12 Exploring telecollaboration through the lens of university students: a Spanish-Cypriot telecollaborative exchange

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Abstract

This paper examines university students' views about a Cypriot-Spanish telecollaboration project through which participants used Google+ Communities for intercultural exchange over the course of one semester. The project was established through the UNICollaboration platform and it involved first-year students at the Cyprus University of Technology (CUT) and the University of Valencia (UV). The telecollaboration tasks and activities were embedded in the students' English for Specific Purposes modules. The project aimed at developing students' cultural awareness and competence learning, as well as at enhancing their motivation to learn English at university level. This paper outlines the pedagogical goals of the project, the design of tasks, the communication modes, the digital tools used for interaction and task completion, and the targeted competences. Using qualitative data through focus groups interviews with the students who participated in the project, the paper aims at exploring telecollaboration from the student experience perspective, demonstrating the benefits and challenges of online intercultural exchanges.

Keywords: telecollaboration, design-based research, students' views.

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1.   Introduction

In this era of globalization and unending technological growth, telecollaborative learning can provide a fertile background for crossing global boundaries and meeting the demands of 21st century learners as universal citizens. Telecollaboration (Guth & Helm, 2010), or Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) (O'Dowd, 2007) is

> "[a] form of virtual mobility which is being increasingly [adopted] by university educators in Europe and elsewhere [as a substitute for physical student mobility]. Foreign language telecollaboration refers to virtual intercultural interaction and exchange projects between classes of foreign language learners in geographically distant locations" (O'Dowd, 2013, p. 47).

A total of 115 students participated in this Cypriot-Spanish telecollaboration exchange using Google+ Communities for interacting and collaborating over the course of one semester. The exchange was twofold as it included two projects: The Spain Cyprus Intercultural Telecollaboration (SCI-TEL) project which connected 27 first-year students at the UV and 32 first-year students at the CUT, and the Cyprus Spain Intercultural Telecollaboration (CSI-TEL) project which connected 31 first-year students at the CUT and 25 first-year students at the UV. The interventions designed were embedded in the participants' English for Specific Purposes modules and were benchmarked to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) and the related course syllabi. The two instructors agreed on a monolingual language configuration with English being used as a lingua franca. Communication modes included synchronous and asynchronous interaction in a blended learning environment. Web 2.0 tools included the use of Google+ Communities for asynchronous interaction, Google Hangouts for synchronous communication, and Google Drive for collaborative completion of tasks.

Target competences of the telecollaboration project included intercultural communicative competence, language competence and media literacy. A learner-

centered, socio-constructivist, task-based approach to computer-assisted language learning and teaching was adopted. The tasks supported collaborative inquiry and the co-construction of knowledge and were designed so as to be authentic, challenging, meaningful and enjoyable while capable of enabling students to develop linguistic, intercultural, problem-solving and digital skills. The design of tasks followed O'Dowd and Ware's (2009) typology. These included interactions on the Google+ Community to discuss and complete activities about stereotypes, experiences communicating in the L2, enrollment and student life in their respective institutions, culture shock, the creation of a digital story and the delivery of an oral presentation about an innovative product or technology.

2.   Methodology

This paper reports on the first cycle of an on-going Design-Based Research (DBR) study. DBR is an emerging educational paradigm situated in a real educational context where an intervention takes place. It involves continuous cycles of design, enactment, analysis, and redesign and leads to the development of practical design principles, patterns or grounded theorizing (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Brown, 1992; Collins, 1992). The study combined a mixed methods approach with quantitative and qualitative data collection. For the purposes of this paper, qualitative data collected from focus groups interviews with students will be presented. Focus groups interviews were conducted with students-participants in the telecollaboration exchange at both universities upon completion of the project. Questions asked were semi-structured and open-ended, specifically related to the main issues under investigation, exploring topics such as the students' experience with telecollaboration with foreign students as part of their language course at the University; the issues which had arisen and how they had dealt with them; the strategies they had used for successful communication; their overall views on language learning, collaboration, culture, online interaction and technology in education; the contributions of the project to the development of different competences; and the elements they would add to or remove from the project. Forty-six students from CUT and 46 students from the UV participated in the interviews. Topics discussed included students'

attitudes and feelings, communication modes, peer feedback, time constraints, personal commitment and the affordances of the digital tools used. Data were analyzed qualitatively on NVivo.

3.   Results

The telecollaboration project was well received by most students, and participants exhibited positive attitudes towards the exchange, as shown by their responses. An interesting quote articulated by a student at the CUT is:

> "Our collaboration with the Spanish students through this project was very important as we got closer to a new culture that we didn't know before. We learned about their way of life and different elements about Spain in general. We used various applications, such as Google+ and we did different tasks".

Students' feelings towards the exchange presented fluctuations as they either evolved positively or negatively, as expressed by students in the final focus groups interviews. Nevertheless, positive perceptions were more common than negative ones. Reasons reported that may have led to a positive evolution of students' feelings were participants' progressive familiarization with the concept of the telecollaboration, with their partners and the digital tools used, as well as the incremental complexity of tasks and activities which made the whole project more interesting to them. A student from the UV expresses this positive evolution of feelings during the exchange:

> "Well, I felt kind of weird at the beginning because I had to work with someone I didn't know, but then when I started to talk to her it was like really interesting because we had a lot of things in common so it was nice to meet people from other countries and know more about their culture".

Factors mentioned that may have led to a negative evolution of students' feelings were low commitment and responsiveness levels on behalf of some participants

who did not appear to be adequately engaged, as well as the complexity of certain collaborative tasks which required reciprocity among partners and mutual respect of deadlines. A student from the UV mentions:

> "At the beginning it was exciting but then it was… a boring thing because they were not responding".

Similarly, a student from the CUT refers to how communication broke down in the course of the exchange and how this had an impact on the evolution of feelings:

> "It started off with great enthusiasm… that we would speak with students from a different country, but after a while, communication broke down because they wouldn't log in".

Despite the challenges of lack of mutuality and low commitment levels, the majority of participants acknowledged the value of telecollaboration as a situation whereby certain competences can be developed. Specifically, students referred to the project's linguistic and communicative gains, such as negotiating meaning, vocabulary building, the development of listening, oral, reading and writing skills, as well as other skills such as adaptability, flexibility, and responsibility. Furthermore, students valued the project from an intercultural point of view, emphasizing that the project provided them with access to different opinions and diverse viewpoints while at the same time it helped them position themselves and project their own cultural orientation onto others. Students also highly emphasized the digital competences attained through the project. Motivation levels for language learning at tertiary education appeared to have risen according to students' responses.

Focus groups interviews also provided an insight to the challenges involved in telecollaboration exchanges which may have led to a communication breakdown and failure to reach the pedagogical goals set at the onset of the project. Such challenges include issues of level mismatch, limited time for too many assigned tasks, different expectations, language level gap, and personal commitment, among others.

4.   Discussion

Research studies have reported on various gains but also on the pitfalls of telecollaboration projects. This project has been perceived to be beneficial in many respects, yet at the same time it has been challenged by many participants. In this project, some partnerships maintained steady interaction and kept motivation levels and positive feelings at high levels till the closure of the exchange, yet other partnerships demonstrated low levels of commitment and mutuality which led to communication breakdown and negative feelings towards the project. One of the students' suggestions to ensure commitment was to make the participation voluntary for those who are really interested and willing to collaborate. Another suggestion was to increase the amount of synchronous in-class activities as a means to establish more personal rapport, connectivity, interactivity and responsiveness. Overall, the telecollaboration exchange was positively received as a concept, and its multiple gains were acknowledged by most participants.

5.   Conclusion

Telecollaboration exchanges, if successful, may be a constructive and beneficial experience for students, but they have also been found to be a complicated process. Success or failure in telecollaboration revolves around various interrelated factors pertaining to the learners themselves, the task design, or the context in which the telecollaboration takes place. For this reason, continuous iterations of refined and redesigned interventions might prove useful in making the telecollaborative learning environment more effective and beneficial to the learners involved.

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