14 Incorporating cross-cultural videoconferencing to enhance Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) at the tertiary level

Barbara Loranc-Paszylk[1]

Abstract

This paper attempts to provide evidence of cross-cultural videoconferencing affordances with reference to a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) context at the tertiary level. At the core of CLIL lie student-centered paradigms of teaching methodologies that invite task and project work and authentic and meaningful communication, while also providing numerous opportunities for intercultural learning. The aim of this paper is to discuss the results of collaboration that took place in spring 2015 between two cohorts, namely post-primary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher trainees at two universities: the University of Bielsko-Biala in Poland and the University of León in Spain. The main objective of the task was to develop lesson plans and EFL teaching materials that included Polish and Spanish cultural content, respectively, and in addition, to provide feedback on the work sent by the partner university team during videoconferencing sessions. The results of the project illustrated in the self-reported data suggest that within the CLIL methodological framework it was the cultural and cognitive dimension that appeared to benefit most from incorporating the cross-cultural videoconferencing into the course.

Keywords: telecollaboration, videoconferencing, CLIL, teacher training, English as a lingua franca.

1. University of Bielsko-Biala, Bielsko-Biała, Poland; bloranc@ath.edu.pl

1.   Introduction

Cross-cultural telecollaboration as an innovative educational experience is becoming more and more popular in the higher education area. It has influenced teaching practices at many different levels as it may be implemented with a great deal of flexibility in various learning contexts. For example, Bueno-Alastuey and Kleban (2014) discuss their telecollaboration project, emphasizing benefits which such an experience could bring despite the fact that students had completely different educational needs.

Almost a decade ago, O'Dowd (2007) enumerated the main goals of telecollaborative exchanges: achieving target language linguistic development and intercultural communicative competence. However, as can be seen in the research agenda nowadays, along with their typical goals, telecollaborative projects are also thought to add new value to "general educational goals, internationalization of education, and electronic/digital literacies in higher education" (Chun, 2015, pp. 11-12). There are therefore premises for integrating cross-cultural telecollaboration into various educational settings, and the aim of this article is to provide indications of the potential benefits that can be derived from engaging in telecollaborative projects in the CLIL context, since these inherently entail development of linguistic and intercultural skills.

2.   CLIL and telecollaboration

The conceptual framework of CLIL is based on the four Cs curriculum, that is, Content, Communication, Cognition and Culture (Coyle, 1999). CLIL learning objectives typically focus on the following: progress in knowledge, skills and competences related to subject curriculum (Content dimension), learning and using a foreign language to learn about content (Communication), "'self' and 'other' awareness" achieved through the learners being exposed to the local and global context and consequently acquiring alternative perspectives (Culture) and finally, Cognition, which is thought to involve not only development of high order thinking skills but also fostering independent analysis and students' own

understandings with respect to culture and content (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010, pp. 56-57).

The rationale for incorporating telecollaboration into the CLIL classroom can be found at several levels where areas of interest of CLIL and telecollaboration overlap.

Firstly, intercultural teaching in CLIL, which includes "articulating alternative interpretations of content rooted in different cultures" (Coyle, 1999, p. 60) and promotes cross-cultural sensitivity (Coyle, Holmes, & King, 2009), may become more meaningful thanks to personalized intercultural encounters facilitated by online exchanges.

Secondly, telecollaborative projects, by juxtaposing participants' different cultural backgrounds and thus reinforcing comparative perspectives, invite reflection and critical thinking and, as a result, may enhance CLIL students' gains within the cognitive dimension.

Furthermore, online exchanges increase the amount of language exposure and interaction allowing for "a new realm of collaborative inquiry" (Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004, p. 254), and therefore possibly contribute to the development of linguistic skills and collaborative construction of content knowledge among CLIL students.

Next, by addressing the learning needs of contemporary generations of students, focus on immediacy and personalized hands-on experience with integrated digital technologies and online exchanges may enhance the progressive aspect of the CLIL educational context that has already been described as "an innovative methodology that has emerged to cater to this new age" (Mehisto, Marsh, & Frigols, 2008, p. 11).

Finally, telecollaborative exchanges may help CLIL students, especially those at university level, become global citizens who are culturally aware and fluent in today's lingua franca, as English is the dominant language of communication

used in telecollaborative projects, and at the same time, the most frequently used language of instruction in CLIL (Dalton-Puffer, 2011).

3.   Methodology

In this action research study of cross-cultural telecollaboration, the MA study program for post-primary teachers was selected as the CLIL context, since it includes a number of non-linguistic courses delivered in English, along with classes that offer English language support.

3.1.   Aim of the study

The focus of the study was to investigate a repertoire of CLIL students' self-perceived gains resulting from the telecollaboration. The following research question was formulated: To what extent will telecollaboration enhance the gains related to the CLIL four Cs conceptual framework: content expertise, communication in English language, development of (critical) thinking skills and intercultural competence?

3.2.   Participants and the task

The participants were Master of Arts (MA) students at two partner universities: 14 students from the University of Bielsko-Biala (Poland) and 11 students from the University of León (Spain). Both cohorts were homogenous with respect to age and L1, level and profile of studies. Their level of English language proficiency ranged from B2 to C1. The task involved preparation of a detailed plan for one lesson unit with teaching materials, exchanging it via e-mail and finally discussing it during videoconferencing sessions. The telecollaboration exchange primarily focused on content learning – that is, on developing expertise in devising teaching materials by completing a task as part of a regular university course on *Teaching FL skills*.

4.　　Results and conclusions

For the purposes of the study, qualitative data was used. Data was collected by means of 22 participant-recall surveys using an identical sample of both Polish and Spanish participants – all 11 Spanish participants and 11 out of the 14 Polish participants completed the survey, answering open-ended questions such as: *What aspect of the telecollaboration project did you find most useful?*; and *Can you describe gains resulting from the project?* The students' reports were analyzed and the dominating tendencies related to self-perceived gains were classified into categories.

Students' answers which were classified into the culture category included the following themes: interacting with peers from another country (mentioned by 20 out of the 22 respondents), learning about the foreign peers' teaching ideas/ learning styles (18 out of the 22 respondents), and finding out about educational solutions typical in the respective country (11 out of the 22 respondents). One Polish participant wrote: "I liked the fact that I could see how the students in Spain prepare lesson plans and didactic materials. What is more, I have learned more about Spanish culture and how the students from the partner university perceive Poland".

Gains within the cognitive dimension were also reported: 15 out of the 22 participants' surveys reflected thoughts suggesting some development of a comparative perspective and critical reflection. Themes that were classified under this category include: being able to compare and contrast different teaching procedures and educational solutions, and developing awareness of differences between the two countries. An illustrative quote from a Spanish student may serve as an example: "The most interesting aspect of the project was the ability to compare the procedures used during FL teaching in both countries. It gave me a new perspective on teaching English". Another Spanish student wrote: "It was a great experience because I could compare Polish and Spanish ways of teaching and learning English".

As a result, a repertoire of self-perceived gains reported by the participants from both cohorts could be classified mostly into the respective categories of culture and cognition dimensions. Gains related strictly to content and linguistic development were mentioned by only eight and three out of the 22 respondents, respectively. This might be explained by the fact that the task to perform was more a revision of already acquired knowledge rather than a new topic in the content curriculum. As far as the language development is concerned, the participants from both cohorts were probably not prioritizing linguistic gains because, while being relatively advanced language users, yet not native speakers of English, they might have perceived using English as a lingua franca to communicate with peers with another country more as a language practice than as a language learning experience.

The findings of this study cannot be generalized due to the small sample of participants; however, they may indicate that cross-cultural telecollaboration could enhance the CLIL educational experience since they signal that through authentic interaction in the intercultural context facilitated by new technologies the development of intercultural learning and some critical reflection may be fostered.

References

Bueno-Alastuey, M. C., & Kleban, M. (2014). Matching linguistic and pedagogical objectives in a telecollaboration project: a case study. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 29*(1), 148-166. https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2014.904360

Chun, D. M. (2015). Language and culture learning in higher education via telecollaboration. *Pedagogies: An International Journal, 10*(1), 5-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/155448 0X.2014.999775

Coyle, D. (1999). Theory and planning for effective classrooms: supporting students in content and language integrated learning contexts. In J. Masih (Ed.), *Learning through a foreign language* (pp. 46-52). London: CILT.

Coyle, D., Holmes, B., & King, L. (2009). *Towards an integrated curriculum: CLIL national statement and guidelines*. London: The Languages Company.

Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). *Content and language integrated learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dalton-Puffer, C. (2011). Content and language integrated learning: from practice to principle? *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 31*(1), 182-204. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190511000092

Kern, R., Ware, P., & Warschauer, M. (2004). Crossing frontiers: new directions in online pedagogy and research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 24*, 243-260. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0267190504000091

Mehisto, D., Marsh, D., & Frigols, M. J. (2008). *Uncovering CLIL*. Oxford: Macmillan.

O'Dowd, R. (Ed.). (2007). *Online intercultural exchange: an introduction for foreign language teachers*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education
Edited by Sake Jager, Malgorzata Kurek, and Breffni O'Rourke