sessions were integrated within weekly 90-minute classes, and alternated with the regular *English Academic Writing* course activities. Accordingly, only three of the 90-minute classes were fully devoted to the cross-cultural activity.

The goal of cross-cultural writing sessions was two-fold. One of the goals, cultural enrichment, was shared by both institutions: Mars Hill College and the University of Latvia. The other goal was specific for each of the two participating institutions. The specific goal of FML of the University of Latvia was writing skills development, namely, the contextualisation of language variations in the three text-types developed during cross-cultural writing sessions.

The scenario of writing sessions (Table 1) comprised three stages: pre-activities, writing activities and post-activities. The pre-activities and post-activities were specific for each of the institutions and aimed at smooth integration of the cross-cultural writing into the respective courses of both institutions.

During cross-cultural writing activities, the students collaborated in small groups of four or three. The themes of each cross-cultural writing session were discussed with the students chosen by them.

Trial run: Mars Hill College/University of Latvia; traditions, food;

Session 1: traditions, pop-music, leisure time activities; academic community; tourist attractions, contrasts of where we live;

Session 2: academic community, leisure time, family, music;

Session 3: sport, political system, gender roles, family.

During cross-cultural writing activities each small group from one institution, which worked at a particular theme, collaborated with the thematically corresponding group from the other institution.

Cross-cultural writing activities included the following sub-activities (see Table 1):

1. Weeks 2 and 3 were devoted to individual development of biographies and posting of the biographies in the site of the Course Documents created to host the students' biographies from both institutions who worked on the same theme.

2. Week 4 envisaged reading of the biographies of the students from the other institution who had initially chosen the same theme; and starting cross-cultural online discussion via Discussion Board among the small collaborative groups of the students from both institutions who shared the same theme. The discussion focused on the students' interests set out in the biographies as well as the theme that the groups from both institutions had chosen. The online messages were collaboratively brainstormed, and therefore represented the ideas and the gathered information of the participants of the whole small group from the respective institution.

3. Weeks 5 and 6 included collaborative work within the thematic group of the students from each of the two institutions and the development of the text for the informative presentation on the theme that they had chosen; posting of the presentation in the course documents created for hosting of the presen-

tations and biographies of the students from both institutions who worked on the same theme. The writing process of the informative text overlapped with the online discussion via Discussion Board that had started after the posting of the biographies and continued until the closing of the cross-cultural writing session.

4. Weeks 7 and 8 were devoted to the reading of the informative presentations developed by the students from the other institution who had worked on the related theme. Online discussion focused on the issues provoked by the presentation.

#### 4 Results and Discussion

The three types of electronic texts (informative texts, discussion postings and biographies) developed by 44 students of the University of Latvia were compiled in a mini-corpus (38,935 words) in order to explore the students contextualisation of communicative situations by the identification of the overall lexical complexity in these texts. The lexical complexity was explored with the help of *WordSmith Tools*<sup>20</sup>, namely, *Wordlist* and *Concordance* functions.

The overall lexical complexity was investigated by the identification of exploring type/token ratio (TTR) and personal pronoun variations in the electronic texts. TTRs are defined as the total number of unique words, or types, divided by the total number of words, or tokens. According to linguists' findings<sup>21</sup>,

TTR varies in different text-types, thus indicating the writer's lexical complexity: a higher type-token ratio indicates that a text has greater lexical complexity, or in other words, has a greater lexical range. TTR also varies depending on the length of the text: longer texts have more repeated words and consequently lower TTR. In order to compare TTR across the three previously mentioned text types the ratio was standardised according to 1000-word samples.

The frequency of the personal pronouns was identified with the help of *Wordlist* and *Concordance*. In order to represent comparable frequency, the raw totals of personal pronouns were normalised to a text length of 1000 words, namely, indicating how many of the respective pronouns would occur if the text had been 1000 words long. This enables the characterisation of each text-type.

The purpose of the first cross-cultural writing activity, biographies, was to introduce oneself to a comparatively narrow audience – to the students of both institutions who had chosen to work on the same theme. Therefore this writing functioned as the opener of the subsequent cross-cultural communication. Consequently, according to TTR and personal pronoun variation (Table 2), the students had contextualised these texts as personal letters.

TTR in biographies (38.2) is considerably higher than TTR in face-to-face conversation (30.0) according to LSWE (Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus) Corpus 1000-word samples as presented by Biber et.al.<sup>22</sup> in *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (LGSPE)*. This prompts that the stu-

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<sup>20</sup> Scott, M. 1996, *WordSmith Tools*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>21</sup> Biber, D. 1988, *Variation across Speech and Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, E. 2004, (eds.), *Longman Grammar of*

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*Spoken and Written English*. (Fourth reprint), London: Longman.

<sup>22</sup> Biber, D., et al. 2004, *op cit*.

dents have attempted to vary lexis in order to transmit in their biographies the information about their interests and hobbies associated with various events, places, activities and people. On the other hand, the presumed thematic variation in biographies might have been shown by a more versatile lexical variation range. The closer exploration of the wordlist of biographies reveals that statistically the most prominent lexical word in them is the mental verb *like* “to find sb/sth pleasant, attractive or satisfactory” that expresses the attitudes as well as the first person pronouns *I* (which ranks the first in the frequency list) as well as *me, my*. It implies, according to Chafe<sup>23</sup>, that the students have extensively discussed their mental processes, attitudes towards places, things, events as well as shown their ego involvement, interpersonal focus and generally involved style in these texts. The number of the second person pronouns in comparison with the first person pronouns is comparatively insignificant, which indicates a low degree of involvement with the presumable addressee<sup>24</sup>. Accordingly, the students’ biographies comprise two functions: emotive (communication of the inner states and emotions of the addresser) and referential (carrying information by description of persons, things and events).

The purpose of the second cross-cultural activity, asynchronous discussion was online interaction in order to learn more about the interests and the hobbies of the students from the other institution

(Mars Hill College) who had chosen to work at the same theme as well as obtain more detailed, culturally specific information about the chosen theme.

Traditionally, lexical complexity in asynchronous discussion (or online conferences) is compared by researchers with the complexity in face-to-face conversation and show that text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) is lexically more complex than face-to-face conversation<sup>25</sup>. The comparison of TTR rate in the students’ discussion postings with the TTR rate in face-to-face communication in *LGSPE*<sup>26</sup> shows that with respect to TTR, students’ asynchronous discussion tends to be closer to academic texts than face-to-face discussion. However, the discussion postings contain a considerable number of the first and second person pronouns (Table 2). Thus, the first and second person pronouns in discussion postings are predominantly used for direct reference, as well as in some instances to emphasise the inner states and attitudes. First and second person pronouns, referring to the speaker and the addressee, are very common in interaction because the participants are in immediate contact.

Such TTR and the choice of the personal pronouns in online discussions show the multifunctional character of the students’ postings. On the one hand, their purpose, as it is seen from the example, has been to maintain the social relationships (phatic function), but on the other hand the purpose has also been to transmit

<sup>23</sup> Chafe, W. 1985, Linguistic Differences Produced by Differences between Speaking and Writing. In: Olson, D., Torrance, N., & and Hidayard, A. (eds.), *Literature, Language, and Learning: the Nature and Consequences of Reading and Writing*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 105-123.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> Warschauer, M. 1996, Comparing Face-to-face and Electronic Communication in the Second Language Classroom, *CALICO Journal*, 13, pp. 7-26; Crystal, D. 2001, *op. cit.*; Fitzze, M. 2006, Discourse and Participation in ESL Face-to face and Written Electronic Conferences, *Language Learning and Technology*. 10:1, pp. 67-86.

<sup>26</sup> Biber, D., et al., 2004, *op. cit.*

information (referential function). The information transmission of online discussion postings was favoured by the following circumstances: the delayed nature of the discussion postings, the considerable difference in time zones, as well as the collaborative brainstorming that preceded the posting of the online messages. The discussion posting texts, therefore, show a variation from interactional to transactional writing.

### ***Example***

Hi! We were glad to receive a message and question from you. Primary education (9 grades) is obligatory. Secondary education depends on the choice of a person. People are not required to graduate high school (or in Latvia it's called secondary school), but it's important if they want to have a good job and career. There's a great choice of tertiary institutions in our country. A good education is what companies look for when they seek employees.

The purpose of the third activity of cross-cultural writing, informative texts, was the collaborative development of a text for the thematic presentation. The presentations were envisaged for posting in course documents, so that the students who had chosen to develop thematically related presentations from both institutions could view them. Moreover, the presentations were meant for preserving in course documents to use as material for future cross-cultural writing sessions. Accordingly, the presumable audience was comparatively vaster and the developed text more permanent than biographies and discussion postings.

TTR in the informative texts (42.9) correlates with the ratio (41.0) in academic prose in 1000-word samples of *LSWE*

Corpus as presented by Biber et.al.<sup>27</sup>. The frequencies of the personal pronouns in the informative texts are comparatively insignificant. Thus the texts contain comparatively insignificant numbers of the first and second person pronouns. In addition, these pronouns are found in the quotations of the interviews that are incorporated in these texts. The number of the plural first person pronouns (*we, us*) slightly outweighs their singular counterparts. These pronouns are used in the introductory and concluding paragraphs of the informative texts in order to convey or summarise the overall purpose of the text. Accordingly, the students have contextualised the presentation texts as the informative texts that aim to convey specific information on a particular topic (referential function). As according to the cross-cultural project scenario, the presentations were meant as input material for the subsequent cross-cultural writing sessions, the students have rightly perceived these texts as comparatively permanent with the presumably wide audience, which might be considerably distant from them as writers. It means that these texts exhibit the lexical complexity that is required to transmit information on a particular theme and the students have managed to display considerable lexical diversity within the theme on which they worked. Therefore these texts are predominantly transactional.

Apart from the exploration of students' lexical variation pointing to the contextualisation of the three cross-cultural communication situations, their overall attitude towards these writing activities was explored during the follow-up re-

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

reflection on the insights. The students were encouraged to reflect and rate the usefulness of the activity from the perspective of its cross-cultural enrichment according to a five-point usefulness scale. Accordingly, 66% of the students rated these cross-cultural writing sessions as useful or very useful and only 34% of the students as neutral. Moreover, none of the students has indicated a negative attitude towards these cross-cultural writing sessions. The students' overall positive attitude as well as their attempts to correlate the language use according to the communicative purpose of a particular instance of written communication brings out the usefulness of this authentic cross-cultural communication.

## 5 Conclusions

The analysis of students' writings of three cross-cultural communication sessions as well as the overall attitude of the students allows us to draw two conclusions regarding the educational and cross-cultural potential of this technology-based activity:

1. Cross-cultural writing activities enabled the students to become involved in

authentic written communication with an authentic audience thus gaining cross-cultural enrichment. The students' overall positive attitude to the cross-cultural writing shows that they are motivated to take up such cross-cultural experiences within the *Academic Writing Course*. Therefore, the course can be enriched by authentic cross-cultural writing.

2. The lexical complexity and the variation of the personal pronouns across the three text-types show that the students have practised the contextualisation of lexical diversity according to the communicative functions of the three instances of written communication, and experience contexts embedded in transactional and interactional writing that correlates with the students' needs.

The obtained results show that it is important to proceed with the implementation of such cross-cultural writing activities and exploration of the functionally significant lexicogrammatical features in students' electronic texts as well as take up the comparative investigation of the texts developed by the students of the University of Latvia and Mars Hill College.

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## Appendices

Figure 1: Staff information on Blackboard-based course hosting cross-cultural writing sessions

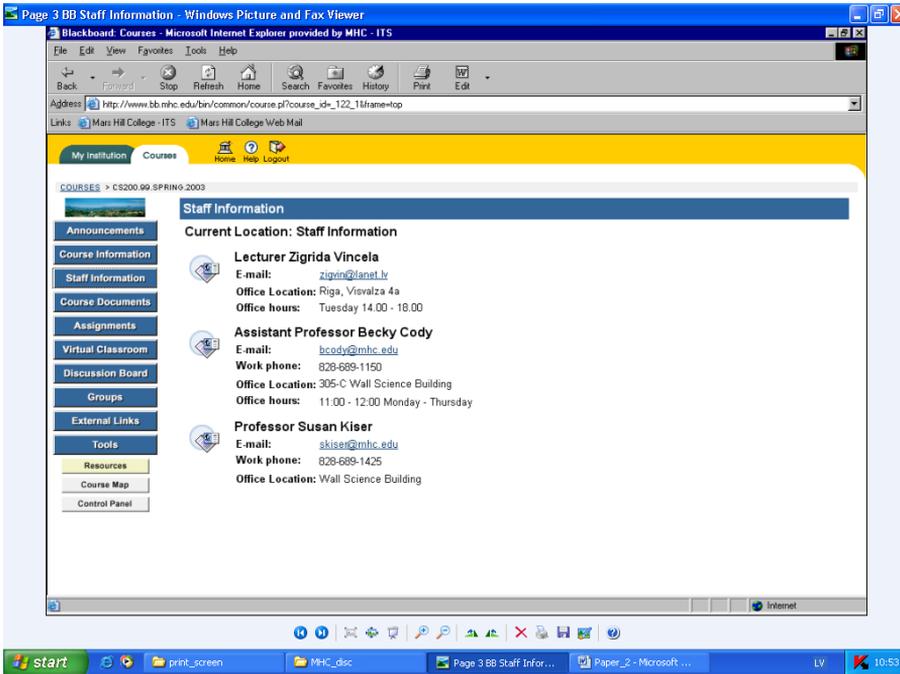


Table 1: Stages, Activities and Schedule of Cross-cultural Writing Sessions

Stages	Writing activities	Schedule
Stage 1: pre-activities	Discussion of the goals, exploration of Mars Hill College web site and the outcomes of the previous sessions, brainstorming for biographies.	Week 1: 90 minutes
Stage 2: activities	Writing process of the biographies	Week 2: 60 minutes followed up by individual writing process
	Writing process of the biographies, posting of the biographies	Week 3: 60 minutes followed up by the final refinement of the drafts
	Reading of the biographies of Mars Hill College students, starting collaborative online discussion, collaborative brainstorming for the informative text	Week 4: 90 minutes followed up by collaborative brainstorming and online discussion
	Collaborative work at the expository text, asynchronous online discussion	Week 5: 90 minutes

	Collaborative editing, arrangement of the text in the presentation, asynchronous online discussion	Week6: 45 minutes
	Reading of the presentations of the Mars Hill College students, asynchronous online discussion	Week 7: 30 minutes
	Collaborative asynchronous online discussion	Week 8: 30 minutes
<b>Stage 3: follow-up activities</b>	Reflection on the insights gained during the cross-cultural session.	Week 9: 90 minutes

**Table 2: Normalised Type/token Ratio and Frequency of the Personal Pronouns per 1000 Words**

<b>TTR and Personal Pronouns</b>	<b>Informative Texts</b>	<b>Online Discussion Postings</b>	<b>Biographies</b>
Number of the tokens/words	7176	12712	19047
Type/token ratio	42.9	38.5	38.2
I, my, me	3	50	89
we, us, our	6	71	9
you, your	3	28	6
he, she, her, him, his	3	2	7
they, them, their	6	5	5
<b>Total (pronouns)</b>	21	156	116