19 It takes two to tango: online teacher tandems for teaching in English

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Abstract

Due to the increasing internationalisation of higher education, universities must ensure the professional development of their teaching staff in English-Medium Instruction (EMI). Nevertheless, very few universities have the means to invest in teacher training and offer their teachers the opportunity to develop the competences that will ensure best practice in teaching and learning. In order to find a low-cost and flexible solution, two universities, Universidad de Cadiz (Spain) and the Université Libre de Bruxelles (Belgium) piloted an online tandem teacher training programme in 2014-2015. This programme was designed to help teachers face the challenges and opportunities of the multilingual and multicultural learning space (Lauridsen & Lillemose, 2015).

Keywords: teacher training, EMI, online collaboration, MMLS.

1. Introduction

Within the context of EMI, the universities of Cadiz (Spain) and Brussels (Belgium) faced a common dilemma: how should non-native speaking university lecturers be trained to deal with the challenges and opportunities of teaching through English? Both universities shared the same vision of EMI embedded

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within a broader internationalisation perspective, where changing the medium of instruction not only implied a shift in language use within classrooms, but also a need to deal with cultural diversity and the professional development of their respective teaching staff (Lauridsen & Lillemose, 2015).

Each institution offered either formal or informal pedagogical support programmes for EMI, led by two experts in the field of Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education (ICLHE). They decided to pilot an online training programme for academic staff in order to enhance transnational collaboration within EMI, since "[i]nternational and intercultural interaction and collaboration has the potential to develop cultural insight and exchange that is enriching and enabling for individuals and through them for local, national, and global communities" (Leask, 2015, p. 72).

The online option seemed appealing for many reasons, including the fact that it would allow sufficient adaptability to be integrated within the two institutional contexts; with different cultural beliefs and values, different teaching styles and beliefs about learner identity, different disciplines and disciplinary cultures, and different linguistic contexts (French for Brussels, and Spanish for Cadiz). It provided the coordinators with a flexible solution to cater for the need of professional development that can fit into teachers' busy schedules. Finally, it also provided low cost and low maintenance solutions for both institutions.

This exchange project was set up to achieve the

> "potential benefits of online communities of practice among teachers, such as the opportunities for reflection offered by asynchronous interaction; the contributions of teachers who tend to be silent in face-to-face settings but 'find their voice' in mediated interaction; and the unique affordances for learning of immersive virtual simulations, among others" (Dede et al., 2009, p. 9).

The main intended learning objectives for participants were to improve the English language skills for teaching purposes; reflect on the roles of teachers

in EMI contexts; create situations where English is a meaningful means to exchange ideas about teaching and learning; learn about different teaching strategies for EMI; share ideas about teaching and learning in higher education; and also discuss the role of language in learning.

2. Course design

Teachers were asked to perform six tasks over seven months; each task consisted of asynchronous preparation (reading texts or watching videos) followed by a synchronous Skype conversation of 20 minutes minimum (with specific questions to answer), which had to be summarised in writing by each participant individually after the online exchange. The initial task featured an ice-breaking activity to allow participants to get to know one another. All the pre-tasks, tasks, and post-tasks were detailed in an online logbook, which the participants had to keep updated throughout the project. All post-task summaries had to be posted on a Moodle platform which all participants had access to. It must be noted that a large amount of time was initially spent planning and setting up the tasks online.

Table 1 below shows the timeline of the project's discussion activities over the academic year 2014-2015.

Table 1. Timeline of the project's discussion activities

Oct-Nov 2014	**Getting ready: Moodle, Skype and logbook**
Dec 2014	Discussion 1 – Getting to know one another
Jan 2015	Discussion 2 – Reflections on teaching
Feb 2015	Discussion 3 – Where is English taking universities?
Apr 2015	Discussion 4 – Content and Language Integrated Learning
May 2015	Discussion 5 – Student goal-orientation, motivation & learning
June 2015	Discussion 6 – Active and experiential learning
Sept 2015	**We all meet in Brussels**

Initially, the coordinators thought that teachers would work in tandems, one teacher from each different institution. In fact, 34 content teachers applied

to join the project: 20 from Cadiz and 14 from Brussels. The coordinators therefore felt that, in order to satisfy all teachers, that there would be 11 tandems and three groups of three. Additionally, certain teachers felt so inhibited by their low language levels that they asked if an individual working solution could be provided, and the coordinators decided on allowing three content teachers to carry out reflective audio journals. In this last possibility, teachers worked alone on the pre-task and prepared the questions of each task, but recorded their answers as audio files which had to be uploaded on the Moodle platform.

It was decided to privilege groupings where participants had similar language levels, and also similar disciplinary backgrounds. Fulfilling this last criterion proved impossible, very few teachers taught in the same disciplines: law, linguistics, business studies, engineering, political science, education, psychology, and architecture. This had a positive effect, albeit fortuitously. Mixing teachers from different disciplines together proved productive since teachers had to talk of their disciplines and research in layman's terms. This allowed teachers to practise a wider range of language skills, which were similar to the language they used in their classrooms to explain academic content to students with no or little previous knowledge.

Since there was a conference organised in Brussels on ICLHE in September 2015, the coordinators decided to offer the possibility to participants to meet physically by organising an Erasmus Training Mobility. 27 of the 34 teachers travelled to Brussels. The coordinators observed that the physical meeting at the end of the project was in itself a large motivational factor for teachers and contributed to their international mobility and intercultural experience, while also contributing to the development of their teaching skills.

3. Evaluation

Teachers were asked to self-assess their language skills using the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) before the first task

and after the last task, as well as fill in a participant experience survey. Of the 34 content teachers who took part in the project, only 19 responded fully to all tasks (14 from Cadiz and five from Brussels), including the self-assessment of language.

Although teachers described improvements in their use of English, only six of the 19 respondents reported a clear increase in English proficiency from one CEFR scale to the next: two teachers reported going from B1 to B1+, two teachers from B2+ to C1, and two teachers from C1 to C1+. Although most teachers did not report a change from one CEFR scale to another, they did self-report improved spoken interaction (seven teachers), spoken production (seven teachers), and listening skills (four teachers). All respondents reported improvements in confidence (18 teachers), fluency (17 teachers), and vocabulary range (13 teachers).

Many participants recalled feeling comfortable with their tandem or group of three partners, which led the teachers to develop a community of practice:

> "The success of telecollaboration and e-tandem learning activities tends to rely on the quality of the relationship that develops between geographically separated participants. [I]t is an exchange between a pair of individuals, already positioned as friends" (Hanna & de Nooy, 2009, p. 88).

From the participant experience survey, teachers especially highlighted as beneficial the fact that they exchanged ideas and resources on EMI, discussed their research, the role of language in learning, teaching in university contexts, and educational development for EMI.

4. Conclusion

When embarking on a teacher training online exchange, Dede et al. (2009, p. 10) recommended that coordinators consider the following questions:

- How should the professional development programme be designed (content, pedagogical strategies, methods of delivery, and identification of good practices) to maximize its effectiveness?

- What measures of effectiveness and means of evaluation should be used to document the outcomes and impacts of the professional development program? What specific tools, if any, should teachers experience as part of the professional development?

- What types of learner interactions should the programme foster through its methodology and its infrastructure for delivery?

The coordinators of the present online exchange wish to pursue the experiment further and have reflected on the above questions. A number of possible improvements should therefore be implemented for the next iteration of the project in 2016-2017.

A more robust online platform will be set up, using a website for communication between teachers and the dissemination of tasks, and Adobe Connect meeting rooms for synchronous discussions.

The groupings will only be in pairs, as it seemed that it was difficult for groups of three to find suitable times for their synchronous online discussions.

In addition to Cadiz and Brussels universities, other partner universities have shown interest and initial contact has already been established with Karolinska Institutet (Sweden), Université Catholique de Louvain (Belgium), and Université de Mons.

In terms of the topics addressed in each task, there will be a stronger focus on international education, intercultural education, pronunciation and ICLHE. Each written assignment will have to be posted on the online discussion forum to allow for peer review with clear descriptors.

Finally, the coordinators also decided to maintain the physical mobility at the end of the next iteration since it was such a powerful motivational factor for teachers to develop professionally.

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