6 CHILCAN: a Chilean-Canadian intercultural telecollaborative language exchange

Constanza Rojas-Primus[1]

Abstract

This paper discusses a telecollaborative project between my students of Spanish at Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU), Canada and students of English from University of Concepción, Chile in fall 2015. The telecollaborative project was aligned with the intercultural objectives already in place under my current intercultural Spanish language curriculum at KPU. The main purpose was to better understand the relationship of intercultural language teaching and learning and the role telecollaborative language exchanges play in developing students' intercultural competences at my university. Based on discourse analysis of students' reflections, presentations, and in-class discussions, this paper presents my findings.

Keywords: telecollaboration, intercultural language curriculum, intercultural competence, higher education.

1. Introduction

In the context of foreign language education, "telecollaboration [...] refers to 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 work" (O'Dowd, 2015, p. 194). Currently, I am working on an inquiry-based research

project whose purpose is to test and inform an intercultural Spanish language curriculum in my classes at KPU to facilitate the development of students' Intercultural Communicative Competences (ICC). ICC is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures, and it has been increasingly recognised as a priority in effectively engaging diversity in higher education (Byram, 2010; Ghorbani Shemshadsara, 2012). While there is still a need for a deeper understanding of principles and applications on how to effectively teach ICC in the language classroom, research shows that telecollaboration has come to be seen as an important pillar of the intercultural turn in foreign language education (O'Dowd, 2011). My current research supports the vision that "new technologies have significantly contributed to the ways in which language can be taught as culturally contexted practice [… as] they have made other languages and cultures immediately present to language teachers and learners than they have ever been before" (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 107). Hence, a telecollaborative language exchange project was conducted in the fall of 2015 between my students of second-semestre Spanish at KPU and students of intermediate English from University of Concepción, Chile. The project was entitled CHILCAN: a Chilean-Canadian intercultural telecollaborative language exchange, and aligned with the intercultural objectives of my current intercultural Spanish language curriculum to better understand the relationship and the role telecollaborative language exchanges play in developing students' intercultural competences at KPU.

2.   The CHILCAN project: a case study

In fall 2015 the CHILCAN project took place between my students of second-semestre Spanish at KPU and students of intermediate English from University of Concepción, Chile[2]. My colleague at University of Concepción, Prof. Alejandra Deij, and I worked collaboratively to coordinate and supervise the language exchanges among our students via Skype throughout the semester. However, we both assigned and aligned students' telecollaborative tasks to our

2. Second semestre students of Spanish at KPU navigate between A1-A2 CEFR level groups and between novice low-mid ACTFL proficiency groups.

respective curricula learning objectives. The CHILCAN tasks for my students were the following:

- 3 bilingual Spanish-English exchanges of 30 minutes per language;

- engage in 30-minute practice of Spanish during each exchange around the themes of conversation studied in class (*the city and the university*, *sports and spare-time activities*, *shopping and the cost of living*, *food and celebrations*);

- take notes (on *language*, *culture*, *ask/give feedback*) during each exchange;

- after each exchange, write a structured reflection (on *information learned*, *feelings*, *observations*, *self-awareness*, *future goals*) in Spanish, in English, or both;

- engage in in-class structured collaborative reflections about evidence of learning from the CHILCAN project;

- present a personal project about the CHILCAN experience (*visual format and presentation in Spanish*).

My students' tasks were aligned with the following intercultural learning objective already in place under my current Spanish language curriculum at KPU:

- intercultural knowledge (*politeness*, *time*, *collectivism*);

- intercultural attitude (*curiosity*, *discovery*, *openness*, *willingness*, *understanding*);

- intercultural skills (*awareness*, *relating*, *noticing*, *comparing*, *communicating*);

- intercultural behaviours (*adaptability*, *flexibility*, *exploration*, *appropriateness*, *empathy*).

3.   Methodology and analysis

My research question was *what role does telecollaboration play in developing students' intercultural competences in my intercultural Spanish language curriculum at KPU*? To analyse this relationship, I did a discourse analysis of students' reflections, presentation, and in-class discussion. The following is a selection of the analysis:

Students' reflections:

> "Me siento logrado porque entendí más palabras de la conversación (en español) que la primera conversación [I felt accomplished because I understood more words in Spanish than the first conversation][3]. I still had some trouble but I think it's fair to say that I tried to listen past all the Skype glitches".

This reflection is an indicator of openness and willingness (intercultural attitudes) as demonstrated by the student's ability to regard positively and a degree of resilience, despite the difficulties arisen from the language exchange. The student's use of Spanish is also an indicator of exploration in the target language (intercultural behaviour).

> "I like that [my friend][4] says choclo and not maíz, and she told me that she did not have access to cooking classes which is why she learned to cook from her mother. In contrast, I learned to cook both at home and in cooking classes in school, and many people here do the same, if they learn to cook at all".

3. The translations in brackets throughout this paper are mine.

4. To protect the identity of students in Chile I have replaced their names by the entry [my friend].

Comfort with diversity is a critical aspect of intercultural development. The student's liking of lexical difference in this reflection is an indication of this comfort, which speaks of the student's degree and level of global understanding (intercultural attitude). Moreover, the choice of words on the student's comparison (intercultural skill), that is "… *did not have access to …"* and *"many people here …*" evokes the student's ability to compare with empathy and suspend judgment (intercultural behaviour).

Students' in-class discussion:

> "Ella deja que la conversación termine naturalmente y no es estricta con el tiempo. Mayoría de las veces, nuestra sesión de Skype duran más que una hora. Yo vi que tan importante las relaciones son para los chilenos [She lets the conversation end naturally and is not strict with time. Most of the time our Skype sessions last more than an hour. I realised how important relationships are for Chileans]".

As above, the choice of communicating solely in Spanish is a sign of both intercultural skill and intercultural attitude in respect to the use of the target language. In addition, this opinion shows the student's ability and interest to reflect on the intercultural knowledge learned in class (values and norms about both the concept of time and of human relationship).

Students' presentation:

> "Aprendí que es muy importante practicar un idioma. [My friend] habla puedes aprender un idioma más, si miras las películas en un idioma que quieres aprender, dijo [I learned how important it is to practice a language. My friend told me that we can learn more by watching movies in the language we want to learn]".

This student's presentation is a reflection of appreciation (intercultural attitude) and recognition (intercultural skill) of using a language in meaningful contexts.

This is an important insight because awareness of actions or practical approaches is a vital element for developing and sustaining intercultural growth.

4.   Discussion

ICC development is an on-going, lengthy, and often lifelong process (Fantini, 2000) and people, as individuals with uniquely complex experiences of cultural differences, may be in different ICC developmental stages[5]. Research shows that for intercultural learning to occur effectively, students need to have opportunities to reflect consciously on the intercultural knowledge acquired, on their own intercultural skills, and receive feedback on those skills and reflections (Moeller & Nugent, 2014). Hence, my analysis should be understood within the context of the case study under discussion where the intercultural learning that took place through CHILCAN comes within the supporting environment of my intercultural Spanish curriculum. As a result, my evidence suggests that telecollaboration plays the following role in the development of ICC:

- it facilitates experiential learning where the formal intercultural learning of the language classroom is integrated with the natural setting of the online intercultural language exchange;

- it enables transformative learning where students' own beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours surface at a more conscious level as a result of what is happening through the online intercultural experience;

- it is an anchor for participatory learning as the online intercultural experience becomes a situated environment where intercultural learning takes place in collaboration rather than alone, increasing students' ethnorelative views.

5. For a discussion on ICC models see Bennett (1993).

5.   Conclusion

This CHILCAN case study shows evidence of a relationship between telecollaborative language exchanges and the development of ICC within my intercultural Spanish language curriculum at KPU. Findings of this relationship are (1) students' exploration of intercultural knowledge, (2) student's reflections of personal intercultural skills and behaviours, and (3) student's increase of cultural awareness.

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