20 Up-skilling through e-collaboration

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Abstract

This paper presents an e-collaboration project involving real-time video-conferencing exchanges between students from the University of Westminster and the Université Catholique de Lille. Students drew on diverse resources, including written quantitative data and first-hand qualitative data in French/English to complete weekly tasks. Follow-up work was an integral component of the co-project, taking the form of a series of adaptations in French/English based on the source materials studied and the knowledge of the intercultural issues explored collaboratively. These adaptations, which ensured the development of wider employability expertise, ranged from professional reports to newspaper articles, and from conference papers to information leaflets.

Keywords: e-collaboration, employability, e-portfolio, modern foreign languages, task-based approach, transferable skills, translation education, virtual learning environments.

1.   Context and rationale

The creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 1999 has given rise to a closer relationship between training and the labour market in Higher Education (HE). The EHEA prioritises a competence-based training approach,

building on the premise that learning is transferred to the workplace. In this new education paradigm, the development of transferable competences is vital to equip students with skills which enhance their employability. Employability has thus become a key concept in EU universities, as has the need to embed it in the modern language curriculum. Although recent research in the fields of languages and translation unequivocally demonstrates the value of foreign language knowledge on the graduate labour market, employers are increasingly seeking additional abilities including: intercultural, interpersonal and communication skills, aptitude at addressing international audiences, peer-review competence, adaptability, business awareness, subject knowledge and research skills (Chouc & Calvo, 2011; Lisaité et al., 2016).

In recent decades, innovative pedagogical approaches have emerged in foreign language teaching and translator education in HE. Since the late 80s and 90s, traditional product-oriented and teacher-centred 'transmissionist' methodologies have been replaced by authentic and collaborative approaches that consider students – and learning itself – as the main agents of the learning process (González Davies, 2004; Hurtado Albir, 1999/2003; Kiraly, 2000; Nunan, 1989). Interpersonal competence, and particularly collaborative learning, is therefore a paramount transferable skill for the language and translation graduates of the 21st century. In this new education context, pedagogic tasks and projects that imitate professional assignments should be embedded in the languages curriculum so that students engage in "real-life" activities that are representative of professional standards (González Davies, 2004, p. 19).

Collaborative learning approaches, including task-based (González Davies, 2004; Hurtado Albir, 1999/2003; Nunan, 1989) and social constructivist approaches (Kiraly, 2000) favour students' active involvement and mutual support as well as a positive interaction between students with different backgrounds, cultures and learning styles. Students construct knowledge together "through meaningful interactions with peers" (Kiraly, 2000, p. 60), and the tutor acts as a facilitator assisting students during the learning process, which effectively encourages students to take control and ownership of their learning. With the prevalence of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), HE is undergoing a digital

revolution, resulting in improved interactions between students, tutors and the subject. The development of digital environments in recent years, particularly e-collaboration and communication tools, has undeniably enhanced foreign-language learning and teaching through Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) in student-centred classes. Using Web-based learning platforms, tutors now have access to a wide range of tools to facilitate language learning for students, which complements the more traditional classroom-based setting. It is on this theoretical backdrop that the following case study was conducted.

2.   Aims and objectives

The principal objective of the e-collaboration between the universities of Westminster and Lille was to incorporate employability into the core of a final-year, 15-credit, French for Work module through a series of tasked-based, online sessions. The timing of the module, towards the end of the UK students' undergraduate programmes, helped to prepare students for life beyond academia, serving as a bridge between the worlds of HE and work. Similarly, as a proportion of the UK students had not spent time in a French-speaking country during their degree, the module aimed to provide them with valuable exposure to authentic spoken French in spontaneous, real-time situations. The final overarching objective of the co-project was to equip BA French Translation students with the creative adaptation skills increasingly required in the globalised context of contemporary communication.

In more specific terms, the e-collaboration aimed to enhance:

- intercultural awareness;

- transferable interpersonal skills;

- awareness of real-world 'transcreation' (a form of adaptation involving prioritisation, condensation, translation and localisation) remits and workplace contexts;

- peer review and critical reflection;

- contemporary/authentic foreign-language vocabulary;

- foreign-language receptive and productive skills;

- transferable data-mining and synthesis abilities;

- student-centred learning;

- register sensitivity;

- professional IT skills;

- coordinated working towards mutual deadlines;

- interdisciplinarity (the Lille participants majoring in law).

3.   What we did

3.1.   Overview of the e-collaboration project

As stipulated in the Westminster module description, the main topics serving as the thematic framework for the co-project were 'globalisation', 'human rights' and 'technology in society'. The collaboration involved a series of online synchronous (i.e. real-time) and a-synchronous sessions (i.e. staggered between Westminster and Lille), convened in dedicated language laboratories, equipped with PCs, integrated cameras, headphones and microphones. Westminster's Blackboard VLE was used as the database for the shared learning materials, the platform for uploading student outputs, and the mechanism for live videoconferencing (via Blackboard Collaborate). Each week, students were instructed to work on a topical sub-theme relevant to both the French and UK socio-cultural, political and legal contexts, as well as corresponding to the three

designated module themes. Particular topics were selected for their potential to provoke debate and inspire intercultural reflection (see Section 3.2. for samples).

Students were presented with a balance of French and English online resources to inform their thinking and subsequent critical positioning. This ensured that students at both institutions had an awareness of the cultural, legal and ideological peculiarities of each other's national contexts. Likewise, a variety of sources was chosen to expose students to different registers, modes and text-types, thereby challenging their ability to understand, assimilate, synthesise and adapt multiple forms of data. Examples of sources consulted include: authentic videoclips; raw quantitative data (e.g. online survey results); national radio podcasts; newspaper articles; and legislation. Having spent time studying these materials individually and making notes of key points, students were placed in small groups in Blackboard's Virtual Classroom, where they discussed several aspects of the topic in virtual 'face-to-face' interactions, guided by pre-established tutor suggestions.

As the purpose of the synchronous conferences was not only to give students cultural insights and exposure to authentic spoken French/English but to also provide an additional source of qualitative data for follow-up adaptation tasks, Westminster students were asked to complete a Student Debriefing Form after each session. The form allowed students to log the specific topic discussed, the sub-themes explored, French and English ideological/cultural/legislative differences, a general summary of the conversation and conclusions drawn, together with noteworthy linguistic features and/or vocabulary. This written record was subsequently consulted by students to consolidate their learning and facilitate direct quotation of the French students, thereby increasing the credibility of their professionalised transcreations through the use of first-hand evidence.

3.2.   Description of transcreation tasks

In accordance with the Westminster host module description, the e-collaboration was framed in terms of professional simulations. A distinct scenario-based

task was therefore set each week, requiring students to produce a transcreation according to a professional brief. Particular remits were embedded in a variety of work-related settings, and as such necessitated independent research into the appropriate register of language, format and structure to meet the expectations of the audience targeted. Each adaptation involved: managing a variety of bilingual sources; prioritising and re-appropriating relevant information for their purposes; understanding a range of registers, accents and modes; transferring information from and into French/English; condensing multiple data into a clear and concise document; and producing a coherent target text (200 words) consistent with the norms of the professional environment specified. Adaptation tasks ranged from reports, set in corporate or political contexts, to newspaper articles, and from academic conference papers to information leaflets. Below are several concrete examples of briefs devised for the co-project:

1) You work at the Agence France-Presse international news agency and have been asked to write a short **press release** in French on the recent publication of a book on the selfie phenomenon, *Tous selfie ! Pourquoi tous accro ?* by Pauline Escande-Gauquié. Using information retrieved from the linked France Inter radio episode, together with any persuasive quotes noted during your conversation with the students in Lille, write a text in French which encourages journalists to take up the news item and publicise the book.

2) You work for France Inter in the 'Service Public' production team and have been asked to write the **presenter's introduction** to a forthcoming episode on the migrant 'jungle' in Calais. Based on information found in the three video clips viewed this week, and in response to the French students' audio files (posted on the discussion board), write a short script in French introducing the issue to listeners. Once you have drafted the script, play the role of the presenter and upload your recording to the Voice Board on Blackboard.

3) You work in the Communications Department of the EuropaNova think tank and have been asked to produce a **flyer** (in French) encouraging

members of the public to attend a debate you are hosting in Paris. The public debate has been organised in the aftermath of Paris's terrorist attacks and seeks grassroots' opinion on France's/Europe's fundamental ideals of free speech, free movement and equality for all. Your leaflet will be distributed to the general public prior to the debate and should give some legal and ideological context to the situation in France, as well as presenting arguments for and/or against changes to current legislation/policy.

4) You are a prompt-writer with Red Bee Media, and France 2 have commissioned you to write an **autocue** in French about the ways in which the British and French governments are infringing the online privacy of their citizens. The autocue will be part of an editorial news feature to be broadcast in the 'Journal Télévisé de 20 heures'.

To conclude the module, and based on the material developed collaboratively, students were required to produce an independent project in French and English at a level broadly equivalent to CEFR C1. This project consisted of an e-portfolio comprising their three most successful adaptations in French (totalling 600 words), together with a covering email serving to introduce the dossier within another simulated professional context (see Project Brief 1 below). It also included an 800-word transcreation task into English (see Project Brief 2 below).

Project Brief 1: You are applying for an in-house transcreation position at World Writers and, as part of the recruitment process, have been asked to produce a portfolio of three texts in French, which you originally drafted within the framework of the Lille co-project. The company is looking to see how the process enhanced your data-mining and synthesis abilities, your intercultural awareness and language-transfer skills. You are also required to write a 200-word introductory email in French, providing the Transcreation Director and Recruitment Manager with background information on both the co-project itself and the texts chosen for the dossier, explaining why the e-collaboration and related tasks make you the ideal candidate for the transcreation position.

Project Brief 2: You are an academic specialising in contemporary French culture and society, and are keen to investigate further one of the sub-themes studied under the Lille Co-Project. The final output of your research will be a paper for the 2016 Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France (ASMCF), the overarching subject of which is 'Transitions'. Your paper should give insights into French legislation, policy and public opinion on the chosen issue, and should be presented within the framework of the conference theme. The specific title and angle of the paper is your choice, but incorporating a combination of first-hand evidence (from the Lille students) and your own desk research on the subject is desirable.

Your research will draw on information contained in the corresponding Student Debriefing Form and any relevant materials developed collaboratively online. In total, you are required to submit three French source texts – one of which must be a quantitative survey – which will inform the points made in your paper to support your main line of argumentation.

4.   Discussion and conclusion

Our case study demonstrates how the use of e-collaboration and transcreation tasks set within a range of simulated professional contexts can be integrated in the modern language curriculum to enhance students' employability. Building upon student-centred approaches successfully applied to the fields of languages and translation education (González Davies, 2004; Hurtado Albir, 1999/2003; Kiraly, 2000; Nunan, 1989), the co-project and scenario-based tasks enabled undergraduate language students to develop key transferable skills required in today's workplace. These include: language and communication competence, interpersonal skills, intercultural awareness, creative skills, information-mining ability, thematic competence, peer-review, synthesis skills and critical reflection.

Based on our experience and student feedback, e-collaboration has proven to be extremely valuable for the professional world. The implementation of e-learning

and virtual collaboration is an effective tool that increases language students' motivation, fosters teamwork, and facilitates the incorporation of peer-learning as part of the teaching and learning equation. The specific language-based tasks and professional simulations devised within the e-collaboration framework built students' public-speaking confidence by helping them overcome reservations experienced in face-to-face exchanges. The co-project exposed students to new ICT and provided them with key technological skills needed to learn promptly and effectively to complete the designated tasks. Embedding the individual transcreations within the project (i.e. these marks counting to the overall module mark) was an effective mechanism to ensure active and regular participation.

Finally, organising the co-project so that students in both institutions were at the same level of study ensured they had equivalent language knowledge and understanding of the complex issues discussed.

In the words of a mature student who participated in the e-collaboration, it

> "was excellent in enabling us to interact with the French students […]. Whatever I find myself doing employment-wise, I have found [it] useful… The module tasks have enabled me to use skills from my previous employment but also to gain knowledge from other fields".

Another former student on the module added:

> "I came to notice the importance of the techniques of adaptation and translation […] whilst interning for the Austrian Embassy […]. The skills I have acquired […] helped me deliver efficient work in a fast and precise manner. Now that I work for an agency of the European Commission in Brussels, I appreciate even more […] these various skills".

Overall, therefore, this case study has proved itself to be a credible, viable and replicable model for the enhancement of undergraduate modern language student employability.

References and links

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