Designing Pro-telecollaboration Teacher Training: Some Insights Based on the OCEAN Personality Measures

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Abstract. With telecollaboration gaining in popularity, we obtain more insight into how representatives of different cultures interact and co-work online. We learn that while some exchanges may be smooth, others give raise to problems that need some remedial measures. In my paper, I argue that alongside implicit pedagogy, such measures may take on the form of explicit, focused instruction, involving various forms of raising awareness. Departing from this, I present the results of action research into such a pro-telecollaboration course taught online to 11 novice teachers/teacher trainees in the years 2012-2013. I specifically analyse the participants' attitudes to collaboration as well as their affiliation levels, both in relation to personality measures of the course participants obtained by means of Costa and McCrae's (1992) NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI).

Keywords: telecollaboration, personality, attitudes, teamwork, affiliation.

1. Introduction

Potential advantages of telecollaboration can be traced in its very definition. Such intercultural exchanges involve "the application of online communication tools to bring together classes of language learners in geographically distant locations to develop their foreign language skills and intercultural competence through collaborative tasks and project work" during which students are "challenged to reflect on their own culture or their stereotypical views of the target culture" (O'Dowd, 2011, pp. 342-344). Consequently, telecollaboration results in: (i)

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experiential learning of target language and culture; (ii) different aspects of computer literacy based on the knowledge of a wide variety of CMC tools; and (iii) challenging students to step out of the comfort zones of their long-held beliefs in regard to their own and others' cultures.

However, especially in the face of cultural differences between partnering groups, pedagogical mediation is indispensable to actually bring out the advantages of telecollaboration. It most popularly takes the form of in-class meetings in which students reflect on their experience and problems are dealt with as they appear in the course of the exchange. The legitimacy of such a pedagogical approach is unquestionable: experiential – or inductive – education is a classic learning mode of proven effectiveness. However, sometimes prevention may be better than medication; some individual differences require a more traditional, teacher-fronted type of instruction. This is why, on occasion, *a posteriori* pedagogy may need to give way to its deductive *a priori* counterpart.

2.   Method

2.1.   Collaboractive Online –
introduction to action research

In order to verify the idea of a deductive, pro-telecollaboration training, a course including this type of instruction was designed and implemented online (November 2012 – April 2013). Called *Collaboractive* or *Language as a Social Semiotic* (henceforth *Collaboractive Online*), the course consisted of a series of activities in which: (i) language and culture awareness were raised and (ii) the dialogic nature of collaboration was emphasised, with special regard to labour division, modes of cooperation and the language of feedback. Task-based and experiential, the course included three online lectures in which problems pertaining to areas (i) and (ii) above were explicitly addressed.

During the course a number of aspects of collaboration were investigated in the action-research mode. In this article I focus on attitudes to teamwork and affiliation. Both will be analysed in relation to the course participants' personality profiles.

2.1.1. Research sample

The research sample consisted of the 11 participants of *Collaboractive Online*: graduates (7) or ongoing students (4) of the English Studies programmes at various

universities at home (Poland; 9) and abroad (UK; 1 - Luxembourg; 1). The group included 8 women and 3 men, average age was 26.5 ($SD = 2.94$).

2.1.2. Research tools and procedures

In the case of the attitudes study[2], the tool was a self-reflection diary. In the course of data elaboration, the contents of each participant's diary were subject to quantitative discourse analysis as regards utterances indicative of deference (group reference and focus) and demeanor (self-reference and focus). The percentage rates of both types of utterances were calculated for each participant.

When it comes to the affiliation study, the main tool was a 0-3 affiliation scale[3] applied three times: at the beginning, after a month, and at the end of the course. Before the analysis, the numerical results of each testee were translated into stens (standardised testing out of ten) and divided into two categories; *how-I-see-others* and *how-others-see-me*.

The tool used in both of the studies was a 60-item NEO FFI personality inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The results of both studies were correlated with the participants' sten scores on this inventory.

2.1.3. Research data

When it comes to the results of the attitudes study, they show a fairly noteworthy correlation in the following areas: deference and extravertism ($p = 0.43$), deference and conscientiousness ($p = 0.42$), demeanor and neuroticism ($p = 0.46$), as well as demeanor and openness ($p = 0.47$).

In the affiliation study, in turn, the correlation differs based on the time of measurement and category. The strongest positive correlation between personality traits and *how-I-see-others* can be noted at the beginning for openness ($p = 0.47$); a tendency that seems to reverse later in the course. There are also positive but weaker course-onset correlations of the self-perceived affiliation with extravertism and conscientiousness (p's bordering on 0.33 and 0.34, respectively). When it comes to *how-others-see-me*, it is strongly related to the individual's conscientiousness ($p = 0.7$), and negatively to neuroticism

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2. For a detailed report of this study, see Turula (2013); available at http://www.tewtjournal.org/VOL%2013/ ISSUE%202/ARTICLE1.pdf

3. The scale corresponds to Brown's (2001) affiliation levels of acquaintance-membership-camaraderie.

(p = -0.34). Later in the course, *others* affiliate with extraverts (p = 0.55) and avoid those characterised by openness (p = -0.38).

3.   Discussion

The data serve as basis to a number of observations regarding the relationship between personality types and the two important aspects of collaboration examined here: attitudes to teamwork and levels of affiliation.

As regards the attitudes:

- the high correlation between deference and extravertism as well as neuroticism and demeanor seems rather uncontroversial;

- the correlation between openness and demeanor as well as deference and consciousness appears to be group specific: in these participants, courage is combined with independence, and the conscientious students are probably the most eager to satisfy their tutor's wish for collaboration-as-dialogue expressed explicitly in the three lectures;

- finally, agreeableness and deference correlate quite weakly. Apparently, in this particular group there is an attitude which can be summarised by one diary quote: "*I am quite open to dialogue, even if I don't agree with my interlocutors and stick to my guns*".

In turn, the correlation between NEO FFI scores and affiliation levels leads to the following observations:

- those open to new experiences are more likely to achieve higher affiliation levels faster. This refers to *how-I-see-others* and course onset only: most probably *others* see open people as slightly intimidating on first encounters, and slightly offensive when those more adventurous become bored with the rest;

- neuroticism correlates negatively with levels of affiliation at the beginning of the course, both self-perceived and others-perceived. Simultaneously, there is a growing attachment to extraverts (a moderate positive correlation noted later in the course). While people-orientation prevails as the course continues, the participants seem to become less sensitive to egocentric behaviours or such behaviours become less frequent as the sense of belonging grows;

- the prevailing others-orientation with a simultaneous decrease in task focus is also confirmed by the fact that conscientious people are perceived by others as more closely affiliated with them at the beginning of the course only;

- agreeableness – similarly to the attitudes study, and potentially for the same reason – seems unrelated to affiliation.

4.   Conclusions

Considering the small size of the sample ($N = 11$), the conclusions can only be interim and are in demand of further research[4]. However, at this point there already emerge several important points to be taken into account.

When it comes to the quality of collaboration, we definitely need a balance between other-orientation and self-orientation, even though collaboration per se seems more in demand of the former attitude. In a course like *Collaboractive Online* such a balance will mean training for deference combined with acknowledging individual, personality-related needs for being recognised.

As regards levels of affiliation, there appears to be a need for continued people focus as the course develops. Responding to such needs may require more than the initial warm-up activity; it may amount to interspersing telecollaborative content tasks with affiliation-oriented information exchanges continuing throughout the whole course.

References

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4. To be carried out soon, as the second edition of *Collaboractive Online* is going to start in November 2013.

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